



Taiwanese Cuisine: Pork Buns, Beef Noodles and Bubble Tea, Oh My!

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From Chinese colonization to Japanese occupation, the evolution of Taiwanese cuisine is as complicated and fragmented as any other part of the nation's history. Taiwan has been colonized by the Chinese empire, dating as far back to the 17th century. However, the island's people assimilated and by the 19th century, Taiwanese identity was nearly synonymous with that of mainland China. Even during the island's eventual period of Japanese occupation from 1885 until the end of WWII, Chinese food was not only common, but it was even served to high-ranking Japanese officials. Some of the foods that were commonly served at upper-class festivities included shark fin and braised turtle. However, the majority of the population was largely dependent on rice and pickled vegetables, perhaps having meat and other rare finds like cooking oils on very special occasions.

After the Japanese were exiled from the island post WWII, there was a large influx of mainland Chinese migrants. However, the Chinese dishes that Taiwan had served the Japanese elite did not resemble the new dishes which entering the country after the war. As advancements in culinary establishments took place, a new era of various Chinese foods such as fried pork fillet strips, and gaojha (a mixture of ground shrimp and beef that are stewed to a pulp in broth and then fried) moved in next door to successful Japanese ramen shops.

The people of Taiwan have been able to create their own cuisine mainly through mixing and re-making classical Chinese dishes with Japanese cooking techniques. This combination elevates the complexity and creates a unique flavor profile. The following foods are some staples of modern Taiwanese cuisine— all from an array of different geographical areas in Taiwan like throughout the mountains, coasts, and cities.

Pork Bao Buns: This is a perfect example of how Taiwan put their own twist on an otherwise classically Chinese dish. The bao buns are still made with the same white fluffy dough that is expected in Shanghai (where the food originated), but instead the Taiwanese version is a little bit larger, and is also fried in a Japanese fashion. That being said, the inside is still filled with a blend of spiced pork and vegetables.

Soup dumplings (Xiaolong Bao): Another original from Shanghai, although many argue that the Taiwanese actually perfected them. They are super thin dumpling shells filled with gelatin soup cubes which when heated turn into hot liquid soup in various flavors, such as vegetable and meat. The dumplings are then steamed until piping hot and served in the round woven baskets in which they are steamed. One of the most world-renowned soup dumpling restaurants is the iconic Din Tai Fung, which has gained global recognition for their speedy service and impeccable quality.

Beef noodles: This dish consists of a beefy broth full of thick cut noodles and packed with tender, juicy cuts of braised beef. This dish borrows a lot from the more traditional Japanese ramen, as both revolve around a flavorful broth that is filled with an array of ingredients meant to not only balance the dish, but on a metaphysical level provide some sort of internal balance for the eater as well.

Fried chicken: Although known mostly as an American food, the fried chicken in Taiwan is prepared and flavored much differently. Taiwanese fried chicken is beaten into a large flat piece and then is dusted with a slightly sweet powder that tastes like a mixture of cinnamon and nutmeg after being fried.

Not all of Taiwan's cuisine is based off of its predecessors. Below are popular dishes found solely in Taiwan.

Braised Pork Rice: This classic dish is really one of the simplest. Colloquially referred to as "lurou fan," one can expect this dish to consist of small cut-up pieces of pork belly soaked in broth and then ladled over a small bowl of sticky white rice. The saltiness of the pork flavors the rice and creates a flavorful mixture. "Lurou fan is the more ordinary and down-to-earth dish for any Taiwanese," says Rae Lin, founder of *dearbnb*, a Taiwanese travel website. "From your mother's version of lurou fan to the one served in a restaurant, it's the one dish we truly can't live without."

Bubble Tea: This tasty treat took the world by storm and can now be easily found in nearly every city across the globe, but its roots are in Taiwan. Invented in Tainan out of boredom, “Bubble tea represents the “QQ” food texture that Taiwanese love. The phrase refers to something that is especially chewy, like the tapioca balls that form the “bubbles” in bubble tea.” At the present, bubbles are now added to a variety of drinks including hot, cold, iced, blended, and many more.

Even though Taiwan has enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy under mainland China after WWII, restaurants didn’t initially have signs outside of their doors boasting and advertising “Taiwanese Food.” It actually wasn’t until the 1990s that many culinary professionals on the island sought to establish their food as its own independent entity. Today, Taiwanese cuisine is said to be one of the most unique and delicious in all of the world. From Taipei in the north to Kaohsiung in the south, Taiwan has more than enough options to satisfy even the trickiest of taste buds.

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