FOOD The New York Times

A New Generation of Chefs Reframes Taiwanese Cuisine in America

The island's cooking used to exist under the vast umbrella of "Chinese food" in the United States. A group of chefs and restaurateurs is changing that.

By Julia Moskin

June 11, 2019

When Richard Ho opened Ho Foods, a tiny storefront in the East Village last year, his goal was to serve the best possible version of a single Taiwanese dish: beef noodle soup.

His goal was not to become the host of what his employees describe as Manhattan's first Taiwanese food community center.

But because the dish is so beloved, everyone from Chinatown aunties to fellow Taiwanese-American chefs to curious tourists showed up to see if his soup was up to their particular standards.

"Every Taiwanese mom who comes in tells me a different 'secret' to the broth," said Mr. Ho. "Apples, cilantro stems, star anise."

Beef noodle soup is widely considered the national dish of modern Taiwan, assembled from the island's tumultuous history, celebrated with an annual festival in Taipei and fought over in a cooking competition with multiple winning categories. But it is only one of countless dishes that make Taiwan's cooking remarkable and rewarding.

Refining a recipe means re-examining every detail. Mr. Ho makes stock from scratch, pickles mustard greens in the basement and tosses the noodles in beef fat just before serving. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Much of its cuisine can be traced to somewhere else, but — like the United States — Taiwan has experienced so many transformations of demography and culture, technology and taste, that the food now has its own identity.

Because the modern history of the island includes centuries of immigration and colonization, 50 years of Japanese occupation (from 1895 through World War II), and an influx of two million refugees from mainland China when the

Communist Party took power in 1949, modern Taiwanese food is a particularly kaleidoscopic mix. (Today, the island exists in political limbo between independence from and absorption into greater China.)

“Taiwan itself is a melting pot,” said the chef Vivian Ku, of the restaurant Pine & Crane in Los Angeles.

In the United States, Taiwanese dishes have often been swept under the vast umbrella of “Chinese food.” Until recently, only people who know their food geography could spot a restaurant with a particular specialty — beef noodle soup; box lunches of rice, pork and cabbage; braised beef rolled in scallion pancakes — and identify it as Taiwanese.

Now, Taiwanese food is announcing itself. It is not new to the United States, but it is being newly celebrated, and transformed, by young Taiwanese-American chefs and restaurateurs like Mr. Ho, Ms. Ku, Eric Sze of 886 in Manhattan and Joshua Ku of Win Son in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

By making components from scratch (including basics that most restaurants would buy, like dumpling wrappers and pickled greens), using top-quality ingredients like grass-fed beef and organic tofu, and adapting classics with modern forms and flavors, they are reframing Taiwanese food in the United States for an increasingly enthusiastic audience. New places serving traditional Taiwanese cooking, and calling it by name, are also multiplying, like the Shihlin Taiwan Street Snacks chain in the Bay Area, and Taiwan Bear House and Zai Lai Homestyle Taiwanese in New York.

Cathy Erway, author of “The Food of Taiwan,” said that when she was researching her cookbook five years ago, she had to “scrape the bottom of the barrel” to find chefs and restaurateurs in the United States who identified their food as Taiwanese. But as this new group comes of age, there are more than she can keep up with.

“The younger generation is reclaiming their Taiwanese identity,” she said, by pushing back on the assimilation that their parents and grandparents often encouraged. “What better way to do that, and to rebel against your parents, than through food?”

But what is Taiwanese food? The answer often depends on where the question is being asked.

In Taiwan, any answer would include the food of the island’s first inhabitants: roots like taro and sweet potatoes, millet, wild herbs and greens, and seafood.

Another one-bowl classic: lu rou fan, rice topped with braised minced pork, pickles and greens. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

There would also be traditional dishes associated with different regions of Taiwan, which covers 36,000 square kilometers (an area comparable to the Netherlands) and is home to more than 23.5 million people. In central Chiayi

City, that would be a rice bowl topped with local chicken that's pulled into soft shreds, and dressed with its own juices and fat. In coastal Tainan, when the weather was too rough for fishing boats to go out, cooks improvised "slack season" noodle bowls, stretching a little bit of seafood with pork stock, garlic and noodles into a filling dish that's now popular everywhere.

There would be foods identified with distinct groups from mainland China, like the Hakka, who arrived in the 1600s with pickled vegetables and rice dumplings. The Islamic Hui people from western China are expert with beef, flatbreads and hand-pulled noodles; people from nearby Fujian province brought the sweet braising liquids that define local classics like three-cup chicken and lu rou fan, minced pork on rice. Some Japanese foods caught on and stayed, like sashimi, oden (stew) and bian dang (bento boxes).

If you asked the question elsewhere in Asia, Taiwan would be cited alongside Hong Kong and Singapore as a prime destination for xiao chi, "small food" from street stalls, like scallion pancakes, black pepper buns, oyster omelets and every kind of dumpling imaginable. ("Grazing is how Taiwanese people love to eat," Ms. Ku said.) Taiwan also set off the East Asian trend for foods with "Q," the local term for the springy texture shared by thick rice noodles, tapioca pearls and fish balls.

Guo bao, pork belly folded in a bun with peanuts, cilantro and pickled greens, is a popular Taiwanese export.
Lisa Corson for The New York Times

Taiwan is often credited as the birthplace of bubble tea — or at least, the birthplace of the global trend.
Lisa Corson for The New York Times

And anywhere, the answer would include global pop phenoms that are Taiwanese creations, like bubble tea, mango shave ice, “popcorn” chicken laced with five-spice powder and fried basil leaves, and guo bao, steamed buns filled with braised pork belly and the sacred trinity of Taiwanese condiments: fresh cilantro, chopped peanuts and pickled greens.

Taiwanese dishes, and people, have been established in Chinese-American communities for decades. Between 1949 and 1979, about 300,000 of the Chinese refugees who had fled to Taiwan moved on to the United States.

But in Manhattan, the “new” trend of guo bao was announced — loudly — in 2009, when Baohaus first opened. Eddie Huang, its extroverted Taiwanese-American creator, went on to write a best-selling memoir, “Fresh Off the Boat.” (The book is also the basis for the ABC sitcom, which is very popular in Taiwan.)

Trigg Brown, left, and Joshua Ku of Win Son in Brooklyn cook both classic and creative Taiwanese dishes. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

“Eddie Huang was a pop culture moment” for young Taiwanese-Americans, said Mr. Ku, 31, an owner of Win Son in Brooklyn (and no relation to Ms. Ku in Los Angeles). Not only did Mr. Huang start a Taiwanese restaurant with no cooking experience, but he also rejected a professional path in order to do it. (Mr. Huang graduated from law school before opening Baohaus; Mr. Ku had an established career in construction management.)

“I think people our age looked around and thought maybe they could have a more fun job than being a lawyer,” Mr. Ku said.

Mr. Ho, 34, had a similar thought. Having studied law at the University of California, Berkeley, he moved to New York after graduation to learn the restaurant business. His mother was not happy, he said.

“Instead of working at restaurants,” she asked him, “why don’t you become a lawyer and eat at restaurants?”

But Mr. Ho applies himself to beef noodle soup with as much dedication as a law student writing a case brief, breaking it down and then remaking each element to make sure it is as strong as it can be.

In the United States, where beef is far more plentiful than in Taiwan, the chunks of braised meat in the bowl have become bigger and juicier. But the broth, he said is often dull, not as beefy, fragrant and clear as it should be. Any bowl that costs less than $6, he said, most likely contains “Army soup” — a brew of water, soy sauce, rock sugar, white pepper and a sprinkling of monosodium glutamate. “It’s a delicious shortcut, but it’s not beef soup,” he said.

For his soup, Mr. Ho buys certified humanely raised beef: neck bones for the stock and boneless shank meat for braising, a cut called “golden money shank” in Chinese butchery. He deepens the soup’s flavor with two kinds of doubanjiang, umami-rich pastes made from fava and soy beans. He adds a swirl of custom-pressed noodles and garnishes them with mustard greens that are fermented from scratch in the restaurant’s basement.

Eric Sze, who grew up in Taipei, is the chef at the East Village restaurant 886, named after Taiwan's country calling code. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Eric Sze, who grew up in Taipei, opened 886 (named for Taiwan's country calling code) near Mr. Ho's restaurant in 2018, hoping to reflect the mix of great food and lively atmosphere at Taiwan's popular beer houses, called re chao. The menu is strong on food as entertainment, such as a fried chicken cutlet the size of a plate (a homage to Taiwan's Hot-Star Large Fried Chicken chain) and a tube of meat and sticky rice called Sausage Party.

But nourishment is also important, and Mr. Sze, 26, is already a master of classics like charred cabbage with bacon, tomato and egg, and especially lu rou fan, a dish so fundamental that some restaurants don't even list it on the menu. He considers this simple bowl of rice topped with savory-sweet pork ragù, bright greens or pickled vegetable and a jammy egg to be the true national dish of Taiwan, not beef noodle soup.

Clockwise from top: three-cup chicken, tomato and egg stir-fry, fried shrimp with pineapple, charred cabbage and bacon, minced pork and egg over rice, and the giant fried chicken sandwich at 886 restaurant in Manhattan.
Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

"Most of the O.G. Taiwanese food was made with pork," he said; raising cattle was too expensive and time-consuming for subsistence farmers, who ate lu rou fan for breakfast and were sustained by it throughout the day.

At Win Son, the chef Trigg Brown, 30, is not remotely Taiwanese, but happened to be mentored by a chef from Taiwan while cooking at a country club in Virginia, and became obsessed. He and Mr. Ku travel frequently to Taiwan, and return with ever more new dishes to introduce to their Brooklyn audience.

Ice cream with chopped peanuts and fresh cilantro is a popular combination in Taiwan, and in Brooklyn at Win Son restaurant. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

When Mr. Brown decided to create a version of a popular dessert combination, ice cream with crushed peanut brittle and a shower of fresh cilantro, Mr. Ku said it was too weird: Americans would never eat cilantro for dessert. But the warm crunch of the peanuts, the milkiness of the ice cream and the floral quality of the cilantro are an oddly perfect combination. Now it's the only dessert that is always on the menu.

Vivian Ku's Los Angeles restaurants, Pine & Crane in Silver Lake and Joy in Highland Park, are most focused on the Taiwanese vegetable tradition, including a daily dozen of small plates like marinated eggplant, fresh mushroom salad and edamame with black pepper.

She attributes that to growing up in Bakersfield, Calif., where her family grew vegetables for restaurants and markets around Los Angeles, particularly the vast Taiwanese community in the San Gabriel Valley.

Vivian Ku of Pine & Crane and Joy in Los Angeles serves Taiwanese classics, but also vegetarian and vegan versions for local tastes.
Lisa Corson for The New York Times

Vegan Taiwanese-style appetizers at Joy, clockwise from bottom: cauliflower salad; black pepper edamame; wood ear mushrooms; crunchy potato salad; and braised peanuts.
Lisa Corson for The New York Times

Like many Taiwanese-Americans, Ms. Ku is descended from two different ethnic groups, each with a distinct cooking style and lineage.

On Taiwan, if you can trace your family back for many generations, you are a "taro," called after the island's native root vegetable. A "sweet potato" is a relatively recent arrival, named after the tuber that was introduced to Taiwan around the 17th century.

"I'm considered half taro and half sweet potato," she said.

She is also a native Angeleno, and so Ms. Ku knew that her food would have to fit local tastes, not only Taiwanese tradition. Keeping the fundamental flavor profile of fried shallots, rice wine, rock sugar and sweet soy sauce, she devised vegetarian and vegan versions of classics like three-cup mushrooms and vegetarian mapo tofu, using ingredients like fresh herbs, organic eggs and tofu.

But it wasn't easy, because the unctuous, meaty fat used in dishes like oil-fried sticky rice, lard-brushed scallion pancakes and other street-food classics is also part of the flavor profile.

"Taiwanese home cooks don't cook like that, the food is much lighter and the vegetables are always super-fresh," she said. "The whole idea was that I wanted to make an accurate representation of what my family would eat."

886, 26 St. Marks Place, New York; eighteightsix.com.

Ho Foods, 110 East Seventh Street, New York; hofoodsnyc.com.

Joy, 5100 York Boulevard, Los Angeles; joyonyork.com.

Pine & Crane, 1521 Griffith Park Boulevard, Los Angeles; pineandcrane.com.

Shihlin Taiwan Street Snacks, multiple locations in the Bay Area; shihlinca.com.

Taiwan Bear House, 11 Pell Street, New York; taiwanbearhouseny.com.

Win Son, 159 Graham Avenue, Brooklyn; winsonbrooklyn.com.

Zai Lai Homestyle Taiwanese, Turnstyle Underground Market (57th Street and Eighth Avenue), New York; zailainyc.com.

More on Taiwanese cooking

In Italy, 'Al Dente' Is Prized. In Taiwan, It's All About Food That's 'Q.' Oct. 4, 2018

At Ho Foods, a Noodle Soup That Nourishes and Transports

April 19, 2018

Breakfast as It Is in Shanghai, Taipei and (Sometimes) New York

May 23, 2019

A Meal (and History) in a Box at Taiwan Bear House May 12, 2016

Follow NYT Food on Twitter and NYT Cooking on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Pinterest. Get regular updates from NYT Cooking, with recipe suggestions, cooking tips and shopping advice.

Julia Moskin, a Food reporter since 2004, writes about restaurants, chefs, trends and home cooking. She investigates the best recipes for kitchen classics in her video column Recipe Lab and was part of a team that won a Pulitzer Prize in 2018 for reporting on workplace sexual harassment. @juliamoskin • Facebook

A version of this article appears in print on June 11, 2019, on Page D1 of the New York edition with the headline: Reclaiming Taiwanese Identity

READ 43 COMMENTS