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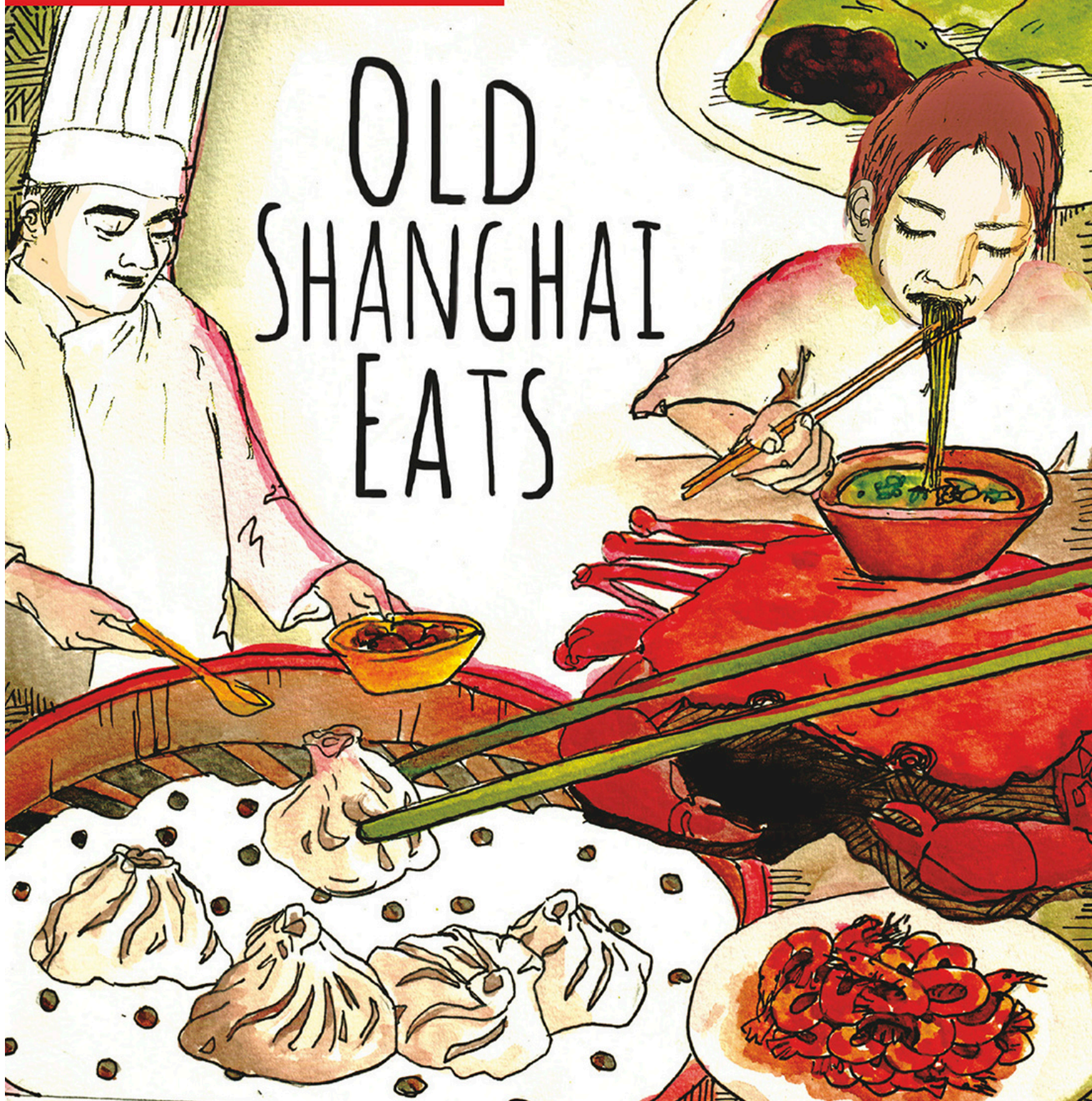
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# OLD SHANGHAI EATS





# A TASTE OF OLI

**Victoria Brownlee** takes you on a tour of some of Shanghai's oldest restaurants and hears about the most famous traditional dishes from the people who make them.

Additional reporting by **Low Zi Yu** and **Serena Yeh**. Illustrations by **Jinna Kaneko**

## SHANGHAI CLASSICAL HOTEL 上海老饭店

Shanghai Classical Hotel was established in 1875, specialising in homely Shanghainese dishes. Originally operating with only two bamboo tables, its humble beginnings are hard to imagine today, considering the large bustling space it currently occupies beside Yu Gardens. Having become a culinary destination in the city, it's appeared on the CCTV documentary *A Bite of China*, and in November 2014 was added to China's Intangible Cultural Heritage list under the category of cooking skills and techniques.

The current vibe here is slightly old-fashioned – it's not called the Shanghai Classical Hotel for nothing – but it works well, and come meal time, the dining room is buzzing. Lining the walls are photos of old Shanghai, and the wait staff are jolly and will tell you fun stories about the food (including one mythical account of Bill Clinton loving the osmanthus cakes – it's not true, but easily could be because these sweet glutinous rice bites are mighty tasty).

Ren Defeng, general manager and head chef, has worked at the Shanghai Classical Hotel for more than 20 years (with over 40 years' experience as a chef) and believes the restaurant's fame and legacy are intertwined. 'We insist on tradition, on our values, on putting quality first. We insist on passing down Shanghainese cuisine to the next generation. For more than three centuries, the more we cook the better we get.'

He explains that there isn't a secret formula for their best selling dishes, rather it's the careful sourcing of quality ingredients that helps set their food offerings apart. 'Shanghai is a city that has four different seasons and that has an impact on how we choose the ingredients,' he says, adding that the heat at which these ingredients are then cooked is closely controlled. 'For 100 years, there has been no change in that.'

Ren's love for the Shanghai Classical Hotel runs deep. He says that the brand and the restaurant aren't passed down based on family lineage, but rather on a *shifu-tudi*



**For more than three centuries, the more we cook the better we get**

(master-disciple) system. And although he's a way off retiring, he's already thinking about how he can pass down his passion for traditional Shanghainese cuisine to the next generation.

### KEY DISHES

If you want to experience a range of classic Shanghai dishes, this is a good one-stop shop. The *xiaolongbao* with pork and crab (36RMB for six) are light and flavoursome (eat while they're still steaming), and the thick soup with crab meat and shepherd's purse (35RMB per person) is rich and soothing. Other highlights include stir-fried eel (68RMB), quick fried shrimps (88RMB) and the braised bamboo shoots (58RMB).

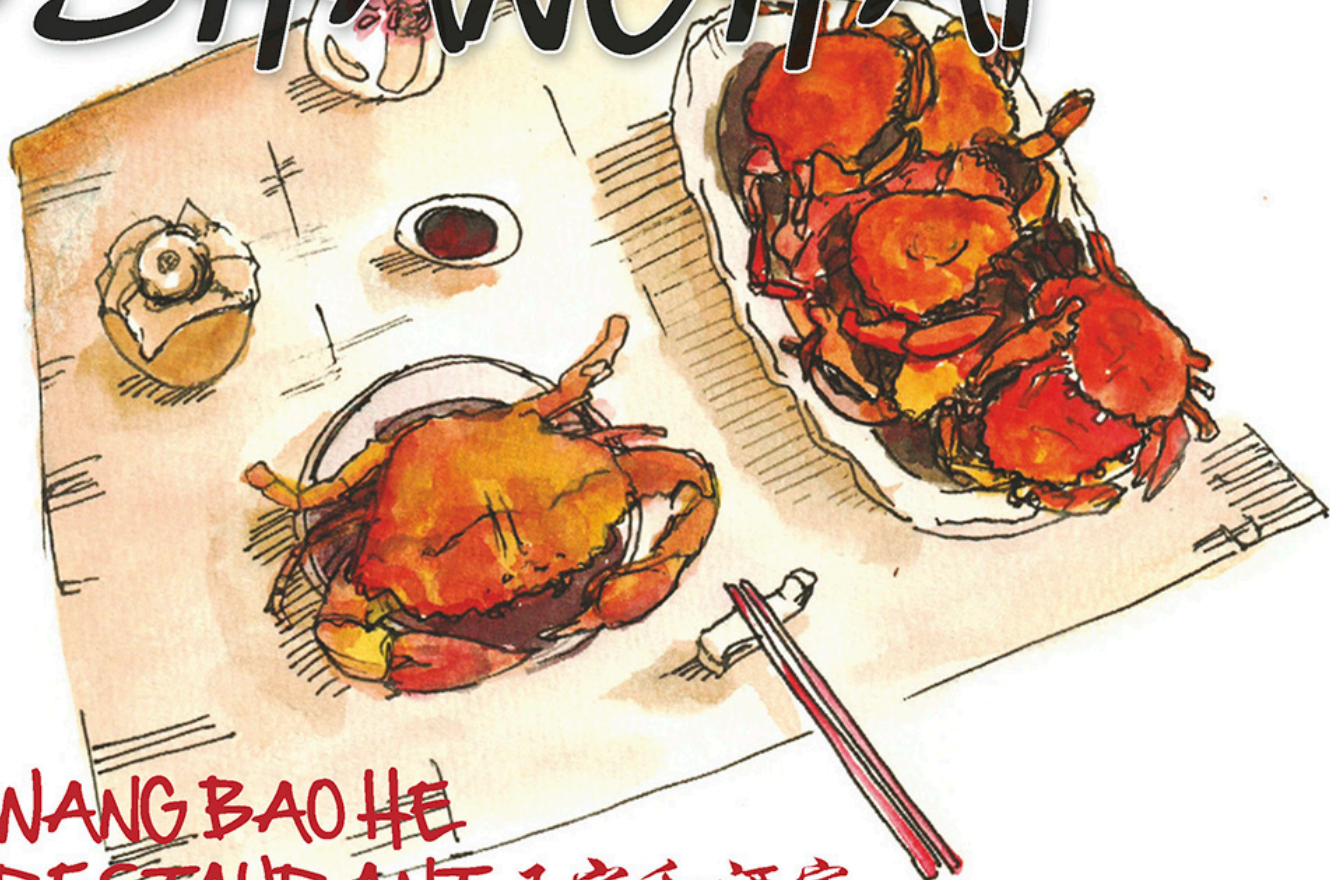
Unless you're dining solo, the Eight Treasure Duck (158RMB) is a must-order. This dish is a true feast for the taste buds (although not so much the eyes) and takes approximately five to six hours to create behind the scenes. Swimming in a thick and slightly sweet soy-based sauce with a few florets of broccoli, the large marinated duck is stuffed with eight ingredients (dried shrimps, ginkgo nuts, duck gizzard, dried ham, chestnut, bamboo shoots, chicken cubes and pork cubes) for a unique and multi-dimensional mouthful.

**Shanghai Classical Hotel** 242 Fuyou Lu, near Lishui Lu, Huangpu district (6311 1777). Open 11am-2pm, 5-10pm daily. ☎ Yu Gardens. 上海老饭店 黄浦区福佑路242号, 近丽水路





# SHANGHAI



## WANG BAO HE RESTAURANT 王宝和酒家

Dating back to 1744, Wang Bao He was originally situated in the Xiaodongmen area of the old city, before moving to its current Fuzhou Lu location in 1936. Known for being one of Shanghai's oldest restaurants, and for its diverse and delicious preparation of crabs, there aren't many Shanghainese who haven't heard of, or eaten at, Wang Bao He.

Outside of crab season, which peaks in early October, it's still worth paying a visit to this institution – which has more than 270 years of experience to draw on – to sample their *zongzi* (bamboo-wrapped rice parcels, traditionally created for the Dragon Boat Festival) and their savoury moon cakes with hairy crabmeat, among other specialties.

Head chef Gong Xiaohua has witnessed significant change in the Shanghainese dining scene since he started working at Wang Bao He 24 years ago. 'Back then there were more people in Shanghai's culinary scene, it was a popular job. But nowadays, there are fewer people in this profession.'

Nevertheless, this hasn't affected the Shanghainese chef's love for his work: 'Cooking is not just my profession but also my passion. I find it interesting, therefore I spend time on it. If you see your job as work only, you won't be able to excel at it but if you treat it as your hobby, you will do well. The company's growth is my own growth.'

Chef Gong believes messiness is part of the pleasure involved in eating crab for the Shanghainese, saying, 'We don't finish eating it quickly; we will bite a bit, try it, and taste a bit of rice wine. It's a leisure activity for us. You might ask why make eating so complicated? It's actually a form of culture,



**This food might not be the world's best, but it expresses our feelings**

and eating is a big part of our culture. When we're eating a meal together, we are enjoying the time spent together. Chinese food might not be the best in the world, but it is the best way to express our feelings.'

And as we sit together and tuck into some crab while donning plastic gloves and making a particularly satisfying mess, chef Gong laughs and adds: 'You can go to fancy restaurants where the food is served in a way that is easier to consume but you will

miss out on the simple pleasures of life.' As we suck the crabmeat out of the legs with glee, it's hard not to agree.

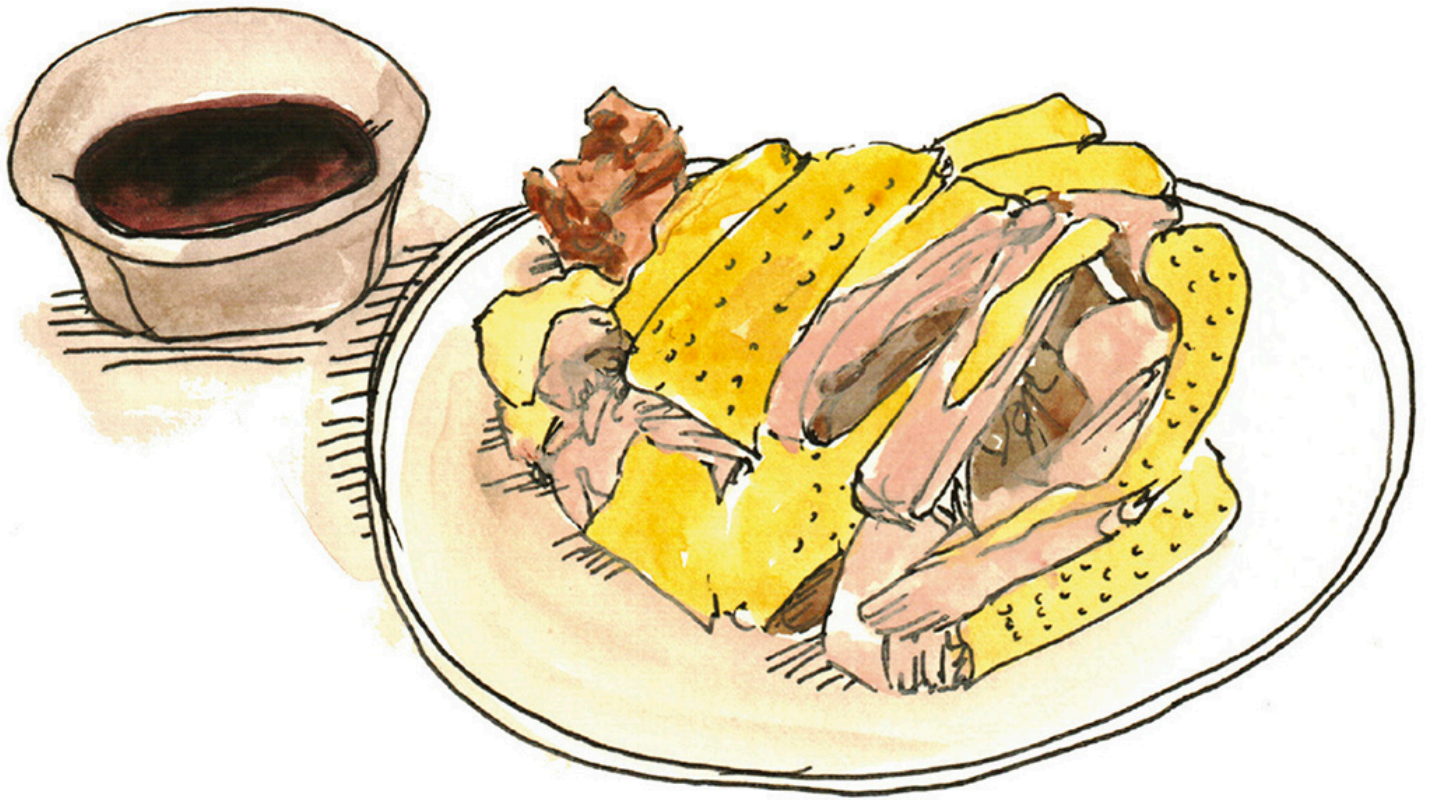
### KEY DISHES

Although best known for their crab dishes – including crab tofu (38RMB), crab and pork *xiaolongbao* (30RMB) and fried noodles with crabmeat and diced fish (88RMB) – Wang Bao He Restaurant also offers delicious seasonal specialties throughout the year.

During May, ask if there is any stir-fried eel (响油鳝丝 *Xiǎngyóu shānsī*) or bamboo (竹笋 *zhúsǔn*) available; although neither is on the bilingual menu, often the kitchen has these ingredients in stock and will happily rustle up a tasty dish for you upon request. Another popular dish at Wang Bao He is the Southern China-style fried shrimps (48RMB). These small shrimp are quick fried in a little soy, sugar and either white (grape) wine or traditional *baijiu*, depending on their size. The best way to eat them is shell and all.

**Wang Bao He Restaurant** 603 Fuzhou Lu, near Zhejiang Zhong Lu, Huangpu district (63223673). Open 11am-1.30pm; 5-9pm daily. 南京东路. 王宝和酒家 黄浦区福州路603号, 近浙江中路





## XIAO SHAOXING 小绍兴

Perhaps the best way to describe Xiao Shaoxing is utterly chaotic. This restaurant, the name of which literally means 'little Shaoxing', has been present in our city since the 1940s, when founder Mr Zhang arrived in Shanghai from the eponymous Zhejiang city, birthplace of Lu Xun. At first, Zhang etched out a living for himself selling snacks, but as time went on, his tender boiled chicken grew in popularity and it is now the restaurant's signature dish.

To the uninitiated, things can seem confusing here. Heavy wooden chairs clatter and bang as they are moved about the stark dining room. Waiters push carts piled high with dishes and chicken bones get scattered about on the tables. Given how busy this place gets at meal times, you might have to hover next to a table and wait to sit down, or share a table with other diners. But it's an authentic type of no-frills Shanghai dining and this raucous environment is home to some of the best tender-boiled chicken in the city.

When you get to Xiao Shaoxing, you'll need to order at the counter in the middle (it might be useful to have the Chinese dish names handy). Then take your receipt to the counter on the left, grab a plastic tray and you'll be unceremoniously handed your chicken. If you've ordered anything other than the chicken, you'll need to head to the counter on the right for collection.

If you're after a more sedate experience,

head up to the second floor where you can sit and order from a menu. Prices are slightly more expensive (with the chicken priced from 36RMB for a small, and 60RMB for a regular-sized platter) however it's not a bad option if you're keen to avoid the bustle on the ground floor.



**Waiters push carts piled high with dishes, and bones get scattered about on the tables**

On our recent visit, we were joined at our downstairs table by fellow diners Mrs Qian and her sister and mother. They've been going to Xiao Shaoxing for almost 30 years, since Mrs Qian was a little girl.

In the beginning, she tells us, the taste of the chicken was better. 'Nowadays we are spoiled for choice. There are just too many things for us to try and the quality of life has risen. But the price here is reasonable; it hasn't really increased much.'

As for the atmosphere, Mrs Qian says she

prefers the *renao* environment downstairs. 'It's ordinary, like any other restaurant,' she says. 'You can't compare it with the fancy places especially when the food is such good value for money.'

And it's true, Xiao Shaoxing is a great little place to chow down on affordable, tasty Chinese food, not to mention brush up on your Shanghainese with some locals.

### KEY DISHES

If you've managed to navigate a seat downstairs, the tender boiled chicken (小绍兴白斩鸡, *Xiǎo Shào Xīng bái zhǎn jī*, 42RMB for regular size) is a must order. It's soft and succulent, and you can see why people get hooked. One serving is easily enough for a few diners, especially if ordered with a soothing – albeit somewhat bland – chicken congee (鸡粥, *jī zhōu*) for a ridiculously affordable 2RMB per bowl.

Elsewhere on the menu, the spicy chicken noodles (鸡骨酱面(辣), *jī gǔ jiàng miàn [là]*, again cheap at only 13RMB), are tasty and satisfying, but it's really the chicken that's the draw here.

**Xiao Shaoxing** 69-75 Yunnan Nan Lu, near Ninghai Dong Lu, Huangpu district (6326 0845). Open 10am-10pm daily. ☎ Dashijie. 小绍兴 黄浦区云南南路69-75号, 近宁海东路





# XIANDE LAI 鲜得来

On the same street as Xiao Shaoxing, you'll find another little casual eatery with a long history. Famous for their pork ribs and rice cakes, Xian De Lai was established in 1921 by He Shide and his family who started out by selling milk, bread and toast on Xizang Nan Lu. After realising that these Western dishes weren't that popular with the locals, they started selling the *paigu niangao* (pork ribs and rice cakes) instead, and the brand hasn't looked back since.

When ordering at the counter, the receptionist, who has been working at Xian De Lai for more than 30 years, proudly tells us that they sell at least 10,000 portions of the *paigu niangao* every day. Their normal sales are 20-30,000 portions per day, climbing to an incredible 40-50,000 a day around Spring Festival. The open kitchen is testament to their output productivity, with huge vats of oil and giant woks all part of the production line.

Senior Chef Le Kefeng, who has been working at Xian De Lai for close to 40 years, is pretty relaxed about the popularity of their *paigu niangao*, and about life in general. 'People keep returning because they are familiar with the brand,' he says matter-of-factly. 'Also because when they walk into the restaurant, they see that the chefs who are cooking are those who have been here for a

long time, so they know the quality of the food will be reliable and they keep coming back.'

There aren't any secret formulas or fancy tricks here, just the same recipes and methodology that has served them well for almost a century. For Chef Le, 'it's just that the way we make it is different. Other places will fry the *niangao*, but for us, we boil it in water and then marinate it in our special sauce. It's precisely because we boil it in water that the chewy texture remains the same even after a few hours.' And the sauce is Xian De Lai's own recipe, made up of sugar, assorted jams, tomato sauce, sweet sauce, chilli oil, starch, salt, and dried chilli – it's mouth-wateringly addictive.

#### KEY DISHES

The *páigǔ niángāo* (排骨年糕, pork ribs with rice cakes) is what you're here for.



They can be ordered in a set with an accompanying bowl of soup with meat dumplings wrapped in tofu skin for 19RMB, or solo for a bargainous price of 11RMB. The ribs are doused in Xian De Lai's slightly sweet and wonderfully rich sauce and the rice cakes are slippery but chewy, pairing well with the juicy fried pork ribs. It's not high-end dining here, but simple and honest food cooked by humble chefs that care about their product.

**Xian De Lai** 46 Yunnan Nan Lu, near Ninghai Dong Lu, Huangpu district (no tel). Open 7am-10.30pm daily. ☎ Dashijie. 鲜得来 黄浦区云南南路46号, 近宁海东路

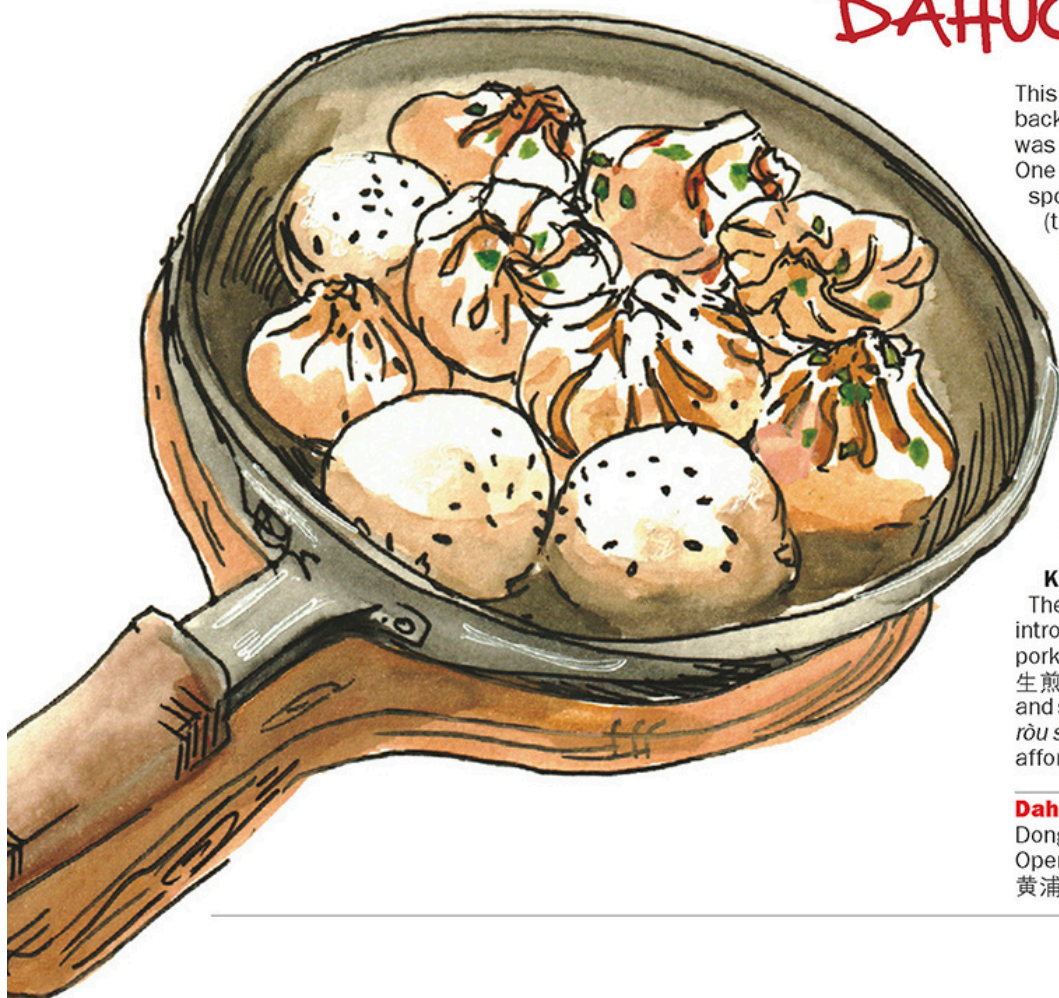
# DAHUCHUN 大壶春

This classic *shengjian* baojoint was opened back in the 1930s by Tang Miaoquan and was originally known as *Dahuchun Mantou*. One of the city's most famous dumpling spots, you'll often find long queues here (though with Xiao Shaoxing and Xian De Lai on the same street as this branch, you at least have alternatives). We love Dahuchun for its no-nonsense menu prices. You can pick up four pork *shengjian* for 6RMB, or four pork and shrimp *shengjian* for 12RMB. The store is clean and nicely designed, with wooden furniture laid out below red lanterns. You can also order your soup on the side, meaning you're less likely to squirt *bao* juice everywhere.

#### KEY DISHES

The *shengjian* bao don't need much introduction here, with a succulent and juicy pork filling available at 6RMB for four (鲜肉生煎, *xiān ròu shēng jiān*), or a mixed pork and shrimp filling (大虾鲜肉生煎, *dà xiā xiān ròu shēng jiān*) at 12RMB for four. Delicious, affordable and wonderfully unhealthy.

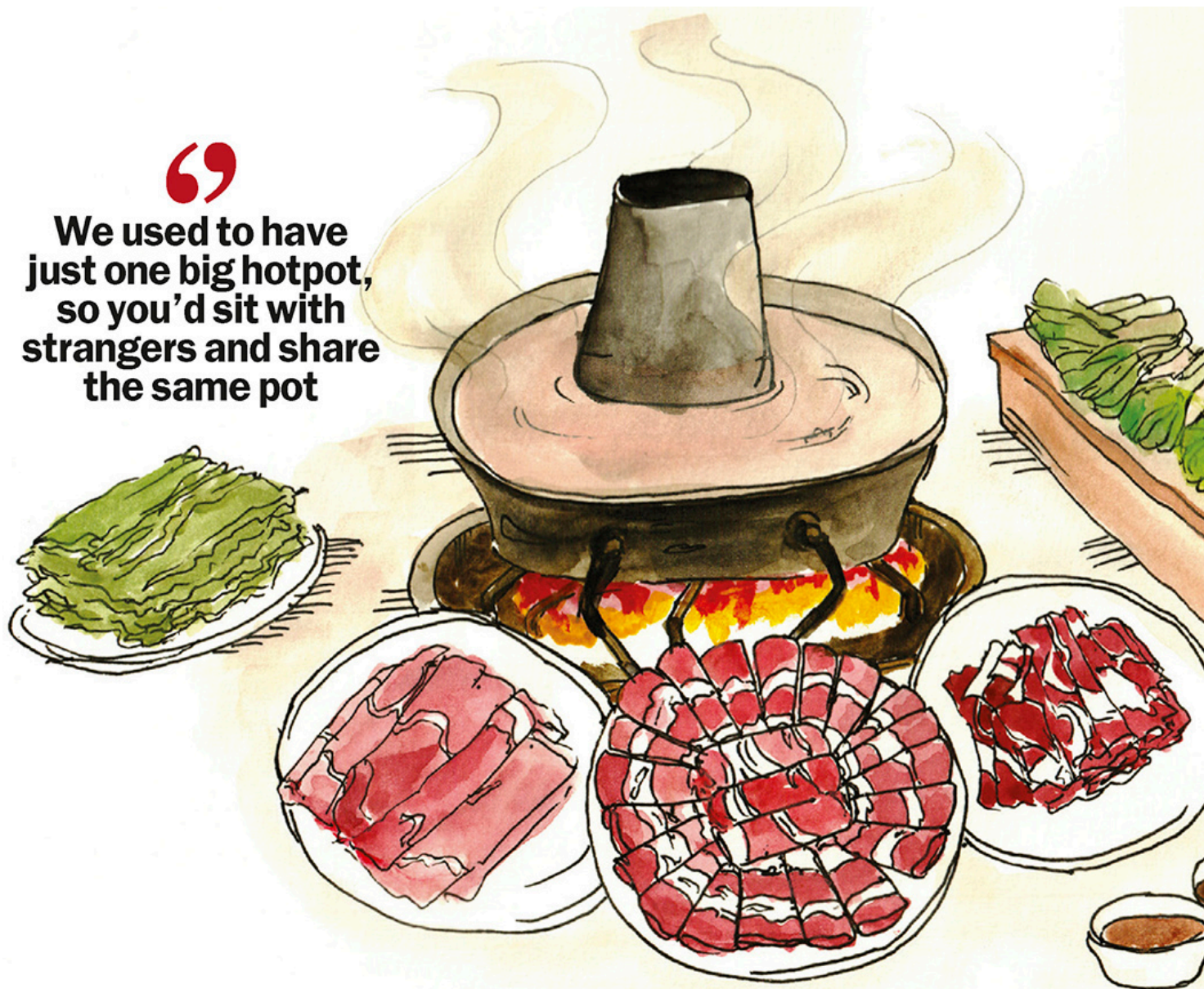
**Dahuchun** 71 Yunnan Nan Lu, near Jinling Dong Lu, Huangpu district (6311 5177). Open 8am-8pm daily. ☎ Dashijie. 大壶春 黄浦区云南南路71号, 近金陵东路





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We used to have just one big hotpot, so you'd sit with strangers and share the same pot



## HONG CHANG XING 洪长兴

The history of Hong Chang Xing has been passed down through the generations. Zhang Zhihua, the current manager, who has been working at this popular spot near People's Square for ten years, eagerly tells us the story of the restaurant being founded in 1891 by the famous Peking Opera star Ma Lianliang's second uncle, Ma Chunqiao.

At the time, the mostly Muslim Peking Opera troupe had trouble finding suitable restaurants in Shanghai. Worried about their throats and concerned that the team would not be able to sing, Ma Chunqiao rented a house and opened a restaurant called Ma Jia Ban Huofang, selling sesame biscuits, mutton pies, *zhajiang mian* noodles and mutton dumplings. Soon after opening, they added mutton hotpot, which garnered a reputation as their specialty. When the original owners returned to Beijing, they passed the joint to Hong Sanba, who renamed it Hong Chang Xing.

Zhang describes the original, rustic, single-storey restaurant on Lianyun Lu.

'They only had one big hotpot. So it wasn't that you would wait for a table, what you would do is order your meat and vegetables, then you sit with a group of strangers and share the hotpot. We might not know the person sitting beside us, but we'd cook our meat in the same pot. The soup in the hotpot would also not change at any point during the day, but the froth from the meat would be removed. This was a special characteristic of Hong Chang Xing in the past. But now, it has changed because people might find that a little unsanitary and wouldn't want to eat with strangers. Back then, people liked it because it was livelier.'

The Yunnan Nan Lu incarnation, which you've likely spotted from Yanan Dong Lu courtesy of its mosque-inspired minaret, has moved on from the communal pot, and now offers multiple tables on the ground floor, or individual sized hotpots on the second storey. Unsurprisingly, the interior here is steamy – mostly thanks to the pots being constantly replenished. Service

is friendly and relaxed, and the space feels open and clean. The crowd is older; something Zhang puts down to the long history of the brand.

Hong Chang Xing prides itself on the quality of its ingredients, and boasts that by using a traditional water base for the hotpot they are able to truly show off their produce. 'Using this clear broth is very healthy, and you can taste the real flavour of the mutton and beef,' says Zhang. 'With clear water, you can immediately taste the original freshness of the meat.'

### KEY DISHES

Although there's a bilingual menu that resembles a Russian classic in length, it's really all about the hotpot here. That said, there are a couple of other key dishes worth the stomach space, including the *niurou jianbao* (牛肉煎包, pan-fried beef buns for 3RMB each) – the restaurant apparently sells between 1,500-2,000 of these daily – and the boiled mutton dumplings (羊肉水饺,



# WANG JIA SHA 王家沙

69

The ground floor at Wang Jia Sha is set up like a dumpling supermarket



Since opening in 1945, Wang Jia Sha has developed a reputation for their *shengjian bao* (pan fried buns), *qingtuan* (sweet green rice balls), shrimp wontons, red bean pastries and shrimp noodles. In 2008, they were awarded a spot on China's Intangible Cultural Heritage List for their technique and skills in dim sum-making.

Although everybody has their favourite *qingtuan* spot – Xing Hua Lou made the news in March when their queues prompted the police to enforce crowd control – Wang Jia Sha is exceedingly popular, with lines regularly forming around the block during Qingming, which is when the *qingtuan* are at their most sought after. And what started as a single-storey small business has now morphed into the huge multi-branch operation it is today.

Liu Chongliang, deputy general manager of Wang Jia Sha, seems unfazed by their popularity, telling us that during peak periods they can sell up to 180,000 of the small green treats. 'During Qingming, the lines for our *qingtuan* went from the front door to the back door, and from the back door to the entrance of the metro station. No other stores sell as well as us. We made them 24 hours a day during that period.' On a 'normal' day, it's more likely they'll sell around 30,000.

Following renovations at their main outlet on Nanjing Xi Lu in 2015, you can now head to the ground floor, which is set up like a 'dumpling supermarket' making it convenient for customers to grab food to go. As you navigate the busy counters, you'll likely jostle with determined *ayis* battling their way to the front of the line.

Wang Jia Sha's dumplings are handmade in the third-storey kitchen and Liu tells us that freshness and innovation are their key selling points. 'At Wang Jia Sha, in comparison to our competitors, we strive for innovation in our products, to create new products. What we have, others do not. But what others have, we do better.'

For a (somewhat) quieter and (slightly) more refined dining experience, head to the second floor where you can sit and sample a host of simple but well prepared home-style dishes. Although not in English, the menu shows all the classics in picture form, and the servers are helpful and patient.

## KEY DISHES

From the ground floor, pick up six plump *qingtuán* filled with a sweet red bean filling for 24RMB, or the newer signature flavour of egg yolk and pork floss for 48RMB. These green dumplings are made using glutinous rice mixed with Chinese mugwort, which gives them delicate savoury notes. They're also sticky and filling – one goes a long way. On the second floor, sit down and feast on rich crab *xiaolongbao* (精致蟹粉小笼, *jīngzhì xièfěn xiǎolóng*) for 22RMB for four, slurp up some freshly-peeled small shrimp wontons in soup (现剥虾肉小馄饨, *xiàn bōxiā ròu xiǎo hūntún*, 15RMB), swirl some crispy shrimp noodles on your chopsticks (虾仁两面黄, *xiǎ rén liǎng miàn huáng*, 38RMB) and chomp on sticky and crunchy seaweed rice cakes (苔条菜饭糕, *tái tiáo cǎi fàngāo*, 9RMB for three).

**Wang Jia Sha** 805 Nanjing East Lu, near Shimenyi Lu, Jingan district (6253 0404). Open 11am-8.30pm daily. 📍 Nanjing Dong Lu. 王家沙 静安区南京西路805号, 近石门一路

*yángrou shǔjiǎo* 7RMB for six).

The hotpot is priced at 18RMB for the soup base, with fatty mutton at 40RMB a plate and delicious wafer thin beef at 108RMB. Accompaniments are also well-priced, with fried bean curd going for 18RMB and a generous assorted mushroom platter for just 45RMB.

Health claims about the base aside, the sauce at Hong Chang Xing is delicious, and should be embraced. A 'secret recipe' that has, like the origin story, been passed down through the generations, the mix includes peanuts, sesame, honey and soy sauce, with the option of adding spring onions, coriander, garlic and chilli.

**Hong Chang Xing** 1 Yunnan Nan Lu, near Yanan Dong Lu, Huangpu district (6328 1551). Open 11am-2pm; 5pm-9.30pm daily. 📍 Dashijie. 洪长兴 黄浦区云南南路1号, 近延安东路

