

# Taste of tradition

Lunar New Year is a time for family members to share their hopes and dreams, and special meals that symbolise togetherness



Authentic Shanghainese cuisine is one of the real treats of the Chinese culinary scene, giving food lovers the chance to savour rich flavours, piquant sauces, and a full palette of delicious seasonal ingredients. But around the time of the Lunar New Year, when members of the extended family get together for perhaps the only time in the year, restaurant goers can look forward to something extra special.

That is when expert chefs come into their own, allowing guests to celebrate the occasion with a selection of traditional dishes, many of which symbolise, as they have for generations past, shared dreams and individual hopes for the year ahead.

In highlighting these themes, the executive deputy general manager of the team behind Xiao Nan Guo, at MegaBox, which is fast acquiring a reputation as one of the finest Shanghainese restaurants in Hong Kong, said it was important to respect certain conventions. Foremost among these was that any recipe for chicken, duck, fish or pork knuckle should ensure that the main item was served “whole”. That meant, for example, not removing the head, feet or fins in the kitchen, or pre-dividing the prepared dish in any way before it reached the table.

Presenting each dish in this traditional way marked the fact that the whole family was together again under the same roof.

Recommending certain dishes, he said an always popular choice was the “Eight Treasures” duck. It was steamed and then braised to give a crispy texture on the outside, while maintaining a flavoursome stuffing, usually including salty ham, mushrooms, glutinous rice, shrimps, dried meat and preserved sausage on the inside. In olden times, these various “treasures” were often hard to come by, so any family able to enjoy them during the Lunar New Year could be grateful that their home contained such good fortune, and that they had the opportunity to share it with each other. Eating the dish was also the time for each person to make a personal wish for anything they especially hoped for – perhaps wealth, marriage, children or fortitude.

Left: Grandma's braised pork belly. Above from left: Chinese flat vegetables, pan-fried soup-filled pork bun, and an appetiser of “drunken chicken” in Shaoxing wine.

左：外婆紅燒肉。上左至右：塔菜；灌湯生煎包；紹興花雕醉雞。

“Recognising that Hongkongers may be inclined to think of Shanghainese cuisine as slightly heavy and fattening, the Xiao Nan Guo group has deliberately introduced new choices reflecting the general trend towards healthier living, and chefs are now using less oil in preparing their specialities”



Rice dumplings, or tang yuen, filled with pork or crab yolks and served in a salty soup or filled with red bean paste or sesame and served in a sweet soup, carry a similar symbolic meaning. In Chinese, the name is a play on the word for “reunion” and, when tasted, the texture of the dumplings is somewhat sticky, which is taken to represent the “glue” that holds a family together through thick and thin.

He said another typical favourite was a hot pot-style dish with assorted meats and vegetables cooked in a casserole (Quan Jia Fu). The ingredients varied but were likely to include fungi, well known for its healthful properties; round fish balls to remind diners of unity; and delicious egg dumplings, whose colour and shape resembled the old-style golden tael and were therefore a good omen for increased prosperity.

To accompany such choices, he said every leading restaurant would offer a few signature dishes. In the case of Xiao Nan Guo, that might be pork knuckles with Shanghai cabbage, particularly good for a Lunar New Year banquet, since the portions were large and the range of specially-made sauces brought out otherwise hidden flavours. Other excellent options were grandma’s braised pork belly and the deep-fried yellow croaker, carefully marinated and cooked to have a crisp skin, but beautifully silky and smooth on the palate, or stir-fried river shrimps, already shelled and served with a clear sauce that doesn’t overwhelm.

As a suitable contrast, he believes the dark green, broad-leaved Chinese flat vegetable has few equals. It is native to the Shanghai region and the distinctive spread-out shape has long been taken to mirror the way someone’s business, wealth and influence gradually extend as they go through life.

Recognising that Hongkongers may be inclined to think of Shanghainese cuisine as slightly heavy and fattening, the Xiao Nan Guo group has deliberately introduced new choices reflecting the general trend towards healthier living. These include green salads, low-calorie appetisers and cold dishes and, in another adjustment to meet changing tastes, chefs are using less oil in preparing their specialities.

Delighted with the location and the way things have taken off at MegaBox, he said the group was keen to add to its current four outlets in Hong Kong. Up to five more openings are planned by the end of this year and, with rapid expansion also occurring in mainland cities, the next logical step will be to build an international brand.

### 傳統滋味 意頭十足

傳統滬菜是中國名菜之一，亦是款待賓客上上之選。它以濃油醬汁，辛辣惹味作賣點，常以時令佐料泡製佳餚招徠美食人士。春節是每年一家團聚的大日子，食店自然推出各樣應節菜式，大廚們亦傾盡全力，為賓客提供既美味又別具意頭的菜餚。

位於MegaBox的「小南國」由小南國控股有限公司常務副總經理及其團隊經營，很快成為香港其中一家知名的上海菜館。他說上好的菜式有傳統的規範，上菜時必須保持主體完整，如雞、鴨、魚或豬手，千萬不能去掉頭、腳或鱗，因為全體上菜代表圖府齊齊整整。

他特別推介瑤柱八寶鴨，八寶鴨要先蒸後炸才會做到外皮香味脆，內餡的八寶是火腿、冬菇、糯米、蝦、臘肉、臘腸等，古時這些都是如「珍寶」般難得一嚐的好東西。春節時吃過便會為一家帶來好運，進食時還可以各自許願、求財富、問姻緣或消災解難等。

春節重要是團圓，正是湯圓的諧音，有鹹甜兩類；鹹湯圓餡料可選用肉或蟹粉，甜湯圓餡料則是紅豆或芝麻，黏黏的口感寓意一家人連結在一起同甘共苦。另一個春節受歡迎的菜式是全家福煲，寓意家人團聚、齊整、平安，內有不同的肉類、手打魚蛋、蔬菜、菌類和蛋餃，魚蛋取意「元旦」，蛋餃顏色形狀似金元寶，是繁榮富足的好兆頭。

每家菜館都有拿手的招牌菜，「小南國」的招牌菜是紅燒發財元蹄，最宜賀年春茗，大塊的秘製元蹄，兩旁伴着翠綠小白菜，保證吃得津津有味。外婆紅燒肉及椒鹽小黃魚是另的好選擇，火候要恰到好處才會皮脆肉滑。還有清炒河蝦仁，配上濃淡適中的芡汁也甚考功夫。滬菜喜用塔菜 一種大塊扁平綠葉的菜，是為大展鴻圖。

多數港人會覺得上海菜較肥膩，有見及此，「小南國」順應健康飲食潮流；一方面實施少油烹調，另一方面提供沙律、低卡路里的前菜和冷盤。

他對能設址在MegaBox內很滿意，集團目前在港有四家分店，今年內計劃再開五間，亦會擴充至國內主要城市，下一步的大計當然是建立國際品牌。

Shanghai Xiao Nan Guo Cuisine (main picture and below right) Below left: Shanghai style pastry. Above from left: Chef’s special braised pork trotter with Shanghai cabbage, stir-fried river shrimp, and eight treasures duck. 大圖及右下：小南國上海菜館；左下：上海糕點。上左至右：招牌菜紅燒發財元蹄；清炒河蝦仁；瑤柱八寶鴨。