

# FORK IN THE ROAD



STEVE DOLINSKY/PHOTOS FOR TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Sea Harbour is a modern dim sum restaurant with dishes that are hybrids of Chinese skill and British Columbia terroir. See a video at [chicagotribune.com/richmondchinesefood](http://chicagotribune.com/richmondchinesefood).

## Canada's Hong Kong enclave

### Most loved of Chinese food is found in Richmond

BY STEVE DOLINSKY  
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RICHMOND, British Columbia — If you close your eyes at the Sea Harbour Restaurant for just a few moments, you could swear you're in Hong Kong, as servers and customers exchange rapid-fire Cantonese. When you open them, it's as if you've been teleported to the Pearl of the Orient; you're planted firmly in a bustling, modern dim sum restaurant, seated beneath ornate chandeliers at gold cloth-covered tables. The aromas of steamed shrimp and barbecued pork simultaneously assault your olfactory nerves.

Surprisingly, this scene unfolds daily in western Canada, some 6,000 miles from Hong Kong. Just 20 minutes south of Vancouver by the incredibly efficient SkyTrain, the suburb of Richmond, known to locals as the "Golden Village," is where Hong Kong expats have been emigrating to since the 1980s. What Monterey Park is to Los Angeles, Markham is to Toronto and Flushing is to New York City, Richmond is to Vancouver. It has become a key entry point, albeit further from the city's core, for Chinese immigrants hoping to start new lives.

Lower rents and a customer base that speaks Cantonese don't hurt. While Chinatowns in cities such as Toronto, San Francisco and Vancouver have become aging tourist attractions, these newer enclaves are attracting second-generation restaurateurs with a taste for modern Chinese creature comforts. Richmond officials claim that more than half of their city's 800 restaurants are Chinese.

Which leads me to Sea Harbour. Located across the street from the massive River Rock Casino, which



A vendor sells dumplings in Richmond's Yaohan Centre, a massive grocery store-meets-food court. It also has bubble-tea shops and ducks hanging from windows.

looks like a Pacific Northwest hideaway for a Bond villain, the sounds and smells instantly take me back to Hong Kong's Central District.

"The crowd here is very Chinese money. They love to spend," says Lee Man, a food writer for Vancouver Magazine and a judge for the local Chinese Restaurant Awards, which have become more significant in some ways than a Michelin star. "It's not uncommon to hear how someone wins big at River Rock and drops \$10,000 here."

Man orders the predictable *har gao* (shrimp dumplings in translucent rice-flour wrappers) as a "barometer" dish. They're much bigger and plumper than what I've had in most U.S. dim sum joints. Then come wedges of fried pumpkin, coated in salted duck egg yolks, and a pliable garlic chive dumpling with scrambled egg and earthy mushrooms sealed in a see-through sticky rice skin. Like several dishes here, they are delicious hybrids of Chinese culinary skill and British Columbia terroir.

"Richmond sits at the mouth of a river delta, just like the Pearl River in China," Man says. "It's a very fertile part of B.C. The clientele here is more open

and wants a local version of Chinese food."

You almost need to speak Cantonese, as Man does, to be a food writer with any credibility in Vancouver.

Earlier in the day I meet with Stacey Chyau, a local consultant for Tourism Richmond, who helps me navigate the Hong Kong-style breakfast menu at Lido, wedged, like almost every restaurant in the Golden Village, into a strip mall. We nibble on warm, yeasty "pineapple buns," which resemble the tops of the tropical fruit. They're split in half and stuffed with a pat of butter. Then there's a Lincoln Log stack of *youtiao*, the long Chinese crullers, which we dip into crocks of warm, scented almond milk embedded with lotus seeds.

A few blocks away, she guides me through Yaohan Centre, a massive grocery store-meets-food court, where she introduces me to one of her childhood snacks from Taiwan: made-to-order sticky rice rolls filled with an assortment of pickled vegetables. There also are bubble-tea shops, barbecued ducks hanging from windows and freshly made noodles in four colors stacked next to giant steamed buns made to

order. Everywhere I look, there is something more delicious than the next vying for my rapidly decreasing stomach space.

We walk next door to Rainflower, another elegant dim sum palace where the chairs are covered in gold fabric and the servers wear black ties and vests. We order *so pei char siu bao*, a sugar-topped, steamed yeast bun filled with barbecued pork that I've been searching for since my Hong Kong trip last year. It's delicious. Later that day I meet Man at another strip mall that generously can be described as well-worn. We step inside the Golden Paramount, which looks better inside than out. Man says it's more family-friendly, and, unlike at Sea Harbour, the chef is a woman.

"The food is more delicate here, not as showy, and it's all made to order," he reassures me. "Word of mouth keeps this place busy."

We devour the most famous item: a sticky rice flour dumpling filled with sweet, local Dungeness crab and pork. We also dig into pan-fried sticky rice as well as bite-size hunks of fried eggplant crowned with steamed fish cakes.

For dinner, we meet a



Richmond says over 400 of its restaurants are Chinese.

### If you go

From Vancouver, take the SkyTrain to Richmond. It's an easy 20-minute ride on the Canada Line, costing less than \$3. Note: Most of the action in Richmond can be accessed from the Aberdeen station. No. 3 Road is the main artery in the Golden Village.

■ Lido, 150-4231 Hazelbridge Way, 604-231-0055

■ Sea Harbour Restaurant, 150-8888 River Road, 604-232-0816, [seaharbour.com](http://seaharbour.com)

■ Golden Paramount, 8071 Park Road, 604-278-0873

■ Yaohan Centre, 3700 No. 3 Road, 604-231-0601

■ Rainflower Seafood Restaurant, 3600 No. 3 Road, 604-278-7288

■ Suhang, 8291 Ackroyd Road, Suite 100, 604-278-7787



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mile or so away, but in terms of cooking it's a thousand miles from Hong Kong. Suhang has a reputation among locals as being one of the best Shanghai-style restaurants in the area. Every customer is Chinese, and I let Man do the ordering/negotiating. The barometer dish here, of course, has to be *xiao long bao*, the prized soup dumplings from the north. Our bamboo steamer arrives with six piping hot, pleated packages, each the size of a golf ball. Man watches me, to see if I know what I'm doing. I carefully remove the plump package from the steamer with my chopsticks, setting it onto my spoon; I bite a hole in the top of it, suck out the meaty rich juice, of which there is plenty, then add a

few drops of ginger-flecked soy/vinegar and devour the rest. I think I pass the test, while the barometer has been set at an absurdly high level. These are the best soup dumplings I've had in quite some time.

Arriving next is 8-Treasure duck. Roasted, deboned and flash-fried, it's stuffed with eight grains (eight being a lucky number), including sticky rice, millet and ginkgo nuts. The fact that it's an overstuffing, whole bird represents good beginnings and endings as well as prosperity, what he means. After a day that began and ended this well, I'm feeling a little overstuffed too.

[ctc-travel@tribune.com](mailto:ctc-travel@tribune.com)