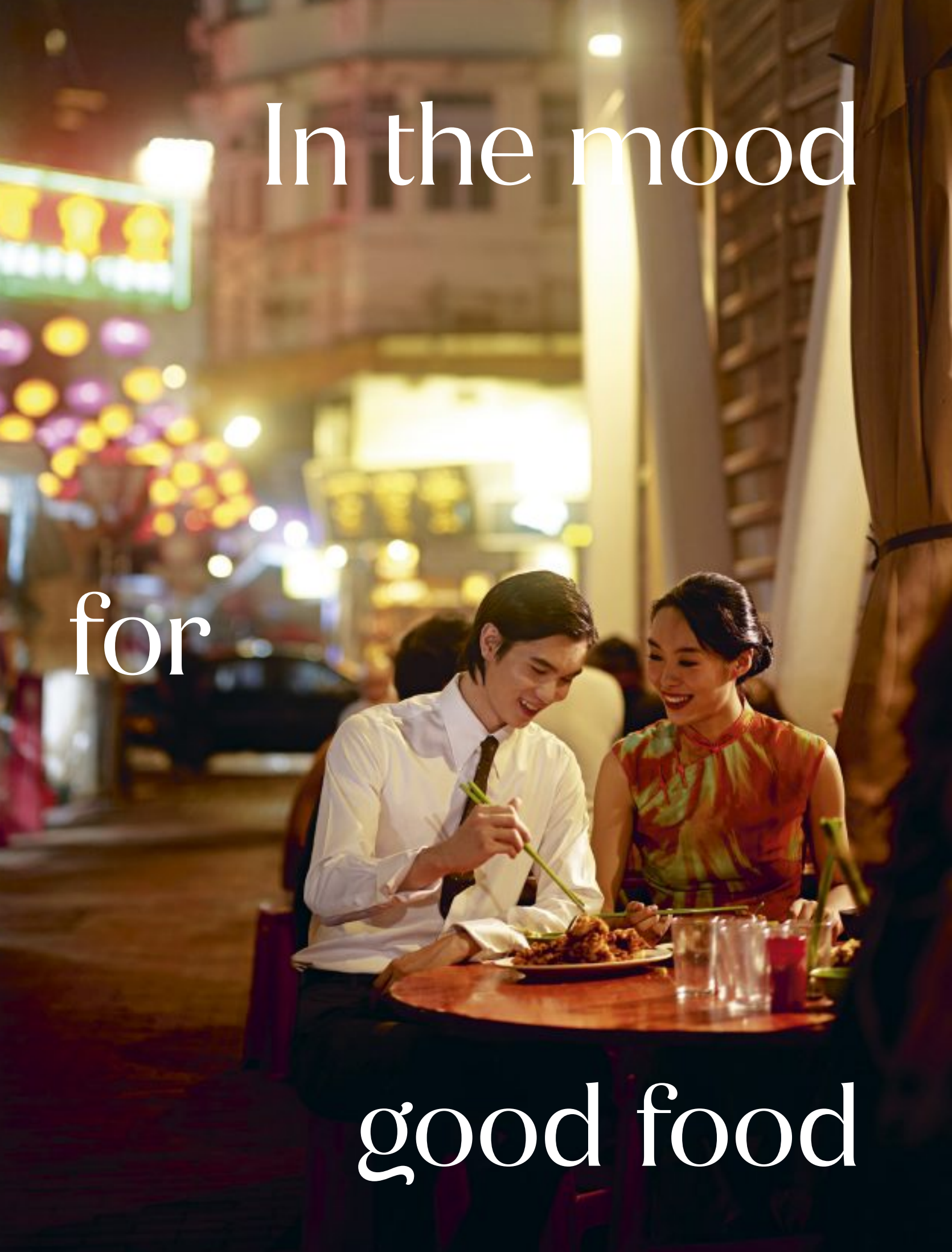


In the mood

for

good food



A top-down photograph of a white ceramic plate with a floral pattern around the rim, containing four scallops. Each scallop is topped with a generous amount of thin, clear glass noodles (fairy hair), a brownish-orange sauce, and finely chopped green onions. The plate is set on a dark, polished wooden table. In the upper left corner, there are two small green ceramic bowls and a pair of green chopsticks resting on a green holder. The lighting is warm, highlighting the textures of the food and the wood.

Words **Carla Thomas** Photography **Calvin Sit**

Quick, tasty and served frills-free, some of the best Hong Kong eats are found in a type of stall called dai pai dong. It's time to experience this disappearing dining classic



It's no secret that Hong Kong's cloud-piercing skyscrapers house numerous Michelin-starred restaurants.

But ask Hongkongers where the city's authentic flavours lie, and they'll point you somewhere more down to earth.

Tucked away down unassuming alleys or in the heart of buzzing markets, you'll find the humble *dai pai dong*. Offering a quintessential outdoor dining experience, these cafés are cheap, though not particularly cheerful. At least, not when it comes to the service. The no-nonsense vendors famously focus on churning out delicious food in flaming woks rather than tableside manners.

While unlicensed hawkers were already common in the first half of the 20th century, this particular type of street stall emerged after World War II. After the war, the government granted official licences to families of selected civil servants, enabling them to operate fixed, open-air food stalls. The issued permits were larger than those



of other street vendors and featured a photo of the food vendor, giving rise to the name, “dai pai dong”, which translates to “big licence stall”.

One of the best and most enduring examples of these thrives among the shiny skyscrapers of Hong Kong's Central district. The bright and smoky Sing Kee, at the end of a row of stalls on Stanley Street, opened during the first post-war wave and has remained largely unchanged over the past seven decades.

Here, a handful of wok masters toss aromatic stir-fried dishes from morning to night. They whip up classics like fluffy scrambled eggs with succulent shrimp, fragrant squid and chilli stir fry, tofu and fish ball soup – a must-try Hong Kong street food treat – and sautéed chicken liver with vegetables for the adventurous.

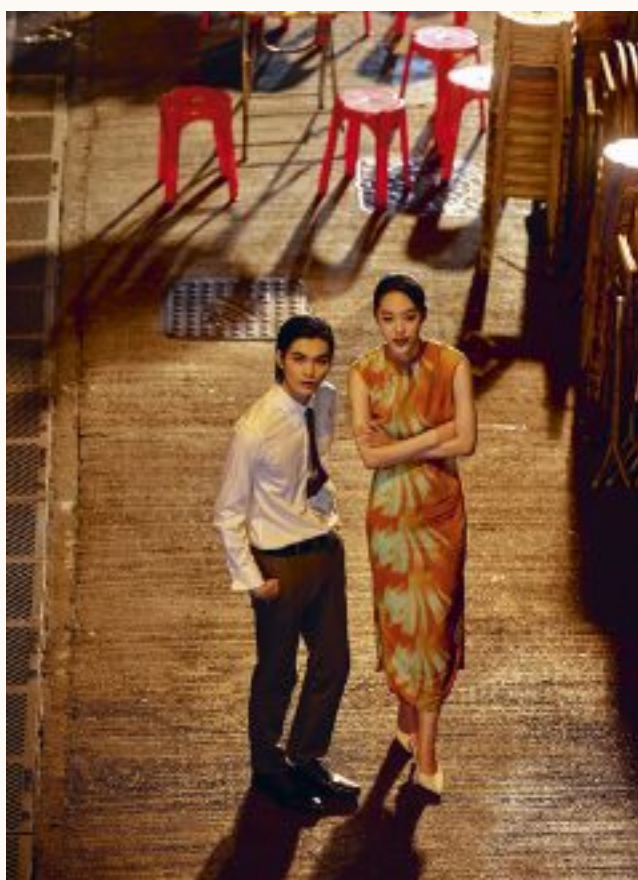
Within a leisurely walk from recently restored heritage sites like Central Market and Tai Kwun, Sing Kee welcomes a steady stream of diners throughout the day, from travelling foodies and locals on errands, to officegoers on their lunch break flowing from nearby corporate towers like the International Finance Centre (IFC) and the Bank of China Tower. When evening descends, the bright white bulbs affixed to the stalls blink on,



Previous spread:
A meal at Woosung Street Temporary Cooked Food Hawker Bazaar; steamed scallops with garlic and glass noodles

Opposite page:
Sing Kee by the street; squid and chilli stir fry

Clockwise from top: A chef at Sing Kee hard at work; Neon lights at Temple Street; an evening out at Sing Kee







spotlighting diners as passengers gliding up the Central–Mid-Levels escalators gaze from above.

WHEN THEY FIRST CAME ON THE SCENE, dai pai dongs were an instant hit. Hongkongers valued their affordability and authentic wok-fired dishes. On any given day, factory and construction workers shared tables with budget-stretched students and street cleaners alike.

In time, the outdoor stalls caught on with white-collar workers, tourists and food enthusiasts, like the late chef and food journalist Anthony Bourdain, who documented his trips to Sham Shui Po's Keung Kee and Sing Heung Yuen in Central. For many, the essence of the dai pai dong experience lies in *wok hei* – the “breath of the wok”. This mouthwatering, multisensory quality is the result of a heavy-duty wok, expertly wielded over a scorching kerosene-fuelled stove. Ideal for high-temperature cooking, kerosene can generate a strong open flame, which caramelises and chars the ingredients quickly, imparting a smoky, savoury flavour that is the hallmark of exceptional Cantonese cuisine.

Staple dishes include salt and pepper squid and black bean clams – each stir-fried in a frenzy and served piping hot with a side of steamed rice, simple condiments and bustling street life.



“

While not exactly the prettiest cafés in town, dai pai dongs have proven they certainly have cinematic appeal on top of their enduring popularity”

Over the years, dai pai dongs have become a cornerstone of the city's culinary scene and a symbol of Hong Kong's resilience and cultural heritage, so much so that iconic Hong Kong films like Wong Kar-wai's forbidden love opus *In The Mood For Love* and the crime-action classic *Infernal Affairs II*, by directors Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, have immortalised these iconic eateries.

After dinner, nearby Soho's precipitous, idiosyncratic lanes – where many of the city's most famous movies, such as *Chungking Express*, were filmed – are perfect for walking off the meal and soaking up the moody, neon-lit vibe that defines much of classic Hong Kong cinema.

Opposite page:

The action at Woosung Street Temporary Cooked Food Hawker Bazaar

This page: Fried squid with spiced salt; Woosung Street Temporary Cooked Food Hawker Bazaar

Clockwise from top left: The scene at Temple Street Spicy Crabs; spicy crabs, arguably one of the best meals in town



FEW THINGS ARE IMMUNE TO CHANGE

in Hong Kong, and dai pai dong are no exception. In the 1970s, officials stopped issuing new licences to discourage street food. Now, they can only be inherited by family members and, as older vendors retire, their population has dwindled. Once numbering in the hundreds, fewer than 25 of these stalls remain today.

Over in Yau Ma Tei, on Hong Kong's Kowloon side, you'll find Woosung Street Temporary Cooked Food Hawker Bazaar – a market that's less a conventional dai pai dong and more of a modern compromise. It was established in the 1980s as part of an initiative to relocate vendors while preserving street food culture.

Even so, the street-stall spirit remains alive and well. Every day, diners swarm the outdoor tables surrounding this unmissable barrel-shaped building. Ten different food stalls churn out everything from Hong Kong café-style eggs and spam with milk tea in the mornings to juicy clams swimming in black bean sauce, mounds of slippery rice noodles topped with garlicky prawns and fresh-out-the-wok salt and pepper squid.



Just a three-minute walk south is another must-try eatery. For anyone with an appetite, Temple Street Spicy Crabs is the place to be. Both the name and the giant crab affixed over the doorway are enough signals that crustaceans are king at this popular café where giant aquariums are filled with jumbo mantis prawns, lobsters and other fresh bivalves. The talented chefs churn out plate after plate of their specialty, spicy chilli crab, heaped with fried garlic, chilli peppers and greens – a not-to-miss dish. Amid the sea of tables, boisterous patrons crack open crab shells and dig out the succulent meat, washing it all down with ice-cold Yanjing beers.

While not exactly the prettiest cafés in town, these streetside stalls don't instantly inspire romance, and yet Temple Street Market is one of the shooting locations for Emily Ting's 2015 walk-and-talk romantic comedy *Already Tomorrow in Hong Kong*. "Let me take you where the locals eat", Josh Rosenburg (Brian Greenberg) tells Ruby Lin (Jamie Chung), two strangers who find each other, along with some of the city's best eats.

Time and again, dai pai dongs have proven they certainly have cinematic appeal on top of their enduring popularity. Catch them while you still can.

“

Over the years, dai pai dongs have become a cornerstone of the city's culinary scene and a symbol of Hong Kong's resilience and cultural heritage”



Malaysia Airlines
flies from Kuala
Lumpur to Hong Kong
14x weekly.



Scan to explore &
book activities in
Hong Kong with
Journify.



Scan to book Flight
+ Hotel packages
to Hong Kong with
MHolidays.

More dai pai dong delights

Sing Heung Yuen

If you're lucky enough to snag a spot at this daytime dai pai dong on serene Gough Street in Sheung Wan, be sure to order a bowl of the famous tomato macaroni soup with a crispy, buttery bun for dunking and a unique Hong Kong refreshment: a Seven Up with salted lemons. **2 Mei Lun Street, Central**

Lan Fong Yuen

It's easy to miss this old-school stall, but the long queues for their signature Hong Kong-style milk tea are the dead giveaway. For a more filling afternoon treat, try it with a thick slice of their pillowy French toast. **2 Gage Street, Central**

Chui Wo Lee

Head up the Kowloon Peninsula to Wong Tai Sin to discover this hidden gem, open 24 hours a day. Enjoy everything from early morning dim sum and congee to aromatic stir-fries and crispy baby pigeons in the evening. **Shop No. 2, Cooked Food Kiosk, Ching Tak Street, Wong Tai Sin, Kowloon**

Directory

Sing Kee

82 Stanley Street

Woosung Street Temporary Cooked Food Hawker Bazaar

29–39 Woosung Street, Kowloon

Temple Street Spicy Crabs

210 Temple Street, Jordan

Production team

Producer: Isabell Lau

Model: Demo@WE Management, Yang@WE Management

Stylist: Akubi Yeung

Make up & hair: Akubi Yeung

Assistants: Denise, Gaaheii and Anson Choi