

POWER OF CANTONESE CUISINE

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Abstract

NOWADAYS, in China, with the improvement of the living standards of the public, their requirements on diet focus more on being balanced and healthy. Specifically, in Guangzhou, the city that is usually renowned for its Cantonese cuisine, various new restaurants are rising for competition. This article is going to manifest the traditions and skills of making one particular Cantonese food – rice roll – under Hekou restaurant by conducting an in-person interview, field investigation, and digital recording. After reviewing this research, ones might acknowledge the history and development of the Cantonese catering system and the importance of preserving culture of Cantonese food.

KEY WORDS: *Interview, Rice roll, Cantonese cuisine, Chinese culture, Traditions*

It is 7 a.m. on a bustling Renmin Road in Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong Province. As the city awakens, the road fills with the dim morning light, an orchestra worth of noises. Though there are not yet many people or vehicles on the road, we are attracted by the noises coming from one small place: Hekou Restaurant. As we walk closer for a look, four or five workers are seen working away in a hundred-square-meter room. They are surrounded by food ingredients, including chicken, flour, noodle, and lots of sauces. Workers and food alike are stuffed into this room, making it look even smaller than it is.

None of the workers talk, as their hands move quickly from place to place, knives flying into action. Each is tied up in intense work of preparation. Keeping a close eye on all this action is Mr. Luo. He is the man who started this small family owned diner, called the Hekou Restaurant. For him it is just a typical morning. “We always have to be well-prepare before 9 a.m. everyday.” said Mr. Luo.

Although busy, he is never perfunctory in making any of his dishes. He has spent decades devoted to making good food. Mr. Luo has been in the catering business since he was a teenager. He never changed his career path at all. But as he worked his way up the ladder, he began to dream of something bigger than working for others. For years, that dream was to open a restaurant of his own; Fortunately, in June 28th, 1983, he achieves this little dream in Guangzhou.

Soon after it became a small success, many people came and said how much they liked his Cantonese food. It had the taste of old traditions and familiar memories. It

evoked memories of their history, their culture, and their childhood homes. “I’ve gained a large number of regular customers; only if they order a bowl of rice roll every day will they feel comfortable.” he says with a smile.

In opening this restaurant. Mr Luo had fulfilled his dream. Since he began he has turned it into a life-long career, and now he was already at his forties.

Throughout all these years, Mr. Luo’s rich experience in catering gave him the confidence to tell people that what his Hekou Restaurant made is authentic Cantonese cuisine. He commented on his dishes earnestly, “Compared to the way that some big restaurants cook the food, all of the rice rolls in our restaurant are made from original rice milk by hands.”

Nowadays in the modern catering business, he sighs, most are using advanced technologies and more efficient food processing methods. But that is not for Mr. Luo. He and his employees still insist on making noodles the old-fashioned way, by hand. His hope is that he can preserve the traditional taste of Cantonese cuisine for the local Cantonese.

Mr Luo says that his noodle maker moves very fast and yet produces a much superior tasting handmade result compared to the machine made ones. He explains that although the steps seem easy, it takes years to learn how to do it just right and fast. First, the cook must mix the flour with water, then even it over the steamer. Then, roll the heated flour slurry up. Within 20 seconds, a bowl of rice noodle is finished.

“It is a simple move, but it helps improve our efficiency while we are busy.” Mr Luo’s wife said. It is true, especially in the annual Dragon Boat Festival, when the restaurant is overrun with people craving good old fashioned Cantonese rice noodles.

The day we interviewed the couple was the 2020 Dragon Boat festival. It was so busy for them, their feet could barely stand still on the ground. We only had a few seconds to take a photo of the rice noodles before it was delivered to their next hungry customer. Nevertheless, the couple are so kind that they apologized for the inconvenience of not spending more time with us. Maybe it is this kind of heartfelt sincerity enables them to bring such warmth to the city with their traditional Cantonese food.

The authentic taste of Mr. Luo’s cuisine has gained him a loyal following over the years. But recently, he says, it has become more challenging than ever for him to keep the customers coming. “It has never been easy to run the Hekou Restaurant for these 10 years, because the competition is very stiff.” Indeed, according to Statistical Bulletin of The National Economic and Social Development of Guangzhou, 5000 Cantonese restaurants shut down in 2017. They fell as casualties of the latest, and most popular food trend in the catering industry: Japanese and Korean cuisine. How to take back their market share has been a risk that any brand with a long history faces. The Hekou Restaurant is not an exception. “In order to compete with the peers, we have to work much harder.” he sighs, for the younger generations’ pursuit of the more international food market. “I hope to cooperate with one of my friends to

expand my business in the face of this highly competitive market.” Mr. Luo says, his eyes burning brightly, “Despite the odds, I believe that our food can still bring up wonderful memories of our neighborhood and culture, which is what I have wanted.” Mr Luo’s aim to keep expanding Hekou, is not just about inheriting skills of handmade rice roll to young people, but about passing on the strength of Cantonese cuisine to them.

Fortunately, although the exact numbers of Cantonese restaurants were decreasing, but the amount of orders were continuing rising though out 2018, which indicates that Guangzhou citizens were still holding passion toward their old traditional foods passed by last generation. With that being said, the road for Cantonese cuisine to thrive is expected to be left for the youngsters to pave



Reference

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