

global flavours.



CITY HEIGHTS

Aussie expat Sarah Lewis spent five months eating her way through Hong Kong. Here, she takes us on a must-eat tour of the bustling high-rise city, from packed local dumpling houses to Michelin-starred restaurants and swanky rooftop bars.



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The most important thing I learned, when I decided to move to Hong Kong to live and work, was that this city demands impulsive acts of eating. The best bites present themselves when you've just finished breakfast, you're en route to another restaurant, or you're wandering through Central in search of a post office. That dumpling shop with a queue snaking down the street? Join it. Even if you're in a rush. Nothing indicates the presence of a fantastic meal more than a line of locals standing in the midday heat or pelting rain. Pass up an opportunity to try something new and, like me, you could spend the next five months trying to find it again. Instead, simply loosen your belt and dive face-first into one of the world's most exciting food cities.

LOCAL ROAMING

Any attempts at self-restraint aren't aided by the fact that every second shopfront on Hong Kong Island seems to be an eatery. I've based myself in Sai Ying Pun, an up-and-coming suburb west of Central, and my studio is just 50 metres from the wet market, where fish, meat and herbs are haggled over from dawn till dusk. Fanning out from there are stalls selling handmade tofu, brightly lit fruit displays and barbecue joints hung with glossy roast ducks and sides of suckling pig.

Other daily distractions include the dim sum joint on the corner of my street, where the wizened old woman out the front dumps bamboo steamers of piping-hot *har gau* (prawn dumplings) straight into plastic shopping bags. There are the mango pancakes and almond cookies in the bakery I rush past every day, and the *bau* shops sporting soft buns filled with a lucky-dip selection of *char sui* (barbecue pork), tuna, sausage or cheese.

Compared to neighbouring Sheung Wan, a hip enclave that's home to cafes with proper coffee, cocktail bars and cutting-edge galleries, this is still largely a locals' haunt. Restaurants are cheap, though not always cheerful, and the menus are rarely in English. Eating out here is of the 'point and hope for the best' persuasion. It's high-risk dining and on many occasions what lands on the table is unexpected. For lunch one day, I'm presented with a bowl of pig's ear, jellied blood and other odd bits, when I thought I'd asked for a comforting dish of *dan dan mian*, the Chinese equivalent of spaghetti bolognese. Yet, for every dining disaster there are at least twice as many happy accidents; think of it as gambling for your dinner.

“That dumpling shop with a queue snaking down the street? Join it. Even if you're in a rush.”

LUXE LIVING

You could endlessly feast on Hong Kong's cheapest offerings, but it's well worth dipping into the city's star-spangled top tier, too. Writing for a local food magazine, I've been lucky enough to visit some of the most noted restaurants. At *8½ Otto e Mezza Bombana* (Shop 202, Landmark Alexandra, 18 Chater Rd, Central, ottoeazzobombana.com), I meet with larger-than-life chef Umberto Bombana in his art-filled, three-Michelin-star dining room. After chatting at length about Australian black truffles (incidentally, he rates them above French and Italian versions), Bombana leads me into his kitchen, where I am permitted to sniff, but not taste, his prized tubers. Such a tease.

Never mind, I have my fill of truffles the next morning at *Aromas Truffle Food Co.* (16A World Trust Tower, 50 Stanley St, Central, truffle.com.hk), a cooking school and gourmet food store in the heart of the city. In a private tasting session with owner Pasco Cheng, I'm served dishes of scrambled eggs crowned in Australian, Italian and Chinese truffle, lamb cutlets with truffle butter and an ink-black truffle and chocolate macaron.

The same week, I visit elegant French fine diner *Cepage* (23 Wing Fung St, Wan Chai, lesamis.com.sg), where I'm spoon-fed caviar by chef Sebastien Lepinoy. At *Amber* (15 Queen's Rd Central, Central, amberhongkong.com), in luxurious The Landmark Mandarin Oriental hotel, the meal is equally decadent. Chef Richard Ekkebus sends out his signature foie gras lollipops, a slab

of glazed pork belly with girolle (*chanterelle*) mushrooms, and a delicate raspberry mille-feuille. Wonderful stuff.

French food carries a certain cachet in Hong Kong; other heavy-hitters include Pierre Gagnaire's Med-leaning *Pierre* (Mandarin Oriental, 5 Connaught Rd, Central, mandarinoriental.com/hongkong/fine-dining), *L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon* (15 Queen's Rd West, Central, robuchon.hk), the acclaimed chef's sexy black-and-red outpost in the label-toting Landmark shopping complex, and *Caprice* (Four Seasons, 8 Finance St, Central, fourseasons.com/hongkong/dining), famed for its cheese cellar and enviable line-up of French wines.

Opposite (clockwise from top left): Pierre restaurant at the Mandarin Oriental; larger-than-life chef Umberto Bombana from *8½ Otto e Mezza Bombana*; Brickhouse has an NYC feel; French fine diner *Cepage*; the cooking school at *Aromas Truffle Food Co.*; refined French fare at *L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon*. Previous page: Hong Kong by night at The Terrace at Seva.





NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

Fresh faces are constantly popping up on the island, with foodies scrambling for a seat at the next hot new eatery. Although it first fired up the grill more than a year-and-a-half ago, **Yardbird** (33-35 Bridges St, Sheung Wan, yardbirdrestaurant.com) is still enjoying that just-opened buzz. Arrive early or prepare to wait for a spot in the Scandi-cool blond-wood space, home to knockout yakitori from chef Matt Abergel, previously of Masa in New York and Zuma in Hong Kong. Skewers of juicy chicken thigh, breast, neck and skin come seasoned with shichimi spice mix, shiso leaf, yuzu citrus and other pitch-perfect Japanese flavours. Whisky cocktails and an all-too-slurpable house sake seal the deal.

Another New York import is **Lupa** (3rd floor, LHT Tower, 31 Queen's Road Central, Central, luparestaurant.com), Mario Batali's first Hong Kong restaurant. The low-lit dining room draws the booted-and-suited crowd for handmade pasta and manly meat dishes, while the sundeck,

La Terrazza, is a top spot for pizza and an aperitivo. The US chef must have figured he's onto a good thing here – in August 2012 he opened **Carnevino** (carnevino.com), a steakhouse just two floors up.

Pizzeria Pubblico (Tsun Wing Ln, Soho, pizzeriapubblico.com) is also scoring points on the American-Italian front, crafting super-sized pizzas strewn with housemade pepperoni, mozzarella and pork sausage, served in a cool, canteen-style eatery with a simple blackboard menu and wine served in huge tumblers.

When the inevitable Mexican wave rolled into town recently, it brought with it a rush of taco and tequila joints, including hipster haunt **Brickhouse** (20A D'Aguilar St, Central, brickhouse.com.hk), diner-style **Socialito** (ground floor, The Centrium, 60 Wyndham St, Central, socialito.com.hk) and laidback hole-in-the-wall **Taco Chaca** (1 Second St, Sai Ying Pun, tacochaca.com). More left-of-centre Latin flavours can be found at chic Peruvian eatery **Chicha** (26 Peel St, Central, conceptcreations.hk), including zesty ceviche and the paella-style *marisco jugoso*.

With just 12 seats overlooking the open kitchen, tiny **BCN** (37 Peel St, Central, bcn.com.hk) bills itself as a tapas bar, but feels more like a pricey private kitchen. Front-and-centre

chef Edgar Sanuy Barahona offers a choice of three tasting menus, which might kick off with imported cured meats and manchego, three bite-sized tapas, gazpacho with melon and mouth-watering suckling pig with pumpkin puree. By the time you make it through the mains you'll be happy that dessert is a perfect pair of dark chocolate truffles.

CANTON CLASSICS

While locals love feasting on foreign delicacies, when out-of-town friends pay a visit, it's the Cantonese and other Chinese specialities that top their must-eat wish list. My boyfriend, Simon, arrives for a three-week stay armed with a spreadsheet of all the dishes he's dying to try. First up, **Yung Kee** (32 Wellington St, Central, yungkee.com.hk), a multi-level venue that does a roaring trade in succulent roast goose with plum sauce (dine at lunchtime, rather than dinner, for a plump bird straight from the oven).

We traverse town in search of the famous five-layer roast pork at **Lei Garden** (Shop 1003, Times Square, Causeway Bay, leigarden.hk/eng), a calorific mix of crackling, flesh and fat. Then we cross the harbour for dinner at **Spring Deer** (42 Mody Rd, Tsim Sha Tsui), a raucous first-floor restaurant where we tackle the biggest Peking duck I've ever seen, fanned out across two huge plates.

After the first week, we've barely scratched the surface on his list, so Simon extends his stay by a fortnight,

and over the next month we run the Hong Kong restaurant gamut. Three Michelin-starred restaurant **Lung King Heen** (Four Seasons, 8 Finance St, Central, fourseasons.com/hongkong/dining) delivers world-class dim sum, with delicate abalone puffs and truffled *xiao long bau* (soup dumplings). Days later, a low-key eatery in Sai Ying Pun delivers another serve of soup dumplings that are almost on par, but for a fraction of the price.

For seafood, standouts include the Szechuan hotpot with rainbow-hued squid balls at **Megan's Kitchen** (5th floor, Lucky Centre, 165-171 Wan Chai Rd, Wan Chai, meganskitchen.com), and the feast of spanking-fresh razor clams, prawns and snapper in Lei Yue Mun, an old fishing village. At the seafood market, you weave through scores of tank-lined stalls, select your catch, then have it cooked in one of the harbourfront restaurants. Catch the ferry from Sai Wan Ho in the island's east to Sam Ka Tsuen on the mainland, but don't (as we did) linger so long that you miss that crucial last boat back.

“When out-of-town friends pay a visit, it's the Cantonese and other Chinese specialties that top their must-eat list.”

Opposite (clockwise from top left): Chicha specialises in Peruvian cuisine; refined Cantonese at Lung King Heen; a local taxi; the world's highest bar, Ozone; Mario Batali's Italian restaurant Lupa; Yardbird's watermelon salad and chef Matt Abergel.

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DESIGNER SIPS

Hong Kong bars multi-task as much as the city's restaurants, spanning basement-level cocktail lounges to flashy rooftop roosts. The loftiest of them all is **Ozone** (118th floor, International Commerce Centre, 1 Austin Rd West, Kowloon), the world's highest bar, which lords over the city from the top of The Ritz-Carlton. On a clear day, you can see over the harbour and Hong Kong Island to the South China Sea beyond; on one of our visits, clouds actually drift through the open-air space.

Set between Central district's cloud-piercing skyscrapers and the bustling waterfront, rooftop **The Terrace** at Sevva (25th floor, Prince's Building, 10 Chater Rd, Central, sevva.hk) is another scene-stealer. Arrive at sunset for strawberry and champagne caipiroskas, then stay for a jug of pink sangria and the city's nightly light show, A Symphony of Lights.

If you're after something more intimate, book a booth at speakeasy-esque **001** (Graham St, near the corner of Queen's Rd Central, Central, +852 2810 6969), hidden down an alleyway behind a nondescript black door in the middle of a fruit market (yep, you'll probably have to call for directions). Slip into the seductive, clubby space and sip on expertly made cocktails, such as the Midnight Manhattan with house-infused cherry-and-vanilla bourbon.

Another favourite is the sleekly styled **Quinary** (56-58 Hollywood Rd, Central, quinary.hk). The science kit behind the bar (a centrifuge and other high-tech gadgets) belies the simple elegance of the drinks, such as the divine

Cheap eats & street food

To avoid playing Russian roulette with your order, seek out places that specialise in one dish, or *cha chaan tengs* (tea houses), for a filling, fabulous lunch for around \$4 (HK\$35). These aren't places to linger, however; stools are tiny, tables are shared, and you'll likely have someone hovering behind you waiting for you to finish. At **Kau Kee** (21 Gough St, Sheung Wan), queue from midday for a bowl of their famed beef brisket noodle soup. Across the road at **Sing Heung Yuen** (cnr Gough and Mee Lun sts), tuck into crisp buns slathered in butter and condensed milk, or noodle soup with luncheon meat and a fried egg, which is infinitely better than it sounds. Unassuming **For Kee** (Shop J-K, 200 Hollywood Rd, Sheung Wan) works wonders with pork chops, simply served over rice with a drizzle of soy, or in Tip Top-style sugary white buns with mayo and tomato. Back-alley **Kwan Kee Claypot Rice** (behind 263 Queen's Rd West, Western District) turns out the best claypot rice, cooked over charcoal and studded with fragrant, fatty *lap cheong* sausage. **Mak's Noodles** (77 Wellington St, Central) has made its name in wonton noodle soup doled out in petite blue-and-white ceramic bowls. Dim sum comes with its own set of rules. In the less salubrious settings, you're given a glass of weak black tea as soon as you sit down, which locals use to clean their bowl, spoon and chopsticks. At **Lin Heung Tea House** (160 Wellington St, Central), one of the few remaining dim sum joints with trolleys, don't wait for the prime dishes to be wheeled to your table – join the throng at the kitchen door duelling over glutinous rice dumplings and *lin yeung bau* (buns filled with a sweet lotus-seed paste). At **Luk Yu Tea House** (24 Stanley St, Central), another old-timer, there are no trolleys, but the notoriously cranky staff may hand you an English tick-box menu and you should eventually get what you want.

Oolong Tea Collins and Crystal 24 made with gin and clarified grapefruit juice. Make yourself comfortable at the bar or on the long leather banquette – chances are you'll come for one, but stay for many.

You'll also want to linger in nearby **Feather Boa** (38 Staunton St, Soho). However, unless you're on your best behaviour, you may find yourself booted out before you've taken your first sip. This moody, boudoir-style den doesn't have a liquor license; instead it runs as a private members' club, so you'll need to hand your ID over at the door. It frequently gets shut down (there's no sign, just look for the groups milling about out the front); as such, the staff are notoriously picky. That said, the 'Soup Nazi' service adds to the unique buzz and their signature drinks – fabulous fruit daiquiris served in cocoa-dusted glasses – are worth talking in whispers for.

Finally, while most drinking sessions in Hong Kong end with jelly shots in the expat hangout strip of Lan Kwai Fong, we prefer the refined vibe of **Lily & Bloom** (LKF Tower, 33 Wyndham St, Central, lily-bloom.com), a smartly appointed restaurant and bar perched safely above the carnage of D'Aguliar Street. Follow up a night of Prohibition era-inspired cocktails in the Lily bar with Bloom restaurant's bountiful Sunday brunch. By the time you've finished your eggs Benedict, you'll be ready to do it all over again. **d.**

Opposite (clockwise from top left): seafood vendors at the wet market; Central's breathtaking rooftop bar The Terrace at Sevva; roast goose and suckling pig at Yung Kee restaurant; style and chic cocktails come together at Quinary; locals flock to the many Chinese bakeries for sweet tarts; tapas bar meets private kitchen at BCN.

