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Food Detective: Exploring world of Taiwanese food

BY DAVID HAMMOND January 10, 2012 11:56AM

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In Chicago, we're lucky to have access to a generous range of foods from countries such as Italy and Mexico, where each region has a its own culinary tradition.

We're also fortunate to have many Chinese restaurants serving traditional foods of that country's provinces, like Szechuan and Hunan; amidst these, here and there, you'll find food characteristic of Taiwan.

Though Taiwanese cuisine is similar to that of China's mainland, there are identifiably Taiwanese-style preparations, and I tasted a few at a recent cooking competition at Kendall College.

Sponsored by the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, this academic Iron Chef-type contest challenged students to prepare typical Taiwanese dishes. The prize: a trip to Taiwan. Kendall sophomore Tayler Moore took first place with his Three Cup Chicken, sweet with brown sugar and honey, packing chile heat, and set among greens for a nuanced, balanced platter.

In Taiwan, meat is more condiment than entree. One dish I sampled was centered around a relatively large circle of beef, which cost it points. Baushuan Ger, TECO director general in Chicago, judged the dish to be authentic "in flavor, but it didn't look Taiwanese."

The menu at Mei's Corner (101 E. Delaware) illustrates how Taiwanese cuisine often is hidden in plain sight. Tucked in among Twin Kobe Burgers and various wraps is Beef Noodle Soup, which Ger told me is perhaps Taiwan's most characteristic dish. Further up the menu, we find Pork Meatballs with Vermicelli, also called Lion's Head (the noodles are the mane, I guess), another fundamental Taiwanese food.

Tamarind (614 S. Wabash) lists Japanese, Vietnamese and even Indian items on its menu, but one also sees Shining Noodles and Honey Walnut, both solidly in the Taiwanese culinary canon.

The cuisine of Taiwan includes more challenging creations like Blood Pudding on a Stick and Stinky Tofu, but simple soups, noodles and meatballs are the comfort foods made by Taiwanese grandmothers and a few Chicago restaurants.

Not many local Asian restaurants openly announce they serve Taiwanese cuisine. Still, with a little detective work, you can uncover it.

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