

In Search of Taipei's Finest Roast Duck

Since Peking duck made its first appearance around 800 years ago during the Yuan Dynasty, the dish has remained a perennial favorite among serious diners. Taiwan Business TOPICS assigned its senior food writer to survey what's available from local kitchens.

BY BRIAN ASMUS

While Taipei boasts a solid 20 or so restaurants specializing in Peking duck, many others dish up their own versions of roast duck theme, whether in the more traditional northern style or the also common Cantonese one. Peking duck, which had its origins in the Yuan Dynasty nearly 800 years ago, has gone through various adaptations as it has spread to new geographical regions with different climates, influencing the type of produce available. Regardless of locale, the skin and sliced duck meat are usually served with pancakes, sauce, and cucumber or scallion (or both), followed by a stir-fried dish making use of the remaining meat, and then by soup made from the bones.

Most restaurants in Taipei prize duck from Hualian and Ilan Counties in eastern Taiwan because of its pleasing, full-bodied appearance, crisp skin, and tender flavorful meat. While connoisseurs say ducks that are 45 days old are the most tender, in Taiwan the preferred age is 60 days (with a weight of 2,000 grams) to ensure that the ducks have a sufficiently high fat content - an important point in delivering full, rich, duck flavors. To prepare the ducks, they are first cleaned of feathers and then boiled. Hot air is blown inside to help loosen the skin from the meat; then the duck is rubbed with sugar water and left to hang for 12 hours to dry. Natural drying is preferred, since the use of fans tends to dry the meat too quickly, which harms the skin. A note of caution: ducks hanging out for too long, especially in summer when temperatures are hotter, develop gamy, liverish flavors.

Now the duck is ready for cooking, which usually takes 45 to 50 minutes. The key is to reduce the amount of fat under the skin to a minimum, while keeping the meat juicy. Too little cooking and the duck is too fatty and greasy; too much and the meat becomes tough. While Peking duck is traditionally eaten with scallion and black-bean sauce, some prefer cucumber for its more delicate flavor. Those who prefer scallion should go for smaller ones that won't overpower the taste of the duck.

Making the pancakes requires a proper balance of water and flour so that the result will not be either too doughy or too powdery. Most high-end restaurants have gone in for ever more transparent pancakes. This keeps diners from filling up, enabling them to eat more duck. This objective is the exact opposite of how things were when meat was a far greater luxury.

For the sauce, Shangrila's Far Eastern Plaza Hotel prefers to use black-bean rather than plum sauce. "The latter is actually Cantonese, not Pekingese," said Eddie Liu, assistant director of food and beverage. "One good thing about plum sauce, though, is that if the duck is too oily (as ducks prepared in southern China often are), then the acid of the plum helps break this down."

The preference at the Westin Hotel is for greater sophistication. "Our sauce is more complex than at most restaurants," said Jordan Yang, chef de cuisine at the Yi Yuan restaurant. "The sauce we use is made of 20 different kinds of herbs and spices, with black bean being the primary ingredient. I think we have the best sauce in town."

After testing out various ducks around town, I would award the top prize to the version at the Far Eastern Plaza Hotel's Shang Palace. This is the best of the best when it comes to meat, skin, and presentation, plus the service is absolutely first rate. Prices are obviously higher than at local restaurants, though similar to those at other five-star hotels.

Tops in quality - less so for interior design - is the Yi Yuan Pekinese Restaurant at the Westin Hotel. Keep in mind, though, that the duck here tends to be fattier in keeping with Asian preferences. The addition of tangerine peel and the sophisticated medley of spices lend credence to Jordan Yang's boast about having the best sauce in town.

The Yi Yuan restaurant at the Sherwood Taipei also has a duck - albeit a Cantonese-style one - that is also in the running for top honors. The side dishes made of the remaining duck meat offer less to quack about, however. The Sherwood's venue more than overcomes this limitation with the elegance of its decor- a black-white checked tiled floor, subdued natural wood paneling, and potted palms.

Outside the fancy hotels, the unanimitous choice among all of my roast duck fans is Song Kitchen. The problem? Getting a reservation for the early shift at night (6 to 8 p.m.) is nearly impossible, and the after 8 o'clock reservations require about a two-month notice. Given that Taoranting offers a duck that is almost as good (though quality can vary, it generally is more hit than miss), that is my No. 1 choice. Booking months in advance and then trying to remember the date plus keep your dining companions all committed is just too much effort. Taoranting is the noticeably cleaner of the two anyway, though neither is going to be winning hygiene awards any time soon. One final note: the Taoranting pancakes also tend to be a bit heavier.

Finally, while Celestial Kitchen used to be one of the places for duck, recent samplings have under-impressed. Gamy flavors are indicative of duck that is either not fresh or not properly cleaned. That said, its other Beijing specialties continue to wow. While I did not get a chance to test it out, AmCham colleagues Don Shapiro and David Ting give Dragon Restaurant (Cantonese roast duck) top marks. This find is, therefore, a feather in their caps.

Best Duck:

Shangrila's Far Eastern Plaza Hotel

Shang Palace Restaurant

Best Sauce:

Westin Hotel's Yi Yuan Pekinese

Restaurant

Most Elegant Venue:

Sherwood Taipei's Yi Yuan restaurant

Best Duck at Local Restaurant:

Song Kitchen

Best Value:

Taoranting

Most Convenient:

Taoranting

Following are some Taipei restaurants featuring either Peking or Cantonese roast duck:

Celestial Kitchen

3F, 1 NanJing West Rd.

Tel: 2563-2380

Dragon Restaurant (Cantonese)

ZhongShan North Rd., Sec. 1.,

Lane 105, No. 18-1

Tel: 2563-9293

Shang Palace Restaurant

Shangrila's Far Eastern Plaza Hotel

6F, 201 DunHua South Rd., Sec. 2

Tel: 2378-8888 x5888

Song Kitchen

ZhongXiao East Rd., Sec. 5,

Lane 15, No. 14

Tel: 2764-4788 or 2746-8408

Taoranting

2F, 86 FuXing North Rd.

Tel: 2778-7805

Yi Yuan

Sherwood Hotel

2F, 111 MinSheng East Rd., Sec. 3

Tel: 2718-1188 x3003 or 3520

Yi Yuan Pekinese Restaurant

Westin Hotel

B2, 133 NanJing East Rd., Sec. 3

Tel: 8770-6565

Pairing Peking Duck with Wine

"Enjoying wines with different foods is a very personal thing," says wine and food guru Mary Nicholls. "Who am I to say you shouldn't enjoy Leibfraumilch with roast beef?" On the other hand, according to Nicholls, there are usually sound reasons behind particular wine choices. Her analysis starts by looking at the different aspects of a dish, taking them individually.

In the case of Peking duck, she notes, the pancakes certainly should not be thick and heavy, but neither should they be highly flavored, even with a nice doughy smell. "At the end of the day, they are just the container for the rest of the ingredients, and in fact the rest could be eaten with chopsticks or a fork without missing the pancake too much."

The duck, she continues, always has a crisp, aromatic, fatty skin. So what kind of wine is suitable? "The fat in the skin will coat the mouth with protein, so we need something to cut through this," she says. "Therefore, we should forget high tannins, which cling to proteins, leaving the wine tasting thin and unsatisfying, and in some cases disappearing altogether. New World wines are to be recommended, as they tend to be less tannic. While some may opt for Chianti, I question the pairing given the presence almost always of high tannins. Of course, alternatives - if you must go Old World - are very young Riojas or something sunny from the Southwest of France."

Rather than making a choice between scallions (spring onions to Brits) or cucumber, Nicholls likes a combination of the two; on its own, cucumber has little to offer aside from some crunch and freshness, whereas scallions add another taste dimension. Neither of the two vegetables, in themselves, is well suited to wine, she says, but in the context of Peking duck, they serve to marginally emphasize the wine's acidity, which in turn makes the fattiness of the duck more palatable.

Then there is the sauce. "Having done most of my Peking duck eating in Hong Kong, I'm more familiar with plum sauce, less so with the black-bean version. However, providing both are sufficiently sweet-sour and with reasonable levels of acidity, I see no reason why they should not be interchangeable. The problem for black-bean sauce, as I see it, is that the beans do not deliver acidity. More complex sauces with up to 20 different kinds of herbs and spices, however, do. Once again, the purpose of the sauce is to balance the richness of the duck, so we must think of the wines being complimentary to the fruity sauce, which is why I would go for a Chardonnay with just a touch of wood and reasonable levels of acidity or a young Pinot Noir with sweet earthy notes and once again good acidity."

Just to give some of Mary Nicholls' pearls of wisdom a try, I paired the duck with Rocca delle Macie Vernaiolo Chianti 2004, Wolf Blass Eaglehawk Australia 2004 Shiraz Merlot Cabernet, Chateau Quilhanet Corbieres 2004, and Villa

Antinori Toscana 2002, along with whites like Ironstone Obsession Symphony 2003 California, Lindeman's Bin 65 Chardonnay 2005, and Louis Jadot Burgundy Chardonnay.

The Vernaiolo Chianti raised the caramel notes of the plum sauce while leaving a fruity, slightly cherry finish and enhancing gamy duck notes, but was still quite harsh in the mouth. Meanwhile, the Villa Antinori Toscana 2002, with its prized slightly medicinal fruitiness that works so well with ribeye, was a disaster, bringing out unpleasantly harsh oak flavors. The Wolf Blass Eaglehawk, while not a particularly good match for the duck, did bring out a bit more of the fruit and pulled out fresh essences from the cucumber. Finally, the Chateau Quilhanet Corbieres 2004 brought out greasy flavors that left the wine quite harsh in the mouth.

The whites were a far better choice, particularly the Ironstone. Symphony has at its base Muscat grapes that left a beautifully sweet honey and fig nose, the flavors enhancing the duck in much the same way as the plum sauce. The acidity was high enough to fight the fat while leaving behind notes of caramel, pear-like fruit, and honeyed figs. The Chardonnay was not bad. It was a bit acidic at first, raising the flavors of the duck fat perceptibly before drifting off into a richly rounded sensation of fruit and vanilla. The Lindemann's was very raw with a harshly acid taste that reminded me of why Mary Nicholls was often so dismissive of early Australian attempts at the variety. As usual, Nicholls' recommendations were spot on.

- By Brian Asmus