

# Living

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**W**hen people ask me what I miss about my former life in the Big Apple, my usual answer is "family, friends and good Chinese food." To make authentic foreign food, you need authentic foreigners, and Mexico City is not as culturally diverse for its size as other great world metropolises.

So if, like me, you've slogged through gloopy, celery and cornstarch laden meals in our so-called "Chinatown" (Calle Dolores in the Centro Histórico), eaten pseudo-Thai food in Colonia Condesa that tasted like mole, or paid through the nose for phony Franco-Sichuan in Polanco, you'll be happy to know that there is good, genuine Asian food in this city - you just have to know where to find it.

Asians landed in Mexico in the 19th century when Porfirio Díaz, looking to modernize the country, opened Mexico's doors to foreign immigrants. Chinese, Japanese and Koreans arrived in significant numbers. After much inter-marriage with Mexicans, a fresh wave of Asians is arriving, bringing with it some long-awaited, authentic Asian food.

**CHINESE**

Early Chinese settlers built railroads and irrigation systems in the North, and worked on farms in the South. Utilizing their skills for fast cooking, some established the "Cafés de Chinos," the Mexican equivalent of a U.S. coffee shop, serving up breakfast any time of day, and cooking up nominal Chinese dishes like chow mein and chop suey.

Today about 3,000 Chinese nationals and 20,000 Mexicans of Chinese descent live in the country, mainly in Tijuana, Mexico and in Chiapas. According to the Web site of the Chinese Embassy, Mexico City has about 800 Chinese residents and 5,000 "Chino-mexicanos," Mexicans of Chinese ancestry.

THERE IS GOOD, GENUINE ASIAN FOOD IN THE CITY - YOU JUST NEED TO KNOW WHERE TO FIND IT. HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE ADVENTUROUS EATER.

Chilango explorer and author David Lida first led me to Ka Won Seng, which he'd learned about from a taxi driver whose sister-in-law is Chinese.

The hand-scrawled note on the front door raised my hopes: "No hay comida mexicana, café, ni pan dulce" ("We don't serve Mexican food, coffee nor sweet rolls").

The menu is extensive, with many dishes not found elsewhere in Mexico. Cold beef, flavored with star anise, is an aromatic and refreshing appetizer, as is the "gallina fina" (cold steamed chicken served with dipping sauces). Many soups are offered, including an unusual hot-and-sour seafood - my favorite.

Main courses include the usual meat categories, and a superb "pato rostizado estilo Guangdong" (duck braised in a gingery brown sauce showered with scallions). Whole steamed fish with ginger and scallions is a specialty here, fresh and perfectly done.

"Berenjena con jarabe de pescado" (eggplant with fish sauce) sounded odd, but was a perfect combination of sweet eggplant strips and a mild seafood sauce, served in a bubbling clay cazuela.

There are many choices for vegetarians, such as tofu frío, bathed in chili sauce, then smothered with sesame seeds and scallions. Verdura china (bok choy) appears in many guises here, perfect with chorizo chino (Chinese sausage), as do mustard greens and other seasonal vegetables - best to ask what's fresh. Go with a group so you can share the ample dishes.

**JAPANESE**

Japan is Mexico's seventh-largest investor. At the end of the 19th century, adventurous immigrants arrived in Chiapas to grow coffee and later become cattle ranchers.

A little known fact is that during World War II Japanese-Mexi-



Chili sauce and vegetables make up many of the ingredients in Asian cooking.



cans were sent (by request of the U.S. government) to internment camps in Mexico City, but apparently were treated well and were even sponsored through private school.

Today, 4,000 Japanese live in Mexico, and there are over 15,000 of Japanese descent, the majority in the capital, principally involved in import and export of manufactured goods.

Japanese restaurant chains and fast food joints have proliferated here in recent years - most of them awful.

The custom of augmenting sushi with cream cheese, wildly and inexplicably popular here, is shocking to most Japanese (including my Kyoto-born stepmother, Yasuko, who recoils in horror at the idea).

One restaurant that doesn't pander to "gaijin" (foreign) influence is Taro, located upstairs in an unassuming office building in Coyoacán.

Of modest aspect and friendly service, the menu is pure Tokyo: Start your meal with succulent steamed and pan-seared gyozas (dumplings), lightly scented with ginger. "Daikon sarda" is surprising and refreshing, combining thin strips of raw Japanese radish with a light miso-mayonnaise dressing.

There is an interesting assortment of sushi rolls; I especially like the "shake kawamake," made with crispy salmon skin, the fish light and crunchy atop a soft blanket of rice swathed in seaweed.

"Nabe mono," iron hot-pots filled with noodles, meat or seafood, are a house specialty, and I can't resist the yosenabe, a delicate broth with seafood and vegetables, flavored with "shirin," a sweet Japanese wine. A refreshing dipping sauce of soya and ponzu (citrus) is served alongside for a bona fide Nipponese touch.

Other tempting categories are tempura - light and crisp, not greasy - and teppan yakis, or grilled meats.

True to Japanese tastes, only the freshest ingredients are used. Taro is a real find. (I'll bring Yasuko when she comes to Mexico - but only if she tires of Mexican food.)

**KOREAN**

In 1905 the first Korean immigrants arrived to work the henequén fields in the Yucatán peninsula. An estimated 30,000 to 40,000 descendents live in Mexico today.

Recently, a new wave of immigrants has come, and Korean investment is strong in Mexico. About 3,000 Korean residents work here, opening over 20 restaurants, five grocery stores, several nightclubs, and even an acupuncture office, all in the Zona Rosa, making Koreans the largest Asian community in Mexico.

Biwon is among the best Korean restaurants in the city. Located upstairs, the dining rooms are pretty and old-fashioned. The seemingly steep price includes "banchan," small plates of prepared appetizers, presented to each table, along with rice and water, so you needn't order more than a main dish.

Tables are equipped with grills for preparing your own mouth-watering marinated meats.

Alternatively, you can order a casserole of seafood with kim chi (pickled, chilled vegetable with lots of garlic), which comes in many varieties.

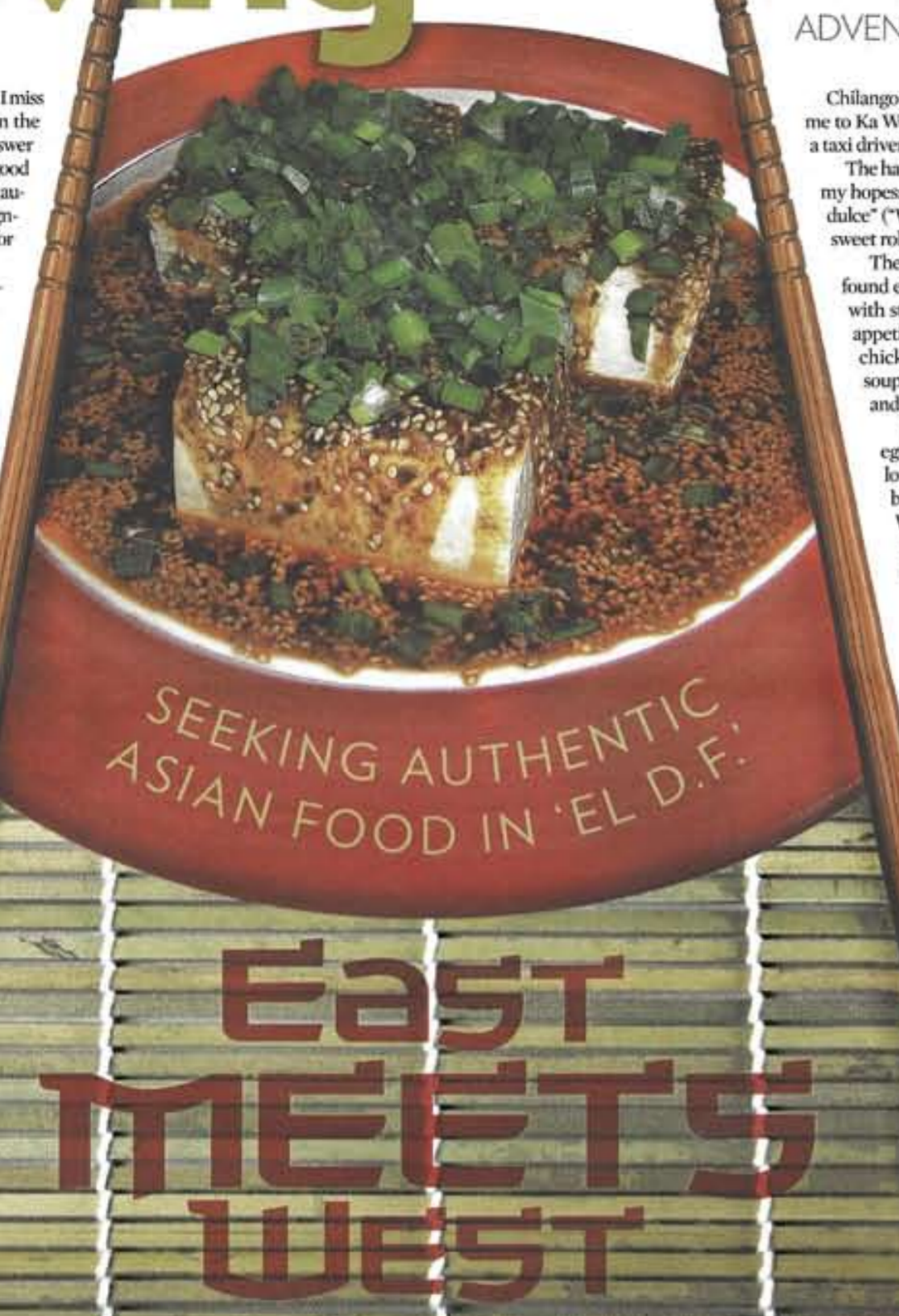
Adding to the element of adventure, Biwon's clientele is mostly Korean, so you'll need to ask your waiter to explain what's on the menu - or just point to what other people are eating.

Other places I've tried in the city offer less authentic fare, but the Indian/Pakistani places, and the elegant Thai venue mentioned on this page should satisfy your cravings for these cuisines.

When applying for a visa at the Vietnamese Embassy, I asked the secretary how many Vietnamese live in Mexico - "two of us," she replied, "the consul and I."

So I cancelled my next question: "Is there a good Vietnamese restaurant in the city?" Dream on. My search for the miraculous will continue. Meanwhile, I count my blessings, read my fortune cookies, and just say "itadaki mas" (buen provecho in Japanese!).

Nicholas Gilman is author of "Good Food in Mexico City: A Guide to Food Stalls, Fondas and Fine Dining."



TEXT AND PHOTOS NICHOLAS GILMAN • SPECIAL TO THE NEWS



Top, cold tofu; below, from left to right, Thai food, larb Thai, sushi, soba, Chinese dish

**MAKING YOUR OWN**

If you'd like to try preparing your own Asian food, here are some tips on where to find the ingredients and how to do it.

**ASIAN FOOD SHOPPING**

• **Mikasa** (see below) Japanese dry goods, fresh produce, tofu, some Thai and Chinese sauces and cookware.

• **Super Oriental**

División del Norte 2515 corner of Londres, Coyoacán. Tel. 5688-2981

Open Monday - Saturday 9:30-7:30 p.m., Sunday 10:30-5:30 p.m.

Asian cooking supplies, kitchen utensils - the best pan-Asian market in the city.

• **Mercado San Juan**

Calle Ernesto Pugibet, Centro

This market has several stands selling an amazing array of fresh Asian produce, products and fresh tofu.

• **El Molinero Progreso**

Calle Aranda 26 (around the corner from Mercado San Juan), open 8 a.m.-8 p.m. Monday-Saturday.

This small store sells every spice under the sun, including many used in Indian cooking.

• **Calle Hamburgo**, west of Florencia, Zona Rosa. There are several Korean markets in a row selling fresh tofu, kim chi and other Korean necessities.

**COOKING CLASSES**

• **Mikasa** sometimes offers sushi rolling classes, check at the store.

• **Soms Dutta** offers small, uncompromising classes in Indian cooking - contact her at somsdutta24@hotmail.com.

**WHERE TO EAT**

If you have a craving for authentic Asian food, here is a list of restaurants located throughout the city that should satisfy discriminating palates.

**CHINESE**

**Ka Won Seng**

Albino García 362, corner of Av. Santa Anita, Colonia Viaducto Piedad, Metro Viaducto. Open daily, 11 a.m.-11 p.m.

**Also good are:**

**El Dragón**

Hamburgo 97, corner of Génova, Zona Rosa. Metro Insurgentes. Open Monday-Saturday 1-11 p.m., Sunday 2-10 p.m. Known for its duck and, on Saturday evenings, its Mongolian hot pot buffet, which is patronized by many Asians.

**O'Mei**

Hotel Nikko, Campos Eliseos 204 near Andrés Bello, Polanco. Monday-Saturday 1:30-5 p.m., Sunday and holidays 12-5 p.m. The pan-Asian buffet lunch here is extensive, and at 225 pesos, a good deal.

**Blossom**

San Francisco 360, Colonia Del Valle, and Paseo de las Palmas 890.

Lomas de Chapultepec. Open Monday - Saturday 1-11 p.m., Sunday until 6 p.m. Satisfying food, although prices are high and portions small.

**JAPANESE**

**Taro**

Av. Universidad 1801, Coyoacán. Tel. 5661-4083. Open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday 1-10:30 p.m., Friday-Saturday 1-11 p.m., Sunday 1-9 p.m., closed Wednesday.

**Also good:**

**Benkay Restaurant**

Hotel Nikko, Campos Eliseos 204, Polanco. Tel. 5280-1111. Open Monday-Friday 7-10:30 a.m., 1-5 p.m., 7-11 p.m., Saturday 1-11 p.m., Sunday buffet, 1-5 p.m. This restaurant is noteworthy for its Sunday buffet featuring seasonal Japanese dishes.

**Mikasa**

San Luis Potosí 175, Colonia Roma. Tel. 5574-4859. Open Monday-Saturday 10 a.m.-7 p.m., Sunday until 6 p.m. An Asian supermarket (see

above) that prepares excellent bento boxes which can be eaten at tables outside the store. On weekends they offer a popular outdoor barbecue.

**KOREAN**

**Biwon Restaurante Coreano**

Florencia 20, Zona Rosa. Open daily 11 a.m.-10 p.m.

**INDIAN / PAKISTANI**

**Tandoor**

Copérnico 156, corner of Leibniz, Antzures. Tel. 5545-6863. Open Monday-Saturday 1-11 p.m., Sunday to 7 p.m., all credit cards. Chilanga of Indian descent Anita Khastu recommends the Tandoor oven baked chicken.

**THAI**

**Thai Gardens**

Calderón de la Barca 72, Polanco. Tel. 5211-3856. Open Monday-Saturday 11:30 p.m., Sunday until 6 p.m. An elegant and pricey venue for nicely presented, acceptably authentic Thai food.

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