

Organic food, tea - perfect blend for devotee

Carolyn Jung, Special to The Chronicle
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This is part of a series of stories about where our food comes from. For previous Food Conscious articles, see the links with this story on sfgate.com/food.

At dim sum restaurants, diners are apt to be preoccupied first and foremost with snagging their favorite dumplings hot off the carts.

As for caring whether those precious morsels are organic or sustainable - probably not so much.

But Imperial Tea Court in San Francisco and Berkeley makes it easier to do so. Except for a couple of sauces, everything on the menu is organic and/or sustainable.

The shrimp are wild from the Gulf of Mexico. The ground pork is from Niman Ranch. Slab pork and beef are from Prather Ranch. Green onion pancakes, as well as all the dumpling wrappers, are made from organic flour.

The soy sauce is organic Kikkoman. Organic jasmine tea accents the wonton soup. Sauteing and frying is done with pricey certified organic tea seed oil.

Roy Fong, founder of Imperial Tea Court, can be found almost every day at Berkeley Bowl or one of Berkeley's farmers' markets, buying organic chard, cabbage and shiitakes for fillings for potstickers and siu mai, as well as sides for lunch plate offerings.

Organic dim sum has other proponents. Harmony Restaurant in Mill Valley boasts organic mache and kohlrabi in a few dumplings; Whole Foods stocks Ohana House frozen organic potstickers; and Tru Gourmet sells organic and sustainable dim sum at Marin County farmers' markets. But Imperial Tea Court is thought to be the first and only Bay Area restaurant to serve such a wide-ranging menu of eco-conscious dim sum.

"I wanted to do organic not just because it's the 'in' thing but because it's all about using better ingredients," says Fong, 53.

Fong didn't start out to be a restaurateur. Born in Hong Kong to an impoverished family, he immigrated to the United States at age 13. Two days after he arrived, not knowing a word of English, he got a paper route. He half jokes that he's been working nonstop ever since.

In his 20s, he returned to Hong Kong for a visit and discovered his destiny when he followed his nose to the district of old tea shops.

"I smelled the final roasting of oolong tea, and I knew from then on, my life would change," he says.

Fong started an import-export tea business in 1992, traveling to Asia to source his teas, and opening his original, now shuttered, teahouse in San Francisco's Chinatown. With Chinese restaurants routinely serving pots of mediocre tea to customers for free, it was a struggle to persuade people to pay a higher price for high-quality tea.

"When I first started, I bought Dragon Well tea that costs \$160 a pound. I had 5 pounds of it. It took me a year to sell it," Fong says. "I had to beg people, and discount it."

Times have changed. This year, Fong's supply of Dragon Well tea was priced at \$480 a pound. It sold out within weeks.

Since tea and dim sum go hand in hand, it was only natural that Fong branched out into serving food. It's also not surprising that he chose to concentrate on organic food, given that many of the 300 teas he sells also are organic.

But it wasn't easy at the start. Three years ago, he ended up firing his first Asian chef after only a month. The chef, Fong says, wanted to cut corners by not using organic produce and by treating farmed shrimp with borax (a chemical food additive banned in the United States) to make the shellfish more translucent and appealing looking.

Nowadays, the kitchen is filled with longtime employees who make the food to Fong's specifications, using dumpling recipes from his Beijing-born wife, Grace.

All of the food is made by hand at the larger Berkeley Imperial Tea Court, which also boasts a more extensive menu because the Ferry Building doesn't allow for open-flame cooking. Dishes include steamed wild-caught fish fillet (\$16), "tea oil chicken" stir-fried with a sweet vinegar sauce (\$12) and the most popular menu item - chewy, spicy, hand-pulled noodles (\$10) that are not only cooked to order but pulled into strands to order, too.

Fong's food costs are high, about 35 percent of his operating budget. But he says he wouldn't do things any other way.

Neither would Cathy Tsui, 42, of San Rafael's Tru Gourmet, an organic dim sum manufacturer and catering company that sells 31 types of handcrafted seasonal dumplings, almost half of which are vegan and nine of which are gluten-free.

When her family's Chinese restaurant, Pier 6, closed in San Rafael in 2007, Tsui decided to embark on her own business.

"I shop at San Francisco farmers' markets all the time," she says. "So I started experimenting to try to make something unusual."

The result is Tru Gourmet, which began selling dim sum at Marin County farmers' markets last year. The selection includes Rosie organic chicken potstickers, buns stuffed with heritage breed Prather Ranch pork, and steamed dumplings filled with wild halibut and wild shrimp. Prices range from \$1.50 to \$2.50 per piece. The dim sum is sold freshly steamed and still warm, or can be packaged cold to tote home.

When Tsui first started, she was lucky to sell a hundred pieces of dim sum in one day at a farmers' market. Now she sells 3,000 per day per market, and has 22 employees. She just started offering delivery to areas of Marin County, and earlier this month premiered a dim sum stand at the new indoor farmers' market at San Francisco's Metreon.

Fong is hoping to spread his ideas to the Peninsula. He is an investor in a project that would transform an old drugstore (originally a movie theater) in downtown San Mateo into the B Street Market, akin to a mini Ferry Building that would house organic producers, cafes and his next teahouse.

Bob Scowcroft, executive director of the Organic Farming Research Foundation in Santa Cruz, couldn't be more pleased by it all.

"These are innovators who looked across the cultural horizon," he says. "Buying fresh, buying direct and buying from small family farms used to be a component in all cultures. It's great to see the return of this ethic."

Both Tsui and Fong long for the day that more Chinese restaurants and food manufacturers incorporate organic ingredients into their offerings. But they acknowledge that old habits can be hard to break, especially in immigrant communities.

"The perception is that Chinese food has to be cheap. I take offense at that," Fong says.

"People used to think that about tea. They thought it was impossible to do organic at a reasonable price. They said the same about produce. All that has changed. I hope someday it will with Chinese food, too."

Imperial Tea Court: 1 Ferry Building Plaza No. 27, San Francisco; (415) 544-9830. Also at 1511 Shattuck Ave., (in Epicurious Garden, near Cedar), Berkeley; (510) 540-8888; www.imperialtea.com.

Tru Gourmet: Available at Marin Civic Center Farmers' Market, 8 a.m.-1 p.m. Sundays; Corte Madera Town Center Market, noon-5 p.m. Wednesdays; Fairfax farmers' market, 4-8 p.m. Wednesdays; and the new indoor farmers' market at the Metreon in San Francisco, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays, until 7 p.m. Sundays. Starting June 5, Tru Gourmet also will operate a stand at the Mill Valley farmers' market, 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesdays. (415) 624-6808; www.trugourmet.com.

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