

Dim sum, meaning touch your heart, is a favorite of ours, and wherever we happen to be: Hong Kong, Shanghai, Honolulu, New York, Las Vegas or San Francisco, we seek out Chinese restaurants that specialize in the delicacy guaranteed to touch both heart and stomach.

According to Chinese legend, dim sum was first created a thousand years ago by Asian travelers. The little ready-made, rice-dough-wrapped dumplings, filled with meat, seafood or veggies, could be stored in backpacks or on ponies. At stops along the road, over campfires, the quick snacks were steamed, toasted or fried.

When travelers reached inns, fresh-made dim sum delicacies were specialties of the house for sit-down and take-out meals. Depending on the locale in the Orient, thousands of varieties of the popular food were available. As today in Asian restaurants, carts of dim sum were wheeled around dining rooms for visitors to pick and choose their favorites.



When looking for dim sum in San Francisco or anywhere else, always look for restaurants where local Chinese families come to eat. While many of the usual tourist trap restaurants serve good food, it's usually so Westernized and too often pre-frozen, it has lost its original charm and taste.

One San Francisco place that's a local family hangout is Happy Chinese Restaurant on Nob Hill's Powell Street. On a recent late-night visit, we were the only non-Orientals in the room. At various round tables were groups of elders, chatting and eating from a lazy susan tray that pivoted around the middle of the table. At another table near the kitchen entrance, another

group was making dim sum dumplings and wontons, slapping them together by hand, but with assembly line speed as they laughed and piled up the ready-to-cook delicacies.

Our first course was an enormous steaming bowl of wor won ton chicken and pork soup. Although there were only two of us at the table, the serving could have fed a dozen. In fact, because it was so chock full of meat, veggies and won tons, we could have made a more-than-adequate evening meal out of just one serving of soup each.

We next chose various dim sum specialties, including sui mai (pork) and shrimp (har gow). Another dish took us back to childhood. When our Mom served us chicken, she always ate only the feet. She wanted to make sure her hungry kids had the best parts, because the feet were almost all skin and bone. At the Happy Chinese restaurant, there's a specialty of chicken feet in black bean sauce. As a salute to Mom, we tried it. Great taste, but still not much more than a few nibbles.

Next time you're in San Francisco, and you want to eat what the local families eat when they go out, especially the dim sum specialties, be sure to try the Happy Chinese.

Hang Ah Tea Room is probably the oldest authentic Chinese restaurant in San Francisco. For nearly the past 90 years, it has been serving up dim sum and all the other great Oriental dishes to tourists and natives. Located in a hard-to-find alley called Pagoda Place in Chinatown, once you find and enter the front door, the sights, smells and sounds take you back at least a generation to the traditional quiet, attentive service of your favorite eating place in Hong Kong, Manila, Shanghai or Lower Manhattan.

The menu is almost impossible to read in the low light, and the waiter will probably pretend he doesn't speak English (especially the one with the MBA from Berkeley). So, just gesture and you'll soon be plied with such specialties as fried shrimp dim sum, sesame chicken in foil and a dozen other delicacies. We were there last year, and although we seemed to pile on every item on the menu, including little cups of wine and a custard dessert, our bill for two was \$21.95. For that price at the Hilton, you'd get maybe a Caesar salad for one.

Another local family favorite is Good Luck Dim Sum on Clement Street in the Richmond area. But don't expect to get there for a late meal. The serving stops promptly at 6:30 pm, and if you hang around after that, the waiters will stand around staring at you until you get up and leave. However, if you like a dim sum breakfast, arrive at 7 am, when everything is deliciously fresh made.

Prices are happily low, almost give-away by the standards of the posh San Francisco restaurants that empty tourist pockets. If you like take-out, for about \$10, you can get a family-meal's worth of such specialties as shrimp gow, pork and peanut dim sum, steamed pot stickers and the inevitable foil-wrapped soy chicken bits. Because the little place is usually jammed full of Asian families, don't expect courteous waiters and bowing wine stewards.

We had a busy, motherly-looking woman waitress who did a quick and efficient job of serving us great food. However, she always looked ready to slap our faces when we failed to make quick

decisions. We left her a big tip, fearing that if we didn't, we almost feared we'd be grounded and confined to our room for a week.