

HOMECOMING KING

Hong Kong Cuisine 1983's SILAS LI tells *Prestige* why he decided to switch to Cantonese cuisine after decades as a Western chef.

Words: JEFF YEUNG

One of the many perks of living in Hong Kong is that even when you've thoroughly enjoyed the Christmas and New Year festivities, there's still more to celebrate. The Lunar New Year is always just around the corner, especially this year when it comes early, so we thought it only fitting to connect with one of our favourite Cantonese chefs, Silas Li, to give you some inspiration for your dining plans during the most important holiday of Chinese culture.

At the helm of Happy Valley's cosy Hong Kong Cuisine 1983, Li has earned the beloved neighbourhood favourite myriad accolades in the two years since he joined the team, including coveted recognition from the Michelin Guide. Most recently, the restaurant was also included among the Top 100 Restaurants in the World in 2024 by the Luxury Lifestyle Awards, an incredible achievement made even more impressive by the fact that Hong Kong Cuisine 1983 is technically the first restaurant at which Li cooked Chinese food.

Born and raised in the UK, Li grew up exploring the many Chinese takeaway joints his parents owned, learning about the cuisine while honing his knife skills. But as his teenage years arrived, his aspirations led him to depart from his family's heritage in search of a cuisine he considered more refined at the time – French – so he enrolled in a culinary course at Brooklands College in Surrey. Aged just 16, he was awarded the Certificate of Merit at the International Salon Culinare competition and worked his way through esteemed kitchens with notable chefs such as Renée Blackman.



Crispy sea cucumber stuffed with prawn mousse, served with premium lobster seafood sauce



In 1997, Li arrived in Hong Kong in search of new horizons, and after a successful time at the exclusive One-ThirtyOne serving European fine dining, local tycoon Dickson Poon recruited him to be his private chef. Over the course of two decades, Li cooked for the family, having at his disposal the most premium and exotic ingredients imaginable. But as creatively free as he was, it was also during that period that he rekindled his relationship with Chinese cuisine.

"Upon my arrival in Hong Kong, I was introduced to a variety of Chinese cuisines, with Cantonese cuisine quickly becoming my favourite," he tells me. "During my 20-year tenure with Dickson Poon, I was inspired by my subordinate, chef Yiu, whose

exceptional cooking skills and techniques motivated me to delve deeper into the realm of Chinese cuisine. Although I was his supervisor, he was always willing to teach me, which allowed me to acquire a wealth of skills and knowledge in Chinese culinary arts. I began to develop a variety of fusion dishes that blended Chinese and Western elements for Dickson. Some were successful, while others didn't perform as well, primarily due to the importance of wok hei in Chinese cooking. I came to appreciate that Chinese cuisine is both complex and captivating.

"To this day, my passion for Chinese cuisine endures, due to its profound depth and diversity," Li explains when I ask what he loves most about it. "Each province and

city boast their own unique culinary traditions, making the scope of Chinese cuisine incredibly vast and impossible to fully master."

True as that may be, it's also evident that Li is well on the way to becoming a master of his own field, bringing his innovative approach to Hong Kong Cuisine 1983 along with his Western training and upbringing. Since he's taken on the position of executive chef at the restaurant, it's now known and loved for its traditional dishes with modern spins, coupled with subtle Western influences. Take, for example, the crowd-favourite: Layers of Steamed Egg White, Fresh Crab Meat with Huadiao Wine Sauce, Lily Flower Root Foam, served in Egg Shell.

“The essence of traditional flavours must never be overlooked”

Almond glazed asparagus, butternut puree, almond sauce, drops of spinach oil and shaved summer truffle



Traditional Chinese art adorns the walls of Hong Kong Cuisine 1983

with drops of homemade crab oil. To enjoy it, you can first eat the mini Japanese crab, which is infused with the rich crab bisque sauce, before enjoying the three layers within the eggshell.”

Classically Cantonese in flavour, the dish is complemented by Western techniques and presentation, fully embodying Li’s culinary journey and heritage. With a cuisine as steeped in tradition as Chinese, creations such as this require a delicate and precise balance, one that the chef has managed to achieve only over decades of hard work in the kitchen.

“Elegantly served in the shell of an egg, the bottom layer of this dish consists of steamed egg white and crab broth, while the middle layer features shredded meat from Red Flower Crab, which has been carefully prepared,” the chef explains. “The top layer is a delicate lily flower root foam drizzled

“The essence of traditional flavours must never be overlooked,” Li says. “While incorporating Western elements into the restaurant’s dishes, it’s essential to achieve the right balance with just a touch of Western influence, ensuring that the traditional flavours aren’t overshadowed. By introducing subtle cooking techniques, the dishes can be made even more distinctive without compromising their authentic roots.”

The process is complicated enough, but what makes Li’s work at Hong Kong Cuisine 1983 truly spectacular is his endless creativity: just recently, the chef introduced a whopping 20 new dishes to his menu, all



of which reflect his deep understanding of flavours, seasonality, presentation and the balance between tradition and modernity. Among our favourites are: the Trio of Baked Mini Crab Shells featuring Sichuan Spice, Hairy Crab Roe and Cheesy Bacon which offer excitingly contrasting flavours to awaken your taste buds; the Steamed Large Yellow Croaker with Fuji Apple and Yellow Bell Pepper Chili Sauce that perfectly pairs the sweet aroma of Fuji apples with the subtle heat of yellow bell peppers and chili; and the Crispy Sea Cucumber Stuffed with Prawn Mousse that’s impeccably complemented by a rich and luxurious sauce made meticulously from lobster, leopard coral grouper and fresh prawns.

“I don’t find it too challenging to find inspiration,” Li tells me. “I frequently travel to mainland China, particularly to Shunde, where I often indulge in the local cuisine.

The ingredients used there may not be particularly expensive, but their cooking methods are quite distinct. My travels across mainland China have exposed me to a variety of culinary experiences, providing me with a wealth of inspiration and encouraging me to experiment with different cooking techniques. While preserving traditional flavours can present challenges, it’s equally important to innovate in this area with thoughtful consideration. Ultimately, I remain committed to ensuring that the dishes retain their authentic traditional essence.

“I would also like to extend my special thanks to Dickson Poon. During my past 20 years as his private chef, I frequently created off-menu dishes, a practice made possible by the unconditional freedom he provided in selecting ingredients and utilising different cooking methods. This has become my habit over the years, and I thoroughly enjoy this style, which I have consistently maintained. Looking back, I’m immensely grateful for this autonomy to explore and innovate, allowing me to conceive a diverse array of dishes. This experience has become my signature style as a chef at Hong Kong Cuisine 1983, and it’s what my patrons have come to expect and enjoy.”



Steamed large yellow croaker with Fuji apple and yellow bell pepper chili sauce



Steamed pork and prawn dumplings with runny quail egg and black truffle sauce