

# AMONG THE WHISPERING AND THE CHAMPAGNE

The legend of the Peninsula Hong Kong grows as the cultural icon redefines luxury in the modern era without sacrificing its white-glove past

BY TY SAWYER



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“In his blue gardens, men and women came and went, like moths among the whispering and the champagne and the stars.”

— F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *The Great Gatsby*

I watched a low fog move over the surface of the water as the last pale strip of daylight was engulfed by what passes as night in Hong Kong. The lights from the buildings sparkled to life, and a halo of ambient light hung over the city. The wisps of gauzy white fog moved low across the waters of Victoria Harbor, squeezing into the narrow passage that divides Kowloon from Hong Kong Island. It was as if the fog were on a slow, careful search. I watched the scene from the hallowed perch of the Peninsula Suite, on the 26th floor of the famous Peninsula Hong Kong, the original hotel in this storied brand’s legacy of luxury.

The low-flowing fog consumed ferries, transport boats—every vessel on the water—and even the Convention and Exhibition Centre, its pale light pulsing through the mist. I stood on the balcony to watch Hong Kong’s nightly spectacle of light. Every evening, precisely at eight o’clock, the skyscrapers that define the waterfront put on a laser show, beaming lights into the sky, accompanied by music. The narrow streaks of blue reminded me of a futuristic space battle as they fired into the air at surprising, uneven intervals, piercing the night with sharp shafts of light like sabers.

I watched the chaotic dance of lights before me from my grand

perch amid the luxurious confines of the suite, Mötet & Chandon champagne in my hand. As I watched, I was afraid the shroud that covered the river would rise and smother the view. Instead, it lofted the scene so that the buildings looked to be rising not from land but from the low-lying cloud thickening at their bases, a city emerging from the clouds, perhaps providing a prophetic peek into Hong Kong’s future as it continues to stretch to heaven.

And if there were a city that could rise from the clouds, the conundrum that is Hong Kong would be it. It has evolved from a 19th-century warren of opium dens, fishing villages and silk and tea merchants, to a manufacturing export hub from which the “Made in Hong Kong” tag has become known around the globe, to its current iteration as a global financial powerhouse.

As a result of the rapid rise in wealth, the city is crowded with luxury: top restaurants and chefs and battalions of opulent brands—Louis Vuitton, Chanel, YSL, Prada, Gucci, Cartier, among others. A casual drive through Kowloon or Hong Kong Island reveals massive stores touting these top brands, not in single showrooms but in numbers that seem more prolific than teahouses or traditional Chinese-medicine venues. There are more than ten Chanel stores and seven Louis Vuittons. There’s one of each, along with other top brands, just in the Arcade of the Peninsula Hotel.



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Interestingly, Hong Kong’s art scene has been stirring up attention from the world’s collectors, and you’ll find gallery showings in odd places, such as the third floor of a Louis Vuitton store, and in hotels, restaurant lobbies and other nontraditional spaces. But these placements effectively and creatively put the vibrant art in front of people with money, who have become the underlying manifestation of the Hong Kong of today. And yet, despite all the explosively modern trappings—the buildings and showrooms, and even the newly refined expanse of the Peninsula Suite in which I stood—the ancient and mysterious still swell through the narrow streets of this eclectic city.

The enigmatic theory and thoughts of feng shui dominate the way spaces—even the most modern of architecture—are designed. The past still resonates in personal healthcare. Around the corner from the fashion houses and paeans to commerce and business, and sometimes right next door, are stores filled with jars of secret ingredients and potions and other archaic forms of medicine that seem more entrenched in the world of Harry Potter’s Diagon Alley than part of the spellbinding pulse of such a cosmopolitan city. This is what makes Hong Kong such a wonderful and compelling conundrum. It’s leading the world into the future and not letting go of the deep and exotic ties to a long cultural history.

And amid this exotically enigmatic and sometimes wildly contradictory city sits the Peninsula Hong Kong, the legendary flagship of this luxury brand. At once a solid and unchanged Hong Kong icon that harkens back and celebrates an earlier (and perhaps more refined) era, the hotel also embraces the marvels of technology, which have been elegantly woven into the elevated experience. Hong Kong’s grand dame, as the hotel has been called, has managed to remain relevant by holding on to its storied and luxurious past and simultaneously doing what all wise grand dames do: define the future. Becoming at once timely and timeless.

#### The Arrival: Into the Timely and the Timeless

SINCE 1928, THE PEN, AS THE PENINSULA HONG KONG IS KNOWN throughout the world, has hosted the world’s elite—presidents, world leaders, rock stars and the most fashionable people from every decade since the hotel doors opened. And the majority of those guests arrived, as I did, in one of the hotel’s British Racing Green Silver Shadow Rolls-Royces. Even this heralded tradition comes with a modern twist: Internet in the car, so you can keep up with the HudsonMOD Instagram.

Traveling in the soft leather confines of the Rolls is like a hand from above reaching down and softly, quietly, gracefully and ro-

manically transporting you along the 45-minute ride from the airport to the hotel's Grand Lobby and delivering you into a singular world and experience that exists only in this one place.

I arrived with a small group, and we were all immediately escorted to our individual rooms. Once inside my suite, I was introduced to the technology-driven amenities and swept away by the views over bustling Victoria Harbor.

Every room at the Peninsula Hong Kong—including the one I was in—is controlled with an iPad, in what the Peninsula terms “the world’s most customized room”: the lights, curtains, air, music, language, valet service, flight information, guest services, privacy, Rolls-Royce pick-up request, helicopter transit, restaurant reservations, room service, city guide and a host of other things are all controlled with a swipe of the finger. Essentially, one has a butler in an iPad, and it will even summon a live butler to further enhance the guest-customized services. There’s also a VoIP phone, which allows you to make free calls via the Internet to keep up with your business. One of my favorite options was the expansive bathroom’s “Spa” mode, which dimmed the lights, changed their hue to a relaxing blue, and turned on music to accompany a quiet bath.

The service during my stay was particularly impressive, with superior responsiveness and an extraordinary attention to detail. I sent a few shirts for laundering, and the presentation upon their return was kingly: They had been pressed, folded and wrapped in paper and were delivered in a leather box. Pressing jackets was done upon request. Complimentary shoeshines finished within 10 minutes. When summoned, the valet seldom took more than a minute to arrive, and everything seemed to appear by magic, unnoticed even when I was in the room (I have yet to figure out how the ice bucket remained so fresh).

Little details predominated in a quiet manner: a touch-button, lit vanity that lifts from a dressing table and tucks away unseen when you’re done; an array of chargers for almost every known device in the bedside table, and slide outs for your drinks which extend from

the sofa arms; stemware for all your drink choices; and dozens of other niceties one would expect from such a grand dame. And, although I would have been happy to just exist for a while, ensconced in my room, the view from my 26th floor window was too enticing.

### My Hong Kong Affair with Food

TASTE. THERE’S NOTHING LIKE FOOD TO FORM AN UNDERSTANDING and a bond with any place in the world. It’s a common tie we humans have. It tells wonderful stories. It expands the soul while exposing it. And in every dish there are secret histories to be heard. Great meals make the past speak to the present, which can only find its voice through taste.

So my first foray into the city, the culture and the Peninsula led me not into the sultry, crowded streets but into one of the working hearts of the hotel, the kitchen of the Spring Moon restaurant, to learn the art of making dim sum with Chef Fong Li Hing.

On the menu, our small group of nouvelle dim sum artists were to make chive dumplings and steamed shrimp dumplings. The ingredients had been laid out. We made the dough, and the chef taught us how to flatten the dough with a knife and then stuff and fold the dumpling to give them an artistic and palatable appearance. My first efforts at folding dim sum looked more like beat-up tacos; folding is harder than you’d imagine. After slow improvement, our little cooking group actually produced edible, even artistic, dumplings (taking three times longer than the chef), which were later put to the taste test during our lunch in the restaurant. Our results ended up being savory tidbits to temper my palate for a cuisine whirlwind through Hong Kong.

There are nine restaurants in the Peninsula, each a culinary delight. There’s hardly a reason to dine outside the coddled confines of this iconic hotel. I debated with myself about ever venturing out. Breakfasts in the lobby are masterpieces (the eggs Benedict and the waffles are both decadent and immediately addictive); even the buffet at the Verandah is a marvel of gourmet cuisine.

Each of the restaurants evokes an Old or New World experience, from the Old World truffle-infused opulence of Gaddi’s for exquisite French cuisine to the glittery rooftop dining at the Felix—created by avant-garde designer Philippe Starck—complete with cascading views of the sparkling city lights.

But to really immerse yourself in the Old World lavishness of the Peninsula, you have to take your afternoon tea in the soaring expanse of the Grand Lobby, where the air lobby fills with the orchestral musings of the Lobby Strings band, and the sound transports the space back to a time when tea was enjoyed as a daily social occasion that was a must for every prominent citizen and guest. Afternoon tea arrives on Tiffany china with Sheffield silverware and is served with an elegant swagger by white-jacketed waiters who deliver a specially blended Peninsula Afternoon Tea



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“There’s nothing like food to form an understanding and a bond with any place in the world. ...”



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(or jasmine, a local favorite) along with a three-tiered tray of finger sandwiches and freshly made little cakes and scones, which, of course, are accompanied by jam, sweet butter and clotted cream.

Eventually, I had to leave the white-gloved world of the Peninsula and venture out to experience the culinary amalgamations that fill the streets of Hong Kong with heady aromas bursting from hundreds of kitchens that make up the complexity of the streetscape.

### Foreigners Are Everywhere! So Is Tea

THERE'S A NEON SIGN OVERLOOKING THE STAIRS THAT LEAD TO Duddell's at the Shanghai Tang Mansion, in the region of Hong Kong called Central. The sign has red-lit Chinese hanzi logograms that read, "Foreigners Everywhere." It's part of the art exhibit at the famed Duddell's Cantonese restaurant.

Hong Kong's daily life, history and identity have evolved on the influence and influx of foreigners, and the exhibit spoke to that in an enigmatic manner that was a slight or a celebration of the fact, depending upon the bias one brought up the steps into the gallery and restaurant. It was another example of art finding a platform in a nontraditional space, forcing everyday people to confront it and form an opinion.

But Duddell's is first and foremost a celebrated Cantonese restaurant and is built upon traditional cuisine. One tradition at the core of the Duddell's dining experience harkens back to the rituals and rites of the Chinese on the history of Hong Kong: tea drinking. Unlike British afternoon tea, which evolved historically as a midafternoon break for sustenance, tea drinking in Chinese culture is a true, socially embedded phenomenon, and its significance has gone unchanged for centuries, despite the press of the modern world.

Sharing tea is an act of hospitality and plays a part in weddings, religious rituals and anything else of import in the Chinese culture. There are even specific teapots for specific teas, and specific water temps to brew green tea (140°F to 185°F) versus black tea (near boiling, as soon as the bubbles rise), and steeping

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“... the Peninsula Hong Kong was the kingpin that entwined the experiences together, connecting the past to the present ...”



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time varies: 2 to 3 minutes for green tea, 3 to 5 for black tea. It's a social art, and Duddell's includes such tea delicacies as Joyous Moment, Jasmine White Dragon and Fragrant Phoenix.

Each meal begins with tea. The menu, like the tea, bends to authentic Chinese cultural fare: crispy eel, bird's nest soup, sautéed pigeon, bean curd, double-boiled sea cucumber and, of course, Peking duck. And every dish that appeared in front of me was dazzling in its simplicity, artistic presentation and complex flavors. Even the pigeon.

### Rising Above

PUMPED UP ON BIRD'S NEST SOUP AND JOYOUS MOMENT TEA, WE headed back to the Peninsula's Clipper Club, which provides access to the helipad, where we boarded a helicopter for an aerial view of the gilded city.

The view from the helipad alone was dazzling, but when we lifted off, hovered over Victoria Harbor and looked out across the expanse of Hong Kong, the impact was breathtaking. Seeing any city, any countryside, any crowded or unpopulated space from the air makes the world seem more comprehensible and awe-inspiring. But the biggest surprise about Hong Kong is the amount of green

space. It's not just an ever-rising thicket of buildings and commerce; there are hillsides, empty beaches, silky clear blue water and expanses of land without a single structure—only trees and grass. There are uninhabited islands (Hong Kong actually comprises 263 islands), even farmland and, of course, the odd bloom of high-rises.

For me, this diversity makes Hong Kong even more of an interesting puzzle. It's not an all-consuming, skyscraper-engorged landscape. It's actually well balanced, like the perfect brew of tea, or a meal made by a true kitchen artist.

Shortly after landing, I was back in the Silver Shadow and winding through the labyrinth of narrow streets to a place I would have walked past a hundred times without remarking.

### The Yin and the Yang

IF WE HADN'T HAD A GUIDE, WE'D NEVER HAVE FOUND THE YIN and Yang restaurant. It has a small kitchen. There are few tables. From the outside, it looks like an ordinary 100-year-old home. Inside, however, you'll find a magician, Chef Xu Yuan. He uses organic ingredients, sourced from his own farm in the New Territories, and traditional cooking methods and mixes them with haute cuisine presentation and style. You never know what the chef will cook on



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any given night—you just have to trust his whimsy and creativity.

Our meal began with vine-tomato jelly with octopus followed by urchin with tomato pesto and hand-scraped noodles. Both dishes were visually elegant and oddly shocking at the same time, especially the tomato jelly, which resembled octopus Jello shots, but each proved sumptuous. Among the mains, I enjoyed Doughnut Devil Crab and Red Hot. The crab lit up my taste buds with a tangy mix of homemade chili miso and ginger mince, which mingled provocatively with the sweet crabmeat. The Red Hot is a traditionally roasted baby pig, and the meat slipped off the bone like piquant edible silk.

Stepping out into the street after the meal and looking back on the nondescript building in which I'd just dined—and dined exceptionally—I climbed into the Rolls Royce to return to the Peninsula, a building recognizable the world over. The car slipped through the night, passing under glowing signs of every kind of merchant, wending past skyscrapers, turning at the fountain of the Peninsula and finally pulling into the U-shaped drive, from which I was swept into the high-ceilinged Grand Lobby.

Up in my room, Hong Kong stretched out beneath me. From my floor-to-ceiling window, I watched boats crisscross the harbor

while I idly sipped champagne and tea. I'd turned on a jazz station from the iPad, and the soft lilt of Miles Davis filled the space. All at once, I was in an oasis and immersed in the middle of the rush of this city. And the Peninsula Hong Kong was the linchpin that entwined the experiences—connected the past to the present—stolidly overlooking this rapidly evolving city, almost seeming to nod in approval, knowing its history would remain and be the platform upon which the future of Hong Kong finds its voice.

### LINKS



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