

THE NEW CHINATOWN

An influx of tastes and vibrancy

CHINATOWN from A1 deed been remarkable. But with the dragons set to descend upon Race Street in a haze of firecrackers at the end of January for the Chinese New Year, it's clear this historic neighborhood is in the midst of a much wider transformation.

An impressive wave of recent development, with at least a dozen new restaurants and bars over the last two years, has turned Chinatown into one of Philadelphia's most dynamic and fast-evolving dining districts.

Fueled in equal parts by a dramatic influx of Fujianese entrepreneurs and a changing demographic of diners — especially a rising population of affluent college students from northern China — the new menus go well beyond the neighborhood's traditional Cantonese fare, offering much more diverse regional cuisines.

Ramen to Vietnam hoagies

There are spicy Sichuan hot pots, Taiwanese meat balls, hand-pulled noodles from Lanzhou, and cumin-dusted Xi'an lamb skewers. "Bubble tea" houses and late-night karaoke bars are a telltale sign of vibrant Asian youth culture. And Chinatown's already strong collection of non-Chinese flavors continues to grow as well, from a sleek Japanese ramen counter to a slew of Vietnamese banh mi "hoagie" shops and a Korean barbecue house at 913 Race St., where Chinatown's first restaurant, Mei-Hsiang Lou, opened over a laundry in 1880.

Bar-Ly, an Asian pub with 60 taps of craft beer, and Hop Sing Laundromat, one of the city's best cocktail lounges, have added nightlife lures beyond food.

Two massive Night Market events, which drew 25,000 people to Chinatown's streets, are a testament to the neighborhood's growing luster in the eyes of mainstream Philadelphia.

Such vibrance seemingly contradicts the foreboding new study of Chinatowns in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston by the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund. It detailed dramatically rising property values and warned that, if unchecked, they would threaten affordable housing for the working-class Asian immigrants who have long been these enclaves' economic engine — and ultimately would turn them into "ethnic Disneylands."

And that sanitized image hardly jibes with scenes one can still witness here daily, as regulars stop for morning congee porridge at the Heung Fa Chun Sweet Shop, nibble wine-cooked duck tongues at Sakura Mandarin, and shop for black-skinned chickens and live frogs at the subterranean Asia supermarket.

Recent arrivals

"I don't think our Chinatown is threatened in that way anytime soon," concedes Domenic Vitiello, who teaches city planning at Penn and worked on the study. He did not dismiss the concerns of gentrification. But: "That Chinatown is in many ways more vital than ever in Philadelphia by certain measures is exactly right."

While residential rents are undeniably rising, and non-Asians are moving into the neighborhood, the study also notes that restaurant spaces remain affordable, while so many are still passed



Patrons dining at a late lunch at the new Dim Sum Garden on Race Street, which opened in September. Its metamorphosis also reflects the changes in Chinatown as a whole. DAVID MAIALETTI / Staff Photographer



At Dim Sum Garden, chef Shizhou Da makes soup dumplings. A Chinatown native says the restaurant has become "the go-to spot for young professionals." DAVID MAIALETTI / Staff Photographer



down in the Chinese community.

Yet, in its evolving state, Chinatown's value as a growing regional hub for modern Asian culture reflects a different Chinese-driven gentrification that results in "no less an authentic form of ethnic space," Vitiello says. Though its central location keeps it relevant for non-Asians and Asians alike, the emerging picture is less like Disney than a miniature reflection of Flushing, N.Y., the

"The new generation of Chinese immigrants have money."

The recent arrival of entrepreneurs from Fujian province in southeast China has marked the biggest change for a neighborhood that has been controlled since its founding by immigrants from the coastal city of Taishan in Canton. While some Fujianese have been in Philadelphia since the Joy Tsin Lau restaurant opened in 1983, the biggest wave

but together as a group they can buy anything."

However, unlike the arrival of Vietnamese immigrants in the late 1970s, whose pho soups and lemongrass-grilled meats are now a fragrant fixture in Philadelphia, Fujianese flavors are still a virtual nonfactor.

"Their cuisine is not too distinguished: Fish balls are their most well-known specialty," says Peter Kwong, author of several books on American Chinatowns and a professor of Asian American studies at Hunter College CUNY.

Instead, the Fujianese, also known for their virtual monopoly on suburban buffets and takeouts in low-income urban neighborhoods, have become eager impresarios downtown for regional cuisines that are currently more popular in China than Cantonese.

Chen, who this fall doubled the size of Sakura Mandarin with a stylish renovation, opened his restaurant five years ago with a Shanghaiese soup dumpling focus, then added more Sichuan flavors — including spicy stir-fry bowls with mix-and-match ingredients inspired by a popular mall food court stand in Flushing. He encouraged one of his former chefs, Xinpang Wang, to branch out and cook the spicy-sour noodles of his western Chinese roots. The result was Xi'an Sizzling Woks, which opened last year.

The audience to appreciate these authentic flavors has grown exponentially with the explosion of affluent Chinese students now studying at local uni-

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Domenic Vitiello, who teaches city planning at the University of Pennsylvania



Hop Sing Laundromat, a top city cocktail lounge. MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Staff Photographer

East Coast's current center for the most recently arrived Chinese immigrants.

The forces shaping this surge in diverse new options reflect more subtle but equally potent shifts in the demographics both of who owns the neighborhood's restaurants, and of the Chinese diners they serve.

"Don't box Chinatown in as a low-income neighborhood," says John Chin of the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation.

migrated here from a post-9/11 saturated New York market in the last five to six years, says Jack Chen, the Fujian-born owner of Sakura Mandarin.

"They now own close to 50 percent of the restaurants in Chinatown and have bought up to 40 percent of the properties in the past 10 years," says Chen, a Cornell graduate who has researched the neighborhood's real estate for his own investments. "Individually they don't have a lot of money,

versities — currently 1,399 at Penn alone, double the number five years ago. At Temple, there are 884 Chinese students, almost tripled in three years, and primarily coming from Beijing, Shanghai, and Sichuan.

It's part of a trend reflecting major changes within China, says Kwong: "Twenty years ago anyone from mainland China needed a scholarship to come. Today China has become more wealthy and people now have the money to send their kids on their own."

And their tastes are distinctly different from those of the Hong Kong-based students of the past.

"Many of us from the northern part of China don't like Cantonese food and think it's a little too sweet," says Qingyi Gong, a freshman at Bryn Mawr College, where 18 percent of fall's incoming class was Chinese. "Most students like the spicy flavors of Sichuan food."

Their impact on the newer restaurants in Chinatown is tangible.

"More than 80 percent of my customers are students," says Michael San Fai Ng, a Hong Kong native of Fujianese descent who sold his two take-out restaurants in North Philadelphia and now serves Shanghaiese and Sichuan food at his two Chinatown restaurants, Red Kings and Red Kings 2.

"Walking down the street here 10 years ago, everybody spoke Cantonese," he said. "But now I need to learn to speak Mandarin."

Add in a sizable group of first-generation Asian Americans as well as non-Asian Philadelphians who have come to appreciate true Sichuan food through Han Chiang's popular mini-chain of Han Dynasties, and the audience for Chinatown's new chile heat and regional diversity is even larger.

'A new frat'

The power shift behind the scenes has not always been easy for members of the old-guard Cantonese, says Warren Leung, 36, a Chinatown native and part-time resident who once lived above his parents' restaurant, the now-closed Lakeside Chinese Deli.

"My dad does not think Chinatown is doing well, but he's from Taishan, so obviously he's about his people," says Leung. "And now there's a new frat [the Fujianese] taking over."

"I see so much new diversity, and I think it's exciting. When it's too homogenous we tend to become insular and selfish and we don't grow, and that very much characterized Chinatown, which was stuck in its own ways. But there's definitely a movement of fresh ideas and new blood in Chinatown now."

Among the by-products, aside from changing menus, has been a greater emphasis on stylish decor to attract the moneyed new generation, supplanting the Formica table "hole-in-the-wall" clichés that long defined Chinatown's spaces. Among the dingiest was the old Dim Sum Garden. The new version, Leung says, "has become the go-to spot for young professionals."

Dim Sum Garden's Sally Song could not be more thrilled.

"Shanghai is such a pretty place," she said. "I just wanted people to see what Shanghai looks like."

✉ claban@phillynews.com
☎ 215-854-2682 📧 @CraigLaBan
🌐 www.inquirer.com/craiglaban



At the Heung Fa Chun Sweet Shop, where regulars can stop by for morning congee porridge, a shop worker makes sticky rice bundles. DAVID MAIALETTI / Staff Photographer



Michael San Fai Ng, a Hong Kong native, shows the karaoke set-up at his Red Kings 2. Everyone used to speak Cantonese in Chinatown, he said. "Now I need to learn to speak Mandarin." DAVID MAIALETTI / Staff Photographer