

Eating Cheaply in a Michelin-Starred Restaurant

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Jiayang Fan



In a world where an establishment's quality is often perceived as proportional to its prices, the distinction of being one of the world's cheapest Michelin-star restaurants can be a dubious one. Is it merely the best effort of its budget class? Or has delectably gratifying been confused with defiantly iconoclastic? Tim Ho Wan, long synonymous with premier dim sum, was anointed with the honor in 2009 in its native Hong Kong. The restaurant's Cantonese name translates to "Add good luck." Recently, given the fanfare surrounding its arrival near Union Square—the forty-fifth outpost in a global chain that reaches from Vietnam to Australia—one has needed a smidge of luck to try its modestly priced offerings without waiting an hour or more: the line to enter the place, which accepts no reservations, has been known to wrap around six New York City blocks.

No trip for dim sum, a ritual that in Mandarin is rendered as "morning tea," can begin without a good pot of tea. Tim Ho Wan, which opens daily at 10 A.M., distinguishes itself from its Chinatown peers with a varied selection, from de-rigueur oolong to the palate-cleansing pu'er, which kindles the appetite for the bamboo steamers to follow.

Begin with the classics: steamed pork spare ribs with black beans, rice roll with shrimp and Chinese chives, pork dumplings. The secret to Tim Ho Wan's success is not so much revolutionized recipes as it is the care with which it makes genre-defining staples. In a business where thin profit margins can incentivize restaurants to cut corners, Tim Ho Wan takes the unusual step of making everything the day it's served, so not a single

rice roll has to endure a flavor-sapping stint in the fridge. For the filling, only whole shrimps are used, instead of the usual seafood scraps. Even the soy sauce is house-made.

Subtlety, traditionally undervalued in Chinese cuisine, is raised to an art form here. The eggplant with shrimp is deep-fried, but there's little feeling of grease; the sauce is not poured over the vegetables but coats the bottom of the plate. Abalone seasoning is used for the chicken feet, rather than its cheaper cousin, oyster sauce. The signature bun with barbecued pork, the restaurant's claim to fame, is baked with a rich, buttery pineapple-shaped crust that complements the savory smokiness of the meat and has a pleasing croissant-like texture—"So it doesn't stick to your tongue," the chef likes to tell his patrons. It's the kind of consideration you don't expect in a restaurant where it's easy to avoid paying triple digits for a meal—even if you dine like a king. (Small plates, \$4.25-\$5.50.) ♦

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