

# TAKEAWAY TAKEOVER

Second-generation restaurateurs come of age

words & photography Jessie Levene

**M**y earliest experiences of Chinese food are of takeaways from Hiu-Man in Hebden Bridge, the small town in West Yorkshire where I grew up. Hiu-Man looked like almost every Chinese takeaway in the country at that time – red paper lanterns in the window, high Formica countertop, bead curtain covering the doorway to the kitchen, Chinese calendar next to the doorway, and in the waiting area, a few chairs pushed up against the walls.

My father would walk the five minutes from our house, and return with stacks of aluminium boxes, their cardboard lids marked with indecipherable biro scrawls. In my memories of these meals, we always ordered the same dishes: sweet and sour pork ribs, egg fried rice, beef in black bean sauce, and thick-cut chips that rivalled any of the traditional fish and

chip shops in town. These my father would slather in “curry sauce” – a pale brown gloop that he loved, and that my mother and I despised.

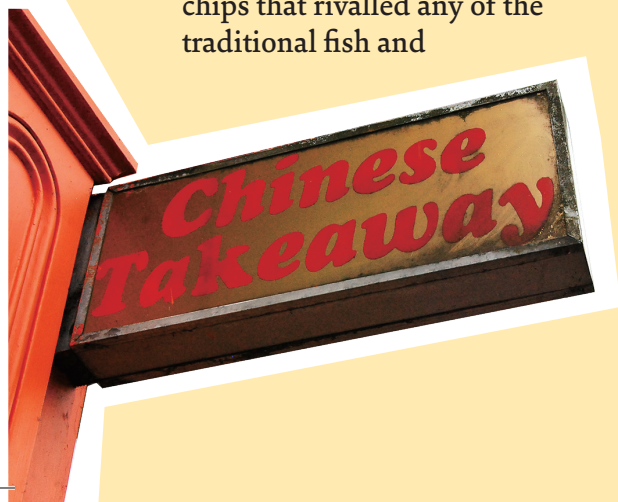
Later, my father took me for my first meal at a “proper” Chinese restaurant – the esteemed Yang Sing in Manchester. Here, I first grappled with chopsticks, and, looking at the blue and white china set in front of me, wondered silently whether I was supposed to use the plate or the bowl.

Before I moved to China at the age of 22, almost the entirety of my contact with Chinese food was through takeaways.

Perhaps for that reason, I didn't really like Chinese food.

Then, on a steamy night in Chengdu, Sichuan, after one bite of *yuxiang qiezi*, I realised how much I didn't know about Chinese food. Over the next three years, I fell head over heels for China's cuisine. I began to write and report on it; after I returned to the UK, I started to lead food tours of London's Chinatown.

Over the years, I've often wondered about the Chinese takeaways of my childhood and the lives of the people who ran them. This curiosity eventually led me back to Hebden Bridge – to The White Swan pub on a Sunday afternoon, sitting opposite my high school classmate, Junkit Lau.





*Junkit and family in the kitchen at JK's*



Junkit is round-faced and broad-shouldered, with a strong West Yorkshire accent. We didn't know each other that well at high school, but I do remember him from sports days, when he was a brilliant runner, and the group of lads he was part of, whose antics always made everyone laugh.

From 1996 to 2001, Junkit's family ran Hiu-Man takeaway in Hebden Bridge. He comes from a long line of restaurateurs – his maternal grandfather, Dougie Leung, was a chef on the HMS *Victory*; there's a photograph of him shaking hands with the Queen in 1952. In 1970, Dougie

moved from Hong Kong to the UK; eventually, he, his wife and seven children settled in North Yorkshire. The paternal side of Junkit's family also worked in catering, opening their first takeaway in nearby Bradford in the early 1960s.

"I was brought up in restaurants, sat in baby chairs in kitchens," says Junkit. "When I was about 8 or 9, mum and dad were working in restaurants in Bradford, and I used to run over to the Italian restaurant next door, into the kitchen through the back door. They used to give me pizza. And then they gave me fish and chips next door! It was a real community."

When his father Simon moved the family to Hebden Bridge to take over running Hiu-Man, Junkit was 11 – old enough to be disgruntled by the transition. "I had to start a whole new life. And I wasn't so used to the quiet countryside." Junkit and his three siblings all helped out at the takeaway. "We ate as soon as we came back from school. One of us would be cleaning the windows, another one of us would be sweeping the floors, by 4pm we would be eating, and by 5pm we would be ready for business."

And business there certainly was, for at that time Hiu-Man was the only Chinese takeaway in town. "I think the whole of Hebden Bridge used to eat there. Dad cooked all the meals. He was amazing – thousands of dishes, week in week out." Simon Lau's cooking was well-known in the Chinese community in the north of England,



and many of his trainees went on to have their own restaurants – but, says Junkit, “they only really learnt about 60% of his stuff.” I tell him about my memories of the sweet and sour spareribs, and how my dad loved chips and curry sauce as much as I hated it. “But it’s a classic!” says Junkit.

In the kitchen, hidden behind the counter, the family ate more traditional dishes, like roast duck and spareribs steamed in black bean sauce. “Stuff that my gran had made for my dad, and my granddad used to make for my mum,” said Junkit. Simon’s speciality dishes – such as salted duck eggs and preserved vegetables – also drew on the family’s Hakka heritage. Junkit was a big eater: “I conquered my first duck when I was about 11; it was the first time I’d eaten a whole duck by myself. I loved spareribs as well – I’d usually eat about 40-50. Growing up in takeaways and restaurants, it wasn’t surprising that I was obese.”

I ask Junkit why his dad never put the traditional family dishes on the takeaway menu. “People just weren’t ready in Hebdon Bridge. They always ordered sweet and sour chicken,” he explained. “So we kept it simple and people loved that. They always strug-

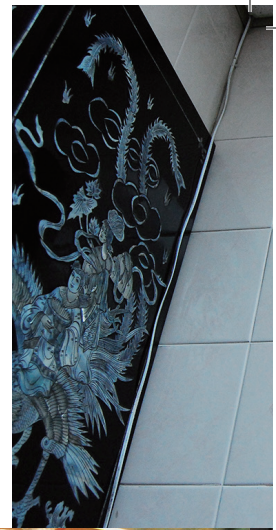
gled to choose, anyway. ‘There’s 109 dishes here!’ they’d exclaim!”

Chinese ranks as the UK’s favourite takeaway.

Though over the years it has occasionally lost this crown to Indian or pizza, in April of this year the *Financial Times* reported on a recent survey that found Chinese to be top of the takeaways once again.

But Britain’s increasingly worldly eating habits, combined with immigration from different regions of China, are changing the face of Chinese cuisine in the UK. Nowhere is this more noticeable than in my own London neighbourhood, Hackney. Though now arguably the trendiest area in the city, not long ago it was one of the poorest boroughs in the whole country. Its cheap rents drew artists, students and immigrants, including many Turks and Vietnamese. In 1993, a man named Dan Duong opened a takeaway on the Lea Bridge roundabout and named it Dan’s Island. Nowadays, this is my local Chinese takeaway.

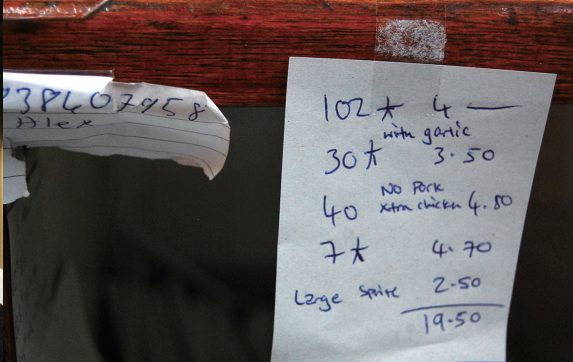
Dan is currently in the process of handing over the reins to his goddaughter, Nga Truong, also known as Nayla. Slim and tomboyish,







Nayla and  
Dan's Island



Nayla has a real “rude girl” south London accent. When I visit Dan’s Island to take photos, the radio in the kitchen is blasting out a live World Cup match. Having placed a GBP 20 bet on the outcome of the tournament that could net her over GBP 2,000, Nayla is cheering on France.

Nayla’s and Dan’s extended family were part of the exodus of Vietnamese ‘boat people’ – the ethnically Chinese population who fled the country following the civil war. In 1980, with the help of the Salvation Army, the family arrived in the UK. Nayla’s parents and their five daughters ended up in Deptford, southeast London. Over time they were joined by

others from Nayla’s mother’s large family, most of whom found jobs in restaurants. “Selling food has always been in my mum’s blood,” says Nayla. Back in Vietnam, her mother and siblings had worked from a very young age, helping their parents make and sell *cheung fan* and other street foods. About her mother’s cooking, Nayla says: “She’s a perfectionist, especially in her presentation. She always brings the most fancy dishes to community gatherings.”

Back in the early 1980s, however, the family struggled to make a living in the UK. “Plain rice was always on the menu at home. And beef mince fried up with spring onion and soy sauce,” Nayla recalls. “When things were bad, we were lucky to get mince; when we didn’t have that, we’d have sardines. We didn’t have the chance to be fussy eaters.” Over the years, however, the family’s fortunes improved. “I remember the first time I ate Vietnamese sausage,” Nayla says. “Ah! It was delicious! And I would pester my mother to take me to my auntie’s house if I knew they were cooking a particular dish, like steamed belly pork that had been marinated for hours till it was so, so soft.”

As a teenager, Nayla didn’t like school, and she wasn’t all that interested in cooking either. “I was very Westernised, and it was pretty challenging being the oldest child. There’s a real culture clash between me and my parents’ generation – it’s a tug of war.” At the age of 18, she experienced a turning point.





She'd been dating a much older woman; when the relationship soured, the girlfriend outed Nayla to her family. Her father threw her out. "I sofa-surfed for a while, met a group of great girls and lived with them. Then my uncle found out I was kicked out, and he heard that my godfather was looking to hire a cashier. When we went to the shop, I thought it was just for a visit, but my uncle said, 'OK, enjoy your shift!'" That was 13 years ago, and Nayla has been at Dan's Island ever since.

***"My dad was forcing me to learn how to make his dishes. I remember crying, because I knew why. I didn't want to learn. But I was 18. I had to."***

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**N**ot long after Nayla started at Dan's Island, Junkit was experiencing his

own turning point. Soon after the family had opened a new restaurant/takeaway in Hebden Bridge, Simon was diagnosed with lung cancer. Junkit hadn't been particularly interested in cooking, but suddenly he had no choice. "My dad was forcing me to learn how to make his dishes. I remember crying, because I knew why. I didn't want to learn. But I was 18. I had to." The first dish Simon taught his son was Junkit's favourite: roast duck. "He taught me the hardest thing first – or maybe the most important."

When Simon died, Junkit took over the woks in the kitchen. The first few years were tough: "After dad's death, I was pretty depressed, I was an alcoholic, I couldn't do anything. I still ran the business, but the love wasn't there, and the dishes going out weren't the best. I knew that, but I had to pay the bills," he admits. "Then when I was 21 or 22, I started to get the hang of it. I'm still learning today. Dad thought I only needed to learn what was

necessary to keep the business going. But I try to mimic the traditional dishes he used to make, like bitter melon and steamed pork belly – stuff he never taught me. I've got a lot of uncles and a grandma who helped teach me recipes and techniques."

In 2008, Junkit renamed his shop to JK's and changed it to takeaway-only. Finally, business started picking up. But in 2012, Junkit was dealt another blow: two devastating floods within a month. JK's stayed closed while he grappled with an insurance claim that ended up only giving him 66% of the refitting costs. About a month after our conversation in The White Swan, JK's reopened. When I visit soon after, I find Junkit, his sister Katy and mum Helen busily preparing for what they hope to be a busy weekend – on Sunday, the Tour de France will come through the town, bringing with it an estimated 20,000 visitors; Junkit's mum says she hasn't been able to sleep lately, worrying about if there'll be enough food. Junkit shows me his new menu, featuring a section entitled "Extraordinary Dishes," and several mock duck and chicken dishes – to cater to Hebden Bridge's many vegetarians. Back in The White Swan, when Junkit told me about his plans for the new menu, I suggested that he include *mapo doufu*, which I adore from my China days and which Junkit grew up eating. "Why not?!" he replied.

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**N**ayla's father died in 2011, of complications related to alcoholism. Just before his death, 10 years after he'd kicked her out of the family home, the two had "a bit" of a reconciliation. For the first time in her life, Nayla recalls, he apologised for his behaviour. Up to that point, Nayla had always worked front of house at Dan's Island; after her father died, she decided "to take another route."

"I realised that I've been letting go of my culture. Someone my age should know how to cook X, Y and Z by now. Certain recipes are gonna disappear with my mum and godfather – if I don't learn them now, it's gone, man. I need to get on it now."

Her godfather Dan is currently teaching Nayla everything she needs to know to run the takeaway. On one of my visits, I watched as Dan explained to her some aspect of bookkeeping, his

bushy grey eyebrows bobbing animatedly. Nayla is also learning how to cook all 127 dishes on the menu. During her first lesson, she recalls, "I got to about 50 or 60 and said, 'Godfather, please stop or my head is gonna explode!' He and my mother thought it was hilarious, saying, 'Well, you should have learnt to cook all this when you were younger!'" Nayla says that she is blessed to have Dan as her *shifu* – her master. "I don't think I've ever admired anyone more in my whole life. I'm sure it's his eyebrows that make him so wise," she says with a smile.

But Nayla also wants to shake things up. Some of the changes will be cosmetic – the shop has hardly changed since opening 21 years ago, with signage that still lists the old London telephone code, which switched in 1999. Other changes will focus on the culinary. "We want to include a lot of the dishes that we would

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eat at home", she says.

During her 13 years at Dan's Island, Nayla has seen firsthand how British diners are becoming increasingly savvy about China's regional cuisines. "There's so many versions of our speciality dishes, like Kung Pao chicken. I'm not gonna lie – it's quite a problem because when I serve someone who's been to China and tasted real Sichuan food, the response I normally get is: 'This is not Sichuan!' Before, I used to get really offended, but now I think, well there's over 100 different dialects in China, so there's obviously over 100 different ways of cooking a Sichuan dish. I couldn't tell you where my version came from. It's the Dan's Island version!" 