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Here's why your chicken is bloody red

BY DAVID HAMMOND May 29, 2012 11:05AM

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In kitchens all over the United States, young cooks are schooled that you shouldn't serve chicken that isn't cooked all the way through. When a chicken is still "bloody at the bone," that bird needs more oven time.

Unless, perhaps, it's Hainan Chicken.

A Southeast Asian favorite, Hainan Chicken simply is the fowl poached in its own broth and served with rice and tangy sauces.

On Hainan Island this spring, I sat down to lunch with shipmates who'd just stepped off Holland America's Zandaam. We ordered Hainan Chicken. What better place, right?

"Yuck," exclaimed one of my fellow diners when the platter arrived — it was bloody at the bone. Back it went for further cooking.

Last month, at Sweet City in Chicago's Chinatown Mall, some friends and I ordered Hainan Chicken. Again it arrived, bloody red at the bone. And once again worried looks passed among tablemates.

Many of us, no doubt, prefer meat cooked thoroughly. Still, in the past few years, we've seen chefs experiment with serving pork that's at least reddish pink in the middle — heck, we've had pig heart tartare at the Bristol. Not long ago, such a dish would have been unthinkable.

Was the apparently "underdone" Hainan Chicken at two locations coincidental or simply the way this dish is prepared?

I sought answers from Tony Hu, owner of Lao Hunan and a number of other hugely successful Chicagoland restaurants.

Asian eaters are perhaps less concerned about blood on their plates than red-blooded Americans. "Chinese cuisine is all about the heat," Hu advised. "If you cook chicken for too long, it will be too 'mature,' or overdone, which means it will likely be dry and tasteless."

Though Americans favor medium-rare steak, medium-rare pork and chicken are routinely rejected.

Still, having been served pork that, when I was younger, would have been judged hazardously "underdone," perhaps we're on the cusp of change when it comes to eating bloody-at-the-bone chicken.

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