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Asian bites

A new Cape Town venue, opened by the Bukhara group, has notched Asian standards up a peg

By Kim Maxwell. Photographs by Melanie Clary.



Sizzling garlic and chilli, lemongrass stalks fused with fresh ginger, Sichuan peppercorns for a starburst of zing, silky soy sauce. If these ingredients get your taste buds salivating and send your imagination east on aromatic fantasies, head to Haiku in Cape Town.

The Bukhara group has long been at the top of the chain when it comes to Indian cuisine. So when managing director Sabi Sabharwal and general manager Conrad Patterson noticed a shortage of good Chinese dim sum in Cape Town, the brainstorming began. "We both love dim sum and Asian food in general. We decided to do some research, and went on a few trips to China, Japan and Singapore," Conrad outlines.

"In China we were taken to Canton, to the more chilli-orientated Sichuan, then to Shanghai to see how modern food in China had developed. We went into heaps of kitchens, from the rural and rustic to those run by master chefs. We found our head of the wok section, Mr Luo, in Canton. We recruited him then and there. We did similar research elsewhere in China. Mr Xie, also in our wok section, is a chilli specialist from Chengdu."

Food and decor research is one thing; sourcing kitchen equipment and staff, borrowing design elements and putting it together in Cape Town is a bigger challenge. Sabi says the restaurant's design was inspired by collective Asian travels. Minimalist decor includes intimate dark tables, dim lighting and granite and wood details. Wooden screens were inspired by Chinese tea houses, while light boxes lining the black eating counters use Japanese washing paper. Sabi says Haiku's simple

design probably borrows most from Super Potato, the talented designer of many of Tokyo's stylish restaurants, and of the mezza9 Asian dining stations at Grand Hyatt Singapore.

With chefs from different regions of China, creating a workable menu wasn't easy. "Sabi worked with our chefs for three months, getting the taste profiles right. In the wok section alone, it was about three different chefs' styles, plus attention to textures, colours..." begins Conrad. "It wasn't so much the taste profile, but modifying items that Westerners don't like. In China, salted chicken is cooked whole and served with the head on," Sabi continues. "We took pork off the menu and substituted it with chicken. We have a lot of Jewish and halal customers, and many diners find it too fatty."

The Haiku menu combines four separate kitchens: dim sum, wok, Japanese sushi and robata. Prices make way for stars. One star is R30, and dishes are priced at one to eight stars (only fresh abalone with vegetables in oyster sauce has the eight-star tag). You order a few dishes to share and eat whatever arrives first, tapas style. The wok menu is the most comprehensive, with dishes grouped by prawn, chicken, beef, fish or duck, for instance. Under these sub-headings, diners may select black pepper beef or calamari with five-spice salt, to Schezwan prawn with black and red bean chilli.

Chinese chefs run the sushi and sashimi section, and expert Chinese hands also fashion dim sum dumplings on the spot. You'll find dim sum favourites such as siu mai (steamed wonton dumplings), duck char siu bao (steamed buns containing barbeque duck) and har

gau (translucent dumplings), alongside local dumpling innovations. "We've adapted some dim sum fillings for local palates, such as spicy prawn with dhania, and cream cheese with spinach," says Sabi. Former Bukhara Indian chefs run the Japanese robata section as they're skilled at grilling. Skewered selections over coals include chicken yakitori or sansho pepper, robata prawn and sweet potato. Lightly battered tempura items are also available.

The kitchen is equipped with giant duck cauldrons for Peking duck, basted and roasted on the bone, sliced and served with crêpes. There's even a machine for making cheung fan, steamed rectangular batter that is rolled with savoury fillings. Homemade dipping sauces really differentiate the eating experience. Around 16 options are made daily, with four chilli options alone. There's also Japanese ginger sauce, tempura mustard, and sweet 'n sour and lemon sauce.

Although the dining tables are dimly lit for privacy, diners are encouraged to wander past the food stations, interact with chefs and eat with their eyes. The winelist has a South African focus, aside from a small selection of sake. It includes popular labels from Boschendal, Buitenversichting and Beyerskloof alongside more serious styles.

Haiku is a Japanese poem that refers to the essence of something in very simple terms. The restaurant of the same name has translated that definition perfectly.

Haiku
Lower level, 33 Orlam Street,
Cape Town
021 424-7000. Open for lunch
from Monday to Friday and dinner
from Monday to Saturday