



Ring in the new

Gone are the days of greasy chow mein and gloopy sauces. On the eve of the Year of the Monkey, Rachel Walker finds 25 places to enjoy Chinese cuisine



Eastern promise
Yu Alderley Edge,
Cheshire

GUARDIAN PICTURES

W

e must have looked like a motley group, four generations squeezed around the table at an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet in north Leicestershire. It was the early 1990s: red and gold bunting was tacked onto peeling walls, a guardian lion stood by the door. Children and OAPs were charged less, the logic being that our smaller stomachs would be filled more quickly. How wrong they were. We heaped our plates with sweet and sour pork smothered in Day-Glo orange sauce, Cif-scented lemon chicken, greasy chow mein and scalding spring rolls.

This image of the regional Chinese restaurant remains lodged in the memories of many, and not always for the right reason. Despite the size of China itself, its hundreds of regional dishes have, for decades, been distilled into a handful of westernised abominations. In recent years, though, there has been a push towards honest and authentic Chinese cuisine. There are delicate dim sum brunches assembled by Cantonese cooks, and robust hot pots from Manchuria. Sichuanese restaurants lace dishes with tongue-tingling spice, and Hunanese chefs labour over Mao's braised pork until the meat collapses beneath thick layers of fat.

It's been hard to whittle down a list of the best, but as we enter the year of the monkey, I've given it my best shot. So *kung hei fat choy*, and enjoy tomorrow night's celebrations, wherever you end up.

LONDON AND SOUTHEAST
ORIENTAL OPULENCE

China Tang, Mayfair, London W1

Art deco design, dim lighting and lobster bisque transport diners in the Dorchester's basement restaurant to opulent 1930s Shanghai. Long evenings here are for those who don't need to scan the prices when ordering à la carte and can flit from bird's nest soup (£60) to abalone (£230). The rest of us can dip into this enchanting interpretation of old China with the set-lunch menu (£27.50), which includes a glass of wine.

chinatanglondon.co.uk

FAMILY FAVOURITE

Royal China, various locations, London

Royal China Club (RCC) in Marylebone is the jewel in the crown of this chain, but its other outposts (Baker Street, Queensway, Canary Wharf, Fulham, Harrow) all have a reputation for exquisite dim sum and classic Cantonese dishes. The honey-roast pork puffs are a must, and the peking duck is carved at the table. From the crispy

seaweed to the sweet red-bean pastries, it's accessible, family-friendly food.

reguk.co.uk

CULT FOLLOWING

Bao, Soho, London WC2

What started as east London street food is now a hugely popular 30-seat Soho diner. The steamed buns come with daikon, pork or lamb shoulder (from £3.50), and the pig blood cake — black pudding, with a soy-salted egg yolk on top — must have been one of the most photographed dishes of 2015. The cuisine is officially Taiwanese, but the co-founders Wai Ting and Shing Tat Chung's Chinese heritage is a strong influence.

baolondon.com

AWARD-WINNING

Yipin China, Islington, London N1

When this Hunanese restaurant opened four years ago, it sparked whispered excitement among those in the know, but now it's won a Bib Gourmand and the word is out. It's easy to see why it won over Michelin inspectors, with authentic dishes such as dry-wok chicken >

that arrives sizzling on tabletop burners, and the man and wife — slivers of spiced beef tongue with fresh herbs and chopped nuts.

yipinchina.co.uk

NEW GENERATION

HKK, Shoreditch, London EC2

HKK is off the beaten track compared with Hakkasan Group's outposts in Mayfair, Miami, Dubai and Doha. The eight-course tasting menu (£88) is a theatrical succession of dishes: dim sum comes with a brush for painting on a lick of soy, and the puddings are sheer artistry. It's an intimate room with impeccable service. Book ahead, especially for Saturday lunch, when its five-course duck and champagne menu (£49) always pulls in a crowd.

hkkLondon.com

SKY-HIGH DINING

Hutong, London Bridge, London SE1

Any restaurant that sits halfway up the Shard is in danger of erring on the side of naff, but Hutong has got it right: its high-end offering of spicy Sichuan and northern Chinese food is as good as the view. It all comes at a price, though, so go for the signature menu at £68 a head, which features eight dishes. The dim sum and soft-shell crab are exceptional.

hutong.co.uk

NEIGHBOURHOOD JOINT

Silk Road, Camberwell, London SE5

An unassuming, cash-only cafe that serves northwestern Xinjiang-style cuisine. Dishes are textured and traditional: crispy cumin lamb threaded onto twisted skewers, bouncy tripe and boiled dumplings. A highlight is the big plate chicken, a spiced sharing stew made from chicken on the bone that will blow away any winter cobwebs.

020 7703 4832

LOCAL HOTSPOT

China Garden, Brighton

For more than 30 years, China Garden has been serving excellent



“The push now is for honest, authentic cuisine”

dim sum, from £3.20 a plate, to the Chinese community and Brightonians who know a good dumpling when they see one. Join the queue at the weekend and try the prawn and scallop or pork and crabmeat versions, or sample the ox tripe and curried whelks (tastier than they sound). If in doubt, point to what the Chinese family on the next table are having.

chinagarden.name

WEST AND SOUTHWEST HIDDEN GEM

Mayflower, Bristol

Tucked away on the Bearpit roundabout, Mayflower doesn't look like much from the outside, while inside, plain walls and big, round tables channel that sparse Brit-Chinese restaurant aesthetic. The food more than compensates, though: salt and pepper squid, pork wrapped in unctuous fat, and soothing hot bowls of congee.

mayflower-bristol.co.uk

SHOP AND SNACK

Water Sky, Eastgate, Bristol

Add a whole new dimension to the weekend shop: whizz round Wai Yee Hong cash-and-carry, then

head upstairs to Water Sky for dim sum (from £3 a plate), or the all-you-can-eat option (£17.95 per person). Congees are silky, the buns are pillowy soft and there's a great selection of dim sum, ranging from taro croquettes to glutinous rice balls wrapped in lotus leaves.

watersky-bristol.com

HOT UNDER THE COLLAR

My Sichuan, Oxford

Sitting behind Oxford coach station, this restaurant borrows its name from China's southwestern province, famed for its spicy food. It's a sharp and distinctive, numbing heat that elevates simple ingredients such as bean curd into a sublime mapo tofu. The menu will send chilli lovers into a frenzy.

mysichuan.co.uk

EAST AND MIDLANDS SEAFOOD SPECIALITY

Hakka, Cambridge

You wouldn't associate lobster with this unassuming high-street restaurant, but the chefs here are seafood specialists. The deep-fried squid is perfectly crisp, the kung po scallops are enormous and sizzling hot, and the mounds of spicy

prawns are juicy sweet. Turbot and lobster are priced by the pound and taste exquisite.

hak-ka.co.uk

21ST-CENTURY KID

Chung Ying Central, Birmingham

It's known as the sister restaurant of the city's Chinatown stalwarts Chung Ying and Chung Ying Garden, but the 32-year age gap makes “daughter” seem more appropriate. Round the corner from New Street Station, it offers eastern-inspired cocktails during a two-for-one happy “hour” that runs 4pm-7pm. Stick around for the food: well presented, familiar dishes, from salt and chilli soft-shell crab (£6) to crispy aromatic duck with pancakes (£18 for a half).

chungyingcentral.co.uk

TOP LUNCH SPOT

Mandarin, Nottingham

From noon until 5pm, the Mandarin churns out fresh dim sum. At weekends it's buzzing with diners tucking into the Shanghai-style steamed pork-mince buns and egg-custard tarts. It's a stone's throw from the Capital FM arena,



Happy new year Clockwise, from far left: a daikon bun at Bao, Soho, London. HKK, in Shoreditch, east London. Dim sum trio and pu'er tea from the Cantonese afternoon tea at Yang Sing, Manchester

so it gets busy when there's a concert on, but service is slick, and the fried honey-roast pork is a joyous way to kick-start or wind down a night.

mandarinrest.co.uk

NORTH CONTEMPORARY CHINESE

Yu Alderley Edge, Cheshire
Brothers Victor and Vinny Yu launched this restaurant last year after the success of Blackburn's Yu & You, founded by their father. This new venture showcases dishes such as Victor's deconstructed duck pancakes and creative cocktails (try the emperor's mule: spiced rum, Cointreau, ginger beer and bitters). Prices start at £4 for steamed rice, so it's a special-occasion destination rather than your regular Friday-night Chinese.

yualderleyedge.com

POPULAR PASTRIES

Bon Bon Bakery, Liverpool
The char sui buns have a cult following at this Chinatown bakery — a snip at £1.20 each. It's also hard not to be tempted by the trays of Chinese pastries, such as custard tarts and beautifully light sponges, all freshly baked on site. It's a

utilitarian-looking shop, with Perspex counters and laminate flooring, but the food is top quality.

0151 384 1876

CHINESE STREET FOOD

Mei Mei's Street Cart, various locations

Anyone familiar with Chinese street food may have already come across jian bing: crepes topped with egg, hoisin, chilli and crispy won ton crackers. But now you don't have to travel to Beijing to try them, thanks to Melissa Fu of Mei Mei's Street Cart. During February, she's pitching up at some top drinking spots up north, including in Manchester, Leeds and Huddersfield. The garlic fried-chicken version is filled with free-range meat brined in Chinese spices and topped with house mayo. Perfect with a pint of Magic Rock Ringmaster or BrewDog pale ale.

meimeistreetcart.co.uk

AFTERNOON TEA

Yang Sing, Manchester

Chef Harry Yeung has fused the English afternoon tea with dim sum to create an exquisite Cantonese tea at this *grande dame* of Manchester's Chinatown. It kicks off with a glass

of prosecco and choice of loose tea (the dark pu'er is a revitalising brew), with the selection of dim sum crescendoing into pan-fried water chestnut cake — all for £17.50.

yang-sing.com

ALADDIN'S DEN

The Zen Restaurant, Lytham St Annes

An unexpected, exotic find in this coastal town that's just a short drive from Blackpool. The Chinese-Thai menu nods to the seaside location, with shellfish deftly laced with spices, steamed fish and hot, sour tom yum soup. Service couldn't be friendlier and there's attention to every detail, from the elaborately sculpted vegetables that frame the plates to immaculate table settings.

thezenrestaurant.co.uk

SOME LIKE IT HOT

Red Chilli, Manchester/Leeds/York

Over the past decade, Red Chilli has expanded its mini empire across northern England. The food is fresh and exciting — steaming bowls of Mrs Spotty's beancurd are alive with spice, and the dandan noodles are hot and juicy, heaped with minced pork and flecked with spring onions. It's the antithesis of the gloopy sauces that put whole generations off Brit-Chinese food.

redchillirestaurant.co.uk

WALES, SCOTLAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

DIY DINING

CN, Cardiff

The gas camping stoves are unusual additions to a table setting, but this is down-and-dirty dining at its best. You cook raw ingredients, such as tofu and slivers of rolled lamb, in bubbling pots of broth. Additional plates of steamed buns and sticky braised pork help create a pot-luck feel in this small, friendly place.

eatcn.co.uk

GREAT BRITISH GRUB

Lychee Oriental, Glasgow

There's been a buzz around this city-centre restaurant since head chef Jimmy Lee represented

Scotland on the latest Great British Menu. It's new-generation Chinese cuisine: elegant decor, a gluten-free menu and a two-course lunch (£9.90). Ease into dinner with a raspberry and lychee bellini and try the five-course banquet (£35), which includes honey chilli chicken served in dishes made from noodles.

lycheeoriental.co.uk

HOME-STYLE COOKING

B&D's Kitchen, Edinburgh

The tiny dining room, free corkage and friendly husband-and-wife team, Colin and Irene Chiu, create an atmosphere here that's more like an intimate supper club. The menu lists a good selection of Cantonese plates, but the best dishes are on an online speciality menu and need to be ordered 24-48 hours in advance. Put in a request for "3 treasures", which is comfort cooking at its best: soft aubergines stuffed with prawns and cooked in an earthy, rich black-bean sauce.

bdskitchen.co.uk

POT LUCK

Xiangbala Hotpot, Edinburgh

Hotplates built into the middle of each table keep pans of broth at a gentle simmer, while diners choose their raw ingredients from the checklist-style menu: crab claws, prawns, sliced beef, pak choy, kelp — at £15 for all you can eat. The relaxed mood is further fuelled by the BYOB policy (£5 corkage).

0131 313 4408

ASIAN FUSION

House of Zen, Belfast

Hot-pink orchids and lacquered screens create an exotic atmosphere in the heart of Belfast's cathedral quarter. The pan-Asian fusion isn't subtle, but it's hard not to enjoy mopping up the kumquat chicken's molasses sauce. In summer, the alfresco area on St Anne's Square makes a delightful space to enjoy dim sum and a lychee martini.

houseofzen.co.uk

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