



WORDS

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The Price of Tradition



ABOVE
Lau Fat Cheong, in his workspace, setting up the giant bamboo pole to flatten dough

Under the single orange light of his 60-year old workspace, Lau Fat Cheong stands on top of his little stool, getting ready to mount the giant bamboo pole that lays horizontally on his table. He lifts his leg over one side of it, then begins to bounce up and down, flattening the dough in the traditional Cantonese way of making noodles — *jook sing* style. He apologises profusely for the strings of dough and flour that scatter the workspace and walls of his home. Here, five floors up in a secret apartment away from his street-level shop, Lau gathers eggs, flour, and water to make his simple dough, which is then pressed through a mill in the next room, turning into the fine noodles

that are then served with tangy wonton sauce and shrimp roe eggs sprinkled on top. For Lau, this is his daily life as the owner of Lau Sum Kee Noodles, one of only five restaurants in Hong Kong which still makes noodles in this manner. The uniqueness of these noodles, as described by Lau's father, is the *song chui heung wat* or the elasticity, crispiness, fragrance, and smoothness that is enhanced by pressing the noodles with bamboo instead of a machine.

Lau Sum Kee Noodles has been running since 1956, when Lau Fat Cheong's father arrived in Hong Kong and set up a hawker cart on the side of the road. Twenty years later, hawkers were no more, so he started a *dai pai dong*, an open air restaurant popular in the



LEFT

Lau Fat Cheong in the process of making noodles



fifties in Hong Kong. Two decades on saw *dai pai dongs* begin to dwindle, and so in 2007, he opened the local restaurant that still stands today. Back then his son grew up in the dining room and kitchen, watching staff work before being tasked with learning the tricks of the trade. “I was washing the dishes at the age of 10 and by the time I was 11, I was making and cooking the noodles,” he explains. Immediately after finishing his Diploma of Secondary Education, he began to work full-time in the restaurant. As the oldest sibling in the family, Lau was expected to take his father’s place, ending any plans he had for attending university. He sighs as he explains that he has sacrificed more than university and rest for the family business: “For everyday work, it’s a little bit hard because I still want to relax and go overseas to other countries but we have no free time because we run the business every day... In Hong Kong we are under very high pressure.”

Lau was very open about the struggles of keeping the doors open in a city with skyrocketing rents. When asked about expanding his restaurant, he was quick to mention the exorbitant prices elsewhere. “Rent is lower in Sham Shui Po. In Central, I think it’s double the price. The portions



are smaller, yet the prices are one and a half to two times higher... I sell noodles for \$38, and in Central these noodles are \$50-70," he says grimly.

This type of restaurant isn't a very good business model, he explains, due to the physical handiwork and expensive fresh ingredients that are required to maintain the quality of the noodles. Even before fast food restaurants became popular, international restaurants were favored over local food. Then, when restaurants like KFC and McDonald's started to pop up, Hong Kong natives flocked to the cheap and greasy food, leaving the *dai pai dongs* and *cha chaan tengs* in the dust. Only recently has media coverage popularized

the little restaurants tucked away in the streets of Sham Shui Po and elsewhere again. "They published articles on local culture so foreigners would come and visit our restaurant," explained Lau.

When questioned on his visions for the future, Mr. Lau dreams of installing his workshop in the restaurant itself. He wants to share this culture with the customer, because the experience doesn't just stop with the meal. "When you see the food, how we make it, the ingredients inside, you will be surprised." After all, it is the method of making the noodles that is special about the restaurant. Mr. Lau hasn't trained anyone to take his place just yet. "the process of making it — it's not easy to teach... but I hope

I can do that [teach others]". With tired eyes and calloused hands, Lau Fat Cheong has sacrificed his whole life to continue this unique trade, his gem of a restaurant sitting in the heart of the busy Sham Shui Po streets.

FROM RIGHT
One of the most popular items on the menu: noodles served with wonton sauce tossed with dried shrimp roe; Chef at Lau Sum Kee Noodles