

# Snake's on the menu

Jennifer Johnston visits a busy Hong Kong diner where the patrons are slurping snake soup.

A line of customers stands patiently outside a nondescript shop in Hong Kong's Sham Shui Po District, in the north-western section of the Kowloon Peninsula.

A row of fluorescent lights exposes the shop's jumbled mess.

The tiled walls are covered with newspaper clippings and coloured paper filled with Chinese symbols, the shelves stacked with an eclectic collection of plastic bags, glass jars, and various utensils.

Despite the shop's dishevelled appearance, the tables and chairs crammed into its small interior are filled with patrons eating from bowls.

Curious, I notice a perspex box at the front right of the shop partially masked with more signs and

“Snake soup's a soothing comfort food for the Hong Kong Chinese to eat, especially during winter.”

Chinese characters. At the top of one sign are two hand-written words in English: 'snake soup'.

In traditional Chinese medicine, snake is renowned for warming the body and for healing benefits, said to promote blood circulation and ease arthritis. Snake soup has been consumed in China for over 2000 years.

I'm accompanied by a Hong Kong local, who suggests we try snake soup, something she's enjoyed many times. I decline but ask her what she likes about snake soup.

"Snake soup's a soothing comfort food for the Hong Kong Chinese to eat, especially during winter," she says. "We aren't able to make this kind of soup at home, so there's always a market for customers who love snake soup."

She informs me cooked snake tastes similar to chicken, although slightly tougher.

The Shia Wong Hip diner has been serving snake soup since 1965 and its proprietor, Chau Ka Ling, known as Hong Kong's 'snake queen' is a second-generation server of the local favourite. As a child, she was trained by her father



PICTURE: JENNIFER JOHNSTON

Dishing it out ... snake soup at Shia Wong Hip diner.

to handle snakes. Now in her 50s, she's a licensed snake catcher and live snake manager. The snakes are stored at the rear of the diner, in a series of brown wooden drawers, each bearing a bright red stamp in Chinese: 'poisonous snakes'.

Shia Wong Hip imports its snakes from China, Indonesia and Malaysia. They use five types of snakes to make their soup. Other ingredients include shredded lemon leaves, vinegar, black fungus and mandarin peel. Also available are fried snake balls and barbecued snake. Or for a more robust concoction, there's a power soup made from lizards, silkworms, cow penis and seahorses. A drop of snake gall bladder wine may help with digestion.

Shia Wong Hip's snake soup is famous, possibly because it includes greater proportions of snake than its competitors. At \$HKG75 (about PGK30) for a large and \$HKG45 for a small bowl, it's an economical meal. After eating, customers can request to hold a snake. The diner also sells products ranging from snake wine to snake skin handbags and belts. ■

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