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Peking Duck With a 21st Century Twist

New York City chefs reinvent a centuries-old dish, with specially sourced birds, unique ovens and fancy accompaniments

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At the two-month-old Midtown Chinese restaurant DaDong, the Peking duck comes with a pedigree.

The birds for the dish are sourced from a specialty farm in Indiana and raised so they have just the right amount of fat without being “excessively greasy,” according to executive chef Andy Xu.

Then, they are prepared in an oven created exclusively for the restaurant. The design is so top-secret that no photos are allowed.

Finally, the ducks are sliced tableside, as thinly and carefully as possible, by any of 10 chefs whose job is dedicated to that task.

The price diners pay for this pursuit of Peking perfection? A whopping \$98 for a full duck, or more than twice the going rate at less fanciful Chinese restaurants. That, of course, doesn’t include the \$42 caviar supplement—just in case you like a few fish eggs with your fowl. Mr. Xu said the caviar adds a welcome note of “brininess” to the dish.

DaDong, which is part of a growing China-based chain, isn’t alone in attempting to take this culinary classic to greater gourmet heights. A wave of high-end Asian restaurants in New York City, generally located outside the Chinatown districts, is reinventing a favorite that purists might be inclined to say needed little in the way of improvement.

After all, Peking duck has been around in China since the 14th century by some accounts. In its traditional form, the dish is a roasted duck served with thin pancakes and accompaniments such as cucumbers, scallions and sweet-bean sauce. Essentially, diners create their own “wrap,” with the duck’s skin, prized for its crispiness, becoming the key filling.

The dish, which generally is shared by at least two diners, spread to the West and became a staple at Chinese restaurants in New York City and beyond. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger counted himself a fan. So did the late New York City Mayor Ed Koch.



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With the new-school approach to Peking duck, tradition gets a twist. And in the hypercompetitive world of New York City chefs and restaurateurs, a degree of one-upmanship comes into play.

It can be all about where your bird is sourced. Forget DaDong and its Indiana-bred ducks, says Stratis Morfogen, owner of Jade Sixty, a new Asian restaurant on East 60th Street. He prefers the ones he found from a farm in Minnesota—he likes their “dense” meat and “very light” amount of fat—after engaging in what might be dubbed a wild-duck chase.

“We looked at about 20 different ducks from different suppliers,” he said.

Cooking methods enter into the discussion as well. Ultimately, the goal is to render much of the fat in the duck and give the skin its signature crispiness. Chefs take different routes—and use different ovens—to get there.

In some cases, they also fuss about adding flavor. At Decoy, a Chinese restaurant in Manhattan’s West Village, the meat gets a last-minute boost with a splash of a house-made duck consommé reduction and a sprinkle of freshly ground sea salt.

“This is the kind of careful good cooking that a fine French chef would do,” said Ed Schoenfeld, Decoy’s managing partner.

And about those accompaniments? Decoy has a hoisin sauce, which is similar to sweet bean, but adds sesame and cranberry sauces to the offerings. DaDong puts slices of melon alongside the cucumber and scallions.

DaDong also isn’t alone in featuring the caviar supplement. So do Jade Sixty and Hakkasan, the Midtown outpost of a high-end global chain of Chinese restaurants. At Jade Sixty, the duck with a 1-ounce portion of Sevruga caviar runs \$395.

Jade Sixty is trying to further distinguish itself in the theatrics department of the duck wars. Not only does the restaurant slice its duck tableside, it also prepares its pancakes in front of patrons using a crepe maker.

No matter how you assess the fowl state of affairs, a lot of duck is making its way onto diners’ plates. Hakkasan, which may have jump-started the new-school Peking duck trend when it opened in New York City nearly six years ago, says demand has grown so great that it is adding the dish to its lunch menu.

And almost all Chinese restaurants are anticipating at least a momentary uptick in Peking duck orders during the Lunar New Year festivities that begin on Friday.

The fervor for the dish, particularly in its more contemporary incarnations, is spreading in other ways. At Pinch Chinese, a Soho restaurant that opened last year, the fowl favorite also appears on the brunch lineup—in the inventive form of eggs Benedict prepared with Peking duck.