

[Register for free](#) | [Login](#)

Stinky tofu smells bad, tastes good

BY DAVID HAMMOND March 6, 2012 10:38AM

Updated: April 10, 2012 9:58AM

During a 14-hour flight to Taiwan, I struck up a conversation with Dershing Luu, a Tawanese-turned-Texan.

He told me he schedules his arrivals there close to midnight for a reason. "As soon as I land, I go straight to the night market for stinky tofu."

Taiwan night markets are daily, open-air, late-night street festivals of very fresh and delicious snacks, including grilled seafood, colorful vegetable kebabs — and stinky tofu. The stinky tofu is especially suitable for outdoor venues because when cooking, its distinctive aroma can be overwhelming.

Brined in a mixture of meat and vegetable juices for up to several months, tofu becomes, predictably, very smelly. Imagine the scent of a sewer in summer; that's the smell of stinky tofu.

Luu assured me that "all Taiwanese like stinky tofu." Indeed, most everyone I asked did confirm that they really liked it, though some national culinary pride might have motivated their unblinking affirmations. Usually fried or steamed, this fermented tofu can be enjoyed at any meal, but it's usually considered more of a snack food, nibbled at night.

Recently in this column, I investigated the lack of overtly Taiwanese restaurants in Chicago; they're there, somewhere, serving the food of Formosa, but you have to look for them.

Even at pan-Asian places that serve Taiwanese food, however, you'll likely not find stinky tofu, though it's sometimes served at local restaurants like Chinatown's Spring World. After trying stinky tofu at Spring World, Chicago Baconfest organizer Seth Zurer described it as "bitter and garbage-y instead of fishy and rotten. It left a trail of unpleasant flavors all down my gullet, developing as it moved across my tongue and soft palate, leaving distinctly unpleasant sensations at each stop along the way."

At the Lantern Festival at Lugang, Taiwan, I screwed up my courage, dialed down my nose, and bit into stinky-tofu-on-a-stick. The flavor was tolerable, distinctive, surprisingly non-revolting, oddly intriguing.

It's ironic that tofu — usually an odor-free, low-taste food — should be elevated to something big with smell and flavor. Stinky tofu can be fearsome, no doubt. After sampling it, however, I had the odd thought that I actually might want to eat more of this unrelentingly funky food.

Hard to say why, but millions love stinky tofu. Try it. You could be one of them.

David Hammond is an Oak Park writer and contributor to WBEZ (91.5 FM) and LTHForum.com. E-mail detective@suntimes.com.

© 2011 Sun-Times Media, LLC. All rights reserved. This material may not be copied or distributed without permission. For more information about reprints and permissions, visit www.suntimesreprints.com. To order a reprint of this article, [click here](#).