# Sakura, Salford: ‘It’s all delightful’ – restaurant review

For Manchester’s Chinese students, this small Hong Kong-style café is a true taste of home

**Sakura, 8 Salisbury House, St Stephen Street, Salford M3 6AX. No bookings. Main dishes £8-£11.50, desserts £3.50. Unlicensed**

Somewhere on the road out of central Manchester, my friend Thom pipes up from the back of the cab. “I think we’re going the wrong way.” I can see the driver’s app. “He’s just following the route,” I tell him. Then, says Thom, we’re going to the wrong place. I ask the driver to pull over. This is a new one on me. I am generally all over where I am going to review. I will have looked it up online, studied the menu, perhaps stalked it digitally via Google Streetview.

That’s exactly what I’ve done with Sakura. During a previous trip to the city, Thom, a reliable source on what’s happening in Manchester, had suggested a restaurant of that name could be worth a look. The Sakura I searched up online was, admittedly, unfamiliar territory: a Japanese all-you-can-eat place in Cheetham Hill, offering a range of nigiri, maki, teppanyaki and the like at about £30 a head, ordered via a tablet. It promised “robot-assisted service”. On the website these look like mobile open filing cabinets full of food trays, blessed with an animated, blinking cat’s face on the screen at the top. Don’t roll your eyes like that. There are restaurateurs all over the country, right now, furiously Googling “robot waiters” as the answer to their staffing woes. Question: do you still tip robot waiters? If you don’t, is that the spark which initiates the rise of the machines? What caused the AI apocalypse? Those tight, unappreciative bastards on table seven who only left 7.5%.

I didn’t get a chance to find out, because I immediately cancelled our table and redirected the cab to the other side of Salford. If you have been to the robot-assisted Sakura, do let me know what it’s like. I’m intrigued. Meanwhile, I found my way to a broad, open housing estate just over the ring road. There, beneath a block of flats, is a short shopping parade boasting a launderette, a mini-mart and, on the corner, the other Sakura. At some point it was a fish and chip shop-cum-Chinese takeaway called Peach Garden. A few months ago, it became this tiny café serving the growing number of the city’s Chinese students and, in particular, recent arrivals from Hong Kong, with its mixture of Chinese staples and Korean and Japanese-inflected dishes.

There are a handful of tables beneath faux street lights jutting out from high up the walls, plus a counter in the window, occupied by solo diners apparently finding familiar comfort in rice bowls or steaming tureens of soup noodles. There’s a laminated menu on the table; you order at the counter. Initially, a light gloom descends on my party. Two major Hong Kong sections of that menu have been crossed out. Apparently, the head chef and owner has returned to Hong Kong for few weeks. So that’s no sweet and sour pork and no yang chow fried rice.

But we’re here now and there are other things. They are dishes you lean into and over. For £10 there’s a rich and profoundly comforting – the C word again – beef brisket and beef tendon curry. The brisket is falling apart into the depths of a sauce which has clearly been the product of hours of slow reduction. Then there is the tendon. There’s a pronounced Asian interest in slippery foods, which some people find challenging. Personally, I love the textural joys of slow-cooked, wobbly tendon. If it’s not for you, order instead what they call the roast chicken with homemade sauce; in reality, big nuggets of the best fried chicken spritzed with chilli oil, on a bed of rice straight out of the rice cooker. We end up with many partially finished bowls of white rice because, in an attempt to share the menu, we have ordered a bunch of dishes meant for one.

A boneless pork cutlet is battered and deep fried then sliced and served sealed over its own rice bed by a deep yellow skirt of scrambled egg. There’s also a section of the menu dedicated to the numbing sichuan peppercorn thrills of mapo tofu and mapo aubergine. For £10.50 you can get mapo tofu with chicken wings. I am intrigued as to how these two elements are integrated. They aren’t. You get a bowl of thick, fiery mapo tofu full of snowy cubes of juddering tofu in a pokey, lightly gelatinous sauce. Alongside that comes another bowl of white rice, upon which are laid four crispy, greaseless chicken wings. They are very good chicken wings.

The side dishes include half rice and half chips for £3 or, better still, instant noodles with spicy sauce, which is exactly what it says: instant noodles lubricated with a liquor rich in more sichuan peppercorns and five spice. It’s while I am spooling these away that I imagine myself in another life: 20 years younger, living in Manchester and desperately craving the embrace of Sakura’s cooking after a louche night out on the lash. The rest of the customers here today are entirely Asian. One of them tells me, while I’m waiting to order, that “this place really is just like Hong Kong”. For a lot of them it seems, this is the waft and hug of something truly elemental from home.

Which brings us to the sweet things. There is a triple-decker French toast made from white bread, sandwiching peanut butter, then drenched in butter and syrup. It is the full Elvis. I do not mean that disparagingly. (Incidentally, if French toast is your thing, get to [Gooey Café](https://thegooey.co/) in Ancoats on the other side of the city, which serves the most extraordinary and increasingly famous breezeblock of French toast, hiding a caramel filling.) The second sweet offering is a barm cake, crisply toasted, then slathered in butter and condensed milk. It’s the kind of joyous thing your nan might have given you when you came in from playing footie on a cold winter’s afternoon. If you were that kind of kid and had that kind of nan, which I wasn’t and didn’t. But you get the idea. It’s all delightful. I’m not knocking the idea of ordering food via a tablet, or robot waiters. The future must be embraced and all that. But on this particular lunchtime, crunching my way through this sweet, sweetened crisp bread roll, I am very pleased we redirected our cab to this particular Sakura. By now the owner has returned and all the Hong Kong dishes should be back on the menu.