

# NIKKEI ASIAN REVIEW

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## DaDong brings Chinese fine dining to New York

Bookings for famous Peking duck restaurant run into February

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NEW YORK -- Chinese celebrity chef Dong Zhenxiang wants his newly opened New York restaurant DaDong to bring more than a touch of luxury to its serving of Peking roast duck, a dish once favored by China's emperors.

After the \$98 duck is carved tableside by a server in white uniform, the customer can choose to dip the crispy, lacquered skin into a \$42 tin of Kaluga caviar. While the skin and meat can be eaten wrapped in the traditional wheat flour pancake with hoisin sauce and julienned scallions, DaDong also offers the option of a flaky sesame pastry with garlic paste and cucumber.

The painstaking presentation reflects Dong's blending of traditional Chinese and modern international influence to create dishes that are simple yet with a twist of extravagance.

"Any restaurant can make food that's delicious," Dong said. Personality is really the selling point. It's the thing that attracts customers back. You can't find this anywhere else."

Dong's culinary vision helped him achieve success in China with his Beijing-born Da Dong Roast Duck chain of 14 restaurants. Two Shanghai branches were recently awarded a Michelin star each for the second year in a row. Now he aims to do the same in the U.S. in his first foray overseas.



The New York flagship, which opened Dec. 11, sets out to maintain DaDong's reputation for fine dining. Designed by hotel architect George Wong, the palatial 17,500 square-foot space overlooking Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan seats up to 440 people, physically conveying the scale of Dong's ambitions to conquer the U.S. market.

Those ambitions appear to be reciprocated. When reservations opened in October, eager diners made 2,500 bookings within two hours, temporarily overloading the server. Reservations now extend through February.

The frenzy recalled last December's opening of Tim Ho Wan, a Hong Kong-based dim sum chain that briefly held the mantle of the world's cheapest Michelin-starred restaurant, with customers happy to wait up to four hours.

Elon Zhang, a financial professional who works a few blocks from DaDong, said he was excited to try the upscale restaurant. "The only place to eat Peking duck in New York that I'm aware of is Peking Duck House. You can't really take a client there," he said, referring to the no-frills establishment in Chinatown. "Generally Chinese restaurants in the U.S. are not big on service.

They are somewhere you would go with family, not with clients."

### Size matters

Da means "big" in Mandarin, and the restaurant lives up to its name, from its imposing front door and soaring ceilings to the dangling sculptural installations and 80-dish menu. In China, that scale is even larger, with restaurant spaces of up to 60,000 square feet and menus boasting nearly 300 dishes.

While the chef's favorite dish, king crab steamed with egg whites and *shaoxing* rice wine, is still on the menu, other items were dropped for the U.S. market because they require specialized cooking skills or hard-to-find ingredients. For example, one dish served in China, sunflower seed chicken, uses Guangzhou-raised birds that are only fed with sunflower seeds. "Even in China, we can only sell a few per day," Dong said.

DaDong caters also to American habits. Unlike Chinese diners who typically want to order food straightaway, Western diners tend to want to have drinks first. Drink is a big part of Western restaurant culture and DaDong has made wine one of its focal points. The vintages on the wine list are divided into Chinese zodiac years, and diners are encouraged to pair their meals with Champagne.



New York's current upscale Chinese restaurants include Hakkasan, part of a London-based chain, and Decoy, which caters to American fans of the "farm-to-table" approach, including an "inspired take" on Peking duck. But food purists claim they do not resemble authentic modern Chinese cuisine.

"I think DaDong will take business away from Decoy for sure," said Cindy Zhu, a New York-based food writer whose blog is called "Chubby Chinese Girl Eats."

In contrast to the abundance of upscale Japanese sushi and *omakase* (referring to chef's choice) restaurants, New York's selection of high-end Chinese restaurants and ones influenced by Chinese cuisine typically shape their menus to target Westerners accustomed to American-Chinese food.

Asked if he'd tried local Chinese restaurants, Dong laughed. "Some restaurants change the Chinese flavor a lot to make the local customers happy. We want to keep the original flavor," he said.

The popularity of DaDong so far reflects the growing demand for authentic Chinese fare at all price levels. "Slowly but surely, people have realized that not all Chinese food tastes the same and they are willing to pay more for authentic food," Zhu said.

### Growing hunger

She noted that a new wave of regional Chinese restaurants has emerged in the last few years. "There's so much diversity now. We get Chinese food from different regions. There's different styles of noodles, more hot pot options in Manhattan, and dry pot, for which I used to have to travel to Flushing [the Queens borough neighborhood known for its large Asian population]."

One restaurant favored by Zhu is Hao Noodle & Tea. Opened in 2016 by Chinese restaurateur Zhu Rong, the eatery serves authentic fare from China and is critically acclaimed. It is always crowded, with about 60% of the customers ethnic Chinese and the rest American, according to general manager Jasmine Hong.

Its popularity has prompted the owner to launch in early 2018 a branch selling Chinese bar snacks and food to accompany drinks, much like Japan's famed *izakaya* eateries, while eyeing locations in other New York neighborhoods.

"It's not takeout like in Chinatown. We want to bring upscale Chinese ambience and comfort to New York City," Hong said. "It's not just about the food. People come in to take pictures and don't even dine here."

