



HERITAGE TRAIL

Life before the skyscrapers – explore a dining trail inspired by 1950s Hong Kong

By Olivia Greenway

My mission began when I found an old menu while clearing out my deceased mother's effects. She lived in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s. The menu was a work of art. The cover was in royal blue with 'Repulse Bay Hotel' printed in gold. Inside was the date 6 March 1960. Googling, I discovered The Repulse Bay Hotel was demolished in 1980, but the original façade was retained, and it was rebuilt on the original site.



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Hong Kong is known nowadays for its food scene. It has 17,000 restaurants, 75 with a Michelin star, topped only by Paris. But back in the 1950s, fine dining was in its infancy. America had introduced us to cocktails, which the British expats in Hong Kong adopted with unashamed enthusiasm.

I can imagine my mother stepping out into the warm Hong Kong night with her friends, ready for a refreshing gin and tonic. She would probably have headed to The Peninsula, the island's first luxury five-star hotel, opening in 1928. It was designed as 'the finest hotel east of Suez' and probably still is. Soaring decorated ceilings, shining marble floors, oversized urns of fresh flower heads and huge potted palms in terracotta pots greet you on entry to the lobby area. French fine dining was all the rage in the 1950s after the austere war years. Not everyone could get to Paris, so enterprising establishments brought the Parisien chefs to them. The famous French restaurant Gaddi's is still at The Peninsula, with a Michelin star. The round tables dressed in fine white linen, the Grosvenor silver cutlery, the heritage chandeliers and the wall sconces are from the original period. The manager tells me people dine here for the exquisite food now, not merely to impress others. I'm delighted to see beef tartare and crêpes Suzette are still on the menu. Both a theatrical piece of dining prepared tableside. With the crêpe, the final flourish is setting light to the sauce once it's doused in Grand Marnier.

Near where my mother lived was the Peak Café. She would meet her friends here, for English-style tea. She would also have enjoyed coffee, which was becoming more popular with



increased travel to Europe, and exposure to Italian coffee culture. Now called The Peak Lookout, it's a pleasant, cool, leafy spot, with a 100-year-old banyan tree.

Down the road is The Verandah at Repulse Bay, whose menu started this story. In the past, one literally sat on a long verandah underneath fans to keep one cool, with fountains and lush gardens beyond. This area is now enclosed with welcome air conditioning, but with the original Lloyd Loom-style chairs with leather seat cushions still there. Afternoon tea was becoming popular in the 1950s, introduced by the British, and it's still the most popular fare here today.

Of course my mother would have also eaten traditional Chinese food. Dai pai dongs, the famous street food stalls in Hong Kong, now only have maybe a few dozen left. Yung Kee moved from a dai pai dong to a proper restaurant in 1942. Peter Yau has been manager here for 28 years. He tells me their top seller is still their unique roasted goose. Each goose is basted 300 times to give it the distinctive orange colour. The skin is crispy and the meat succulent. "Everyone orders this dish," he told me gesturing to the guests eating at numerous tables. The goose is presented whole and serves up to four. "We sell 100 a day," Yau added.

Jimmy's Kitchen first opened in 1928 to serve the British navy, but my mother would have known it for serving good British food. Daily specials include rosemary roast lamb and Beef Wellington. Their famous chicken madras narrowly beats fish and chips as their most popular dish. And for dessert – which my mother first discovered here – is their signature Baked Alaska – hot meringue and ice cream – theatrically served at the table.

Our obsession nowadays is with what's new and shiny, but these heritage restaurants have endured for a reason. I'm glad I found that menu in the old box that sparked this culinary nostalgic adventure – one that can still be enjoyed today.



Previous spread: The Peak Lookout; Jimmy's Kitchen Baked Alaska. This spread, clockwise from top left: Yung Kee; Gaddi's is at The Peninsula hotel; The Verandah; Afternoon tea at The Verandah



Jimmy's Kitchen
12 Pedder St, Central
linktr.ee/jimmyskitchenhk

Yung Kee
32 Wellington St, Central
yungkee.com.hk

Gaddi's
Peninsula Hotel, Salisbury Rd, Tsim Sha Tsui
peninsula.com/en/hong-kong

The Verandah
109 Repulse Bay Rd, Repulse Bay
therepulsebay.com/en

The Peak Lookout
121 Peak Rd, The Peak
peaklookout.com.hk