



ICONIC DISHES: HONG SHING

Since taking over his parents' restaurant, owner Colin Li is striving to find balance between time-honoured traditions and future innovations.

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THIS CITY CAN be fickle. We Torontonians vibrate over the new, swarming the latest restaurant like seagulls with smartphones until the buzz dies down and the next big thing comes along. It's not uncommon to see restaurants shutter here just months after opening. "If you last long in Toronto, you're definitely doing something right," says Colin Li, owner of Hong Shing, the long-standing Chinese restaurant on the corner of Dundas Street West and Centre Avenue. He's running the show now, but that wasn't always the plan: "I was here every day after school, just doing my homework," Li recalls. "My parents never told me, 'Hey, when you grow up, this restaurant is yours.'"

Six years ago, at age 24, Li took over Hong Shing, which was in its 19th year. "My parents gave me the keys and were like, 'OK, that's how you lock the door. Good luck! I had to figure out everything myself,'" he says with a laugh. When Li's parents came to Toronto from China and opened Hong Shing in the 1990s, they too had to figure everything out on their own — and in a different language. As they say — history repeats itself.

But Li isn't someone who fixates on the past. Determined to succeed, and to stand out, the first thing he did when he took over the restaurant? Painted it all black. "My parents

flipped their shit." The previous outdoor signage was red, yellow and green, which signifies good luck; "[my parents] were like black means death and funeral," Li explains.

Change is hard, especially when things are working — you don't get to 20-plus years by being lucky. But Li had even bigger hopes for the future. "I wanted to do something where I [did not] touch the food, but rebranded and repackaged it in a different way," he says.

Back in 2016, a certain photo-sharing app was blowing up. "I grabbed my phone, and I was like, 'Let's start putting this on Instagram.'" Frustrated by the lack of Chinese food he saw online, Li posted photos of everything from a heaping plate of deep-fried spicy shrimp to their perfectionist pit-master, chef Tim, who comes in at 6 a.m. every single day to roast Cantonese-style duck, pork and pork belly. "I wanted to show people that there's a lot of craft and artistry that goes into it," Li stresses. People started paying attention and posting their own photos. Beyond the likes and followers, the sharing of Hong Shing's 60 menu items — spanning all of China's regions — represents so much more.

"What we still face to this day are the old stereotypes of how Chinese restaurants are dirty, old school, no bar program, lack of service. I've been trying to fight that all my life," he says. "When I started the Instagram

account, some were like, 'Why would I want to follow a Chinese restaurant?' That just drove me to become more creative and prove that we can adapt to the times and be relevant."

Instead of shying away from their popular American Chinese dishes or morphing them into something they aren't, Hong Shing shows them off. "People were kind of ashamed of eating General Tao Chicken, but General Tao Chicken tastes really good. You should be proud of it," Li says, enthusiastically.

The stereotypes aren't the only challenges that Li has faced since adopting a teen-aged restaurant. Mix in a pandemic, a devastating fire and a misleading viral video — it's enough to make anyone want to throw in the towel. But, nevertheless, Hong Shing is still here, and Li's jubilant nature unscathed. He was able to see the fire as an opportunity to upgrade the "mom-and-pop" restaurant into something more sleek "to match our digital storefront." Li even helped to develop Hong Shing branded athleisure, and the restaurant sponsors a local basketball team in the Megacity League.

While Li holds the keys, Hong Shing doesn't just belong to him. It has always been a place for community, where multiple generations can come together over a plate of crispy beef on a slow Sunday, where the same staff have worked for over 20 years, where Toronto eats.



Golden Fried Lobster

"My parents are from Guangzhou in the south of China. It's surrounded by water. When we opened Hong Shing, my father was always like, 'No matter what, we're

always going to have lobster on the menu.' It reminds him of back home. With lobster, the big thing is to keep it simple. The way we cook ours is we batter it, then fry it a little for some crispiness and texture. Then, we toss it in a wok. We have a few different sauces,

but our best seller is the ginger-onion, which brings out the natural sweetness of the lobster — it's just green onion, garlic and ginger. That's all you need. I've seen people travel all the way from Brampton and Mississauga just for the lobster."