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A Feasting Guide to San Francisco’s Newly Glam Chinatown

The country’s oldest Chinatown is stirring up a culinary revival, with modern riffs on traditional fare, hidden cocktail dens and the city’s best dim sum.

By Jay Chashes
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ON A RECENT Friday night, China Live, the new food and drink complex on the edge of San Francisco’s Chinatown, throbbed with diners. “We have eight different cooking stations, four district cooking types,” said founder George Chen, leading a tour past open kitchen surrounding a dining room sparkling with luxurious materials—river rock, marble, a cityscape mural in blue and white tile.

In the adjoining room, shoppers browsed a marketplace stocked with fancy cookware and gourmet ingredients (extra virgin tea oil, housemade XO sauce with Cognac). Upstairs hid a plush speakeasy bar and another restaurant, service \$255 tasting menus to just eight tables a night. “The perception of Chinese food has to change.” Said Mr. Chen. “Americans have to get over that mystery brown sauce in a white box cliché.”

To get this message across, this veteran restaurateur bet big on one of San Francisco’s most perpetually troubled neighborhoods, launching his 30,000-square-foot, \$20 million Chinese version of Eataly, as he describes it, along a strip of cheap takeout restaurants and cluttered souvenir shops.

The county’s oldest and largest Chinatown suffered through years of economic decline, plagued by graffiti, petty crime and shuttered storefronts, with whole stretches looking increasingly like abandoned movie sets and little life left behind their historical facades. But while the district’s central thoroughfare, Grant Avenue, lined with sleepy gift shops, remains frozen opened last spring.

In recent years, other newcomers have begun tiptoeing into the district’s restaurant scene, while young heirs to iconic establishments have started re-energizing their parents’ and grandparents’ businesses. Community leaders, meanwhile, spurred by a long overdue subway station project slated to finally open next year, have been working to bring traffic back to the neighborhood with improved lighting and beautification schemes.

A maze of bright murals has sprung up in recent years, a result, mostly, of landlords replacing tagged walls with commissioned street art. Terracotta warriors climb the walls of one building on Grant Avenue, while around the corner a somber piece depicts alleyway gambling in the late 19th century. Both murals are by Francisco Aquino, a local artist who signs his work Twick-and has enough street cred to keep vandals at bay. Betty Louie, a local property owner, commissioned both pieces. Ms. Louie has also been working to attract new food ventures to the area. A new fast-casual dim sum parlor from Bay Area restaurateur Chris Yeo will soon fill one of Ms. Louie’s historic restaurant spaces, the pagoda-topped former home of Cathay House on California Street. “We hope.. we can draw maybe a different population to Chinatown,” she said. “Not only the tourist, but maybe the locals will come back.”

Another neighborhood booster, Albert Cheng—who works with San Francisco’s Friend of Roots organization, which brings Chinese Americans to China in search of their ancestral homes—points out that Chinatown’s food is becoming much more diverse: “This area used to be all Cantonese, now you see a blend of Hong Kong, Shanghai, Hunan, Chongqing.” He’s been eating here since the 1960s, when glamorous supper clubs and banquet halls drew the city’s smart set.

“the old places were absolutely stunning,” said Mr. Chen. The Empress of China, the last of those opulent eating palaces, shut down a few years ago, and its landmark building’s fate remains in limbo. Here, a brief guide to the neighborhood’s newer dining and drinking establishment.

China Live Market Restaurant

The anchor restaurant at China Live serves a market-driven menu of Chinatown classics—juicy pork dumplings, Cantonese roast meats, rice casseroles in clay pots—subtly upgraded with top-shelf ingredients (including produce grown for the restaurant on its own farm plot in Petaluma). The Sprawling dining room, like the rest of this ambitious complex, is the work of hospitality design powerhouse AvroKo, which imported many of the materials from China, including the tiles for the mural of the San Francisco skyline. *644 Broadway, chinalivesf.com.*

Cold Drinks Bar

A neighborhood known for its kitschy dive bars got its first serious cocktail den with the Cold Drinks Bar opened on the second floor of China Live last year. Follow the black bats along the staircase to its unmarked doorway for a mixed drink reliant on Scotch—the thematic ingredient running through much of the menu—sipped in a soft-leather chair. The signature Sometimes Old Fashioned includes duck fat-washed 10-year-old Speyburn and a very big cube of ice. *644 Broadway, chinalivesf.com.*



Bartender Sacred Mitchell at Cold Drinks Bar at China Live. PHOTO: ALANNA HALE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL