

Hong Kong's Forgotten Food Culture

We sat down with three passionate experts to discuss our city's disappearing practices, from the making of Hakka snacks to local farming »

Earlier this month, we at Hong Kong Tatler Dining were fortunate to be invited to a discussion titled *Lost Food: Food, Knowledge, Culture* at the Hong Kong Baptist University. As part of a series of talks held by its Faculty of Arts' Department of Humanities and Creative Writing, the casual session featured three notable speakers – among them our own guest writer and Earthpulse Foundation founder Hing Chao, Choi Yuen Tsuen farmer Fung Yu Chuk and local actor-cum-urban farmer Leung Cho Yiu.

The discussion was organised and chaired by Dr Daisy Tam, a research assistant professor in the humanities programme, who explains her rationale for establishing the talks at the university. "What we have lost in our food culture indicates a wider problem of the unsustainable way we eat and live," she says. "To bring attention to this absence is the beginning of remedying the situation."



Each speaker brought their own perspective on the centralised theme of "Forgotten Food". Following on from his post *Food and Bondage* on Hong Kong Tatler Dining, where he looked at how the masses are subjugated by methods of food production, Hing Chao spoke about how communities in rural China still manage to have some control over the way they eat. With a focus on the relationship between food and identity, Hing ran through the ways in which the practices of eating constitute important cultural markers.

"We have to think about the things we eat, and what impact it may have on not only our local environment, but on the world," he said. "Food has a direct relationship to the land – it's a cycle that cannot be broken."

On this point, he brings responsibility back to the everyday person, the consumer. By thinking more carefully about the food choices we make, and by examining the "cost" (ecologically, rather than economically) of what we eat, we can bring about changes in the food cycle.



The second speaker of the day, Fung Yu Chuk (“Ah Chuk”), brings the question closer to home by looking at Hong Kong’s disappearing food practices. To make her point, she brought with her boxes full of handmade Hakka-style snacks – *ching ming jai* (tiny glutinous rice flour sweets with fevervine, brown sugar and peanuts) and *cha guo* (larger chewy rice flour cakes filled with shredded radish and dried shrimp; they can also be filled with ground peanuts, sesame and sugar, as shown above). “These are traditional village snacks,” she explains. “They’re very simple, everyday foods. But these are the things that are slowly disappearing.”

Ah Chuk tells an anecdote about the days preceding the talk, where she rounded up all the people at Choi Yuen Village to make the Hakka treats for the talk. “The snacks you’re eating today were made by a community, all working together. *Cha guo* is not something you make quietly, by yourself, hidden away in the kitchen.

“Hong Kong is changing – villages are being torn down for bigger buildings, farmland is diminishing and communities are being displaced. Once you lose these places, food heritage is also lost.” She stresses the importance of communication and knowing where our food comes from, but also that – like Hing suggested – the local environment is in desperate need of preservation, particularly farmlands. “I remember going out with some visitors who did not even know that Hong Kong had its own farms, or farmers. They joked, ‘I thought the only thing Hong Kong could grow were skyscrapers!’” She laughs, but then becomes serious. “I don’t think they are alone. Even local citizens are not very aware of Hong Kong’s farming culture.”

Read about Island East Markets, an initiative committed to promoting local and organic produce

In the 60s and 70s, our city had plenty of rice plantations – but now that land is so precious, the number has dwindled down dramatically. “One day, rice planting [as a practice] will disappear,” Ah Chuk laments. “Many people don’t know where their rice comes from. Nevermind that, even rice at mealtimes is falling out of favour.” She addresses the audience of young university students: “What do you eat now, mainly? Pasta and fries?”

One person who is doing his small part to promote farming practices is self-professed urban farmer, actor Leung Cho Yiu. He owns an apartment in North Point with a spacious rooftop, which he has turned into a magnificent urban garden – he even grows

his own rice, and is in his third year of doing so.



He was inspired by a trip to Taiwan, where he realised that the people there were very much in touch with nature, even in the city. “Of course, they’re not so entwined that they don’t have internet or air conditioning,” he jokes, “But they certainly know how to co-exist with their natural environment.” Upon returning to Hong Kong, he was inspired to bring a bit of the countryside to his neighbourhood, one of the more densely populated areas on Hong Kong island.

“Us city people have already forgotten what it’s like to grow our own food,” he explains. He points out the many disused rooftops around Hong Kong, and, like both Hing and Ah Chuk, stresses the importance of baby steps. “Slowly, you can make a change. We, as a society, should take the first step.” Leung simply picks up disused plastic cartons around town to use as planters, and simple soil from local gardening shops.

He waxes lyrical about the simplicity of growing your own rocket, and brandishes an entire box brimming with fresh salad leaves. Quite rightly, he points out that a small bag from a major supermarket is overpriced, while his homegrown variety is equally fragrant and delicious. “Once you taste [homegrown produce], you will know the

merits," he says.

"If you can't get away from the city, why not bring the countryside to you?" he asks. While space is one of our many constraints, it's a start, and a way to regain some control, and understanding, in a time where the simplicity of a rice grain and where it comes from is all too easily forgotten.