

Trend Market watch



Takeaway food outlets along the revitalized Central Market's main thoroughfare, connecting IFC Mall with the Central-Mid-Levels escalator.

In 1939, the residents of Central and Sheung Wan got a glimpse into the future of grocery shopping when Central Market opened its doors for business. A cross between Bauhaus and Streamline Moderne architecture — both trendy prewar styles — the market boasted 255 stalls, a central atrium and the city's first public toilets for women.

The stench of carcasses coexisted with the pleasure of bargaining for rainbow-hued fruit. Only a few families owned a fridge, making it necessary for the rest to make a daily trip to the neighborhood wet market.

In Nan-hie remembers frequenting Central Market with her mother in the 1980s to pick up beef and fresh vegetables. The former Sheung Wan resident recalls that the market was never a family-friendly place.

"There were dark corridors. It was never busy and the stalls were never fully occupied. Even as a kid, I could see that it was already in decline, well before the market closed."

As lifestyles changed Central Market had begun to look like an oddity in a landscape dominated by supermarkets and spiffy, new shopping malls. Its location, however, was on prime real estate which deserved to be better utilized. In 1993, when the Central-Mid-Levels escalator started operating, the government swooped in and converted part of Central Market's western flank into a vital link between Hong Kong's central business district and the escalator.

In 2003, the market finally closed after trying to hold out against years of dwindling patronage. After much bureaucratic flip-flopping between demolition and revitalization, a decision was made in favor of the latter. A decade-long process of public consultations, heritage analyses, architectural proposals and budget reviews followed before a development plan could be firmed up and implemented. The first phase of the revitalized Central Market soft-opened to the public on Aug 23.

Heritage trail

Chinachem Group was awarded a 10-year contract to operate all the interior spaces. "Time constraint was one of the biggest challenges we faced," admits Dennis Au, the group's managing director of real estate. "We had to get the market ready for its soft opening in five months, from interior design, fitting outs, reconfiguration, decoration to recruiting tenants. We had very limited time to curate this urban heart treasured by everyone."

Chinachem had gauged that Central Market would develop over time, reflecting the evolving desires and interests of its users. To that end, architect AGC Design, interiors consultant Shadow Design and branding

After nearly two decades of being reduced to a passageway, Hong Kong's Central Market has reopened to the public in a spiffy, revitalized avatar. **Rebecca Lo** finds out if its current iteration was worth the wait.

butchers' stands. It opens into a central courtyard that has already hosted film screenings at night and public forums during the day.

"The new-look Central Market captures and preserves many of its historical elements and integrates these into the open-plan floor design," Au explains. "We adopt a 'boundary-less spatial concept' to provide more than 100 leasable units for retail and F&B, 1,000 square meters of green open space, and community spaces for a variety of art exhibitions, performances and cultural activities, transforming Central Market into a 'playground for all'."

Slow but steady

Zero-waste food and lifestyle brand Slowood chose to set up its fourth Hong Kong store in Central Market. As one of the market's anchor tenants, Slowood occupies an enviable space, overlooking Queen's Road Central. Jeff Chen, who co-founded Slowood with his wife Dora Lam, feels the location is the right fit for his brand, especially since its strategic location serves as a hub that residents of both Mid-Levels as well as Hong Kong's outlying islands pass by on a regular basis.

Slowood stocks sustainably-produced and vegan products. The pilot store, set up in a New Territories village house, quickly found a large customer base. More outlets in Kennedy Town, Sha Tin's New Town Plaza and Discovery Bay's DB Plaza followed.

"In Central Market, we expanded our nature-inspired accessories collection and transformed our refill station into a new feature — auto refill wall," says Chen. "We hope that will encourage more customers to bring their own containers."



Sustainable products retail chain Slowood's co-founder Jeff Chen says their Central Market outlet is a favorite with people who subscribe to the zero-waste philosophy.



Top: Central Market's eateries offer free seating at table, counter and bar height. **Above:** Chandelier made up of red pendant lamps generic of Hong Kong butchers' shops.



Black metal handrails were added to the original balustrades, to bring the stairs up to present-day building regulations. **Right:** Chinachem's Managing Director of Real Estate, Dennis Au.

Market seems to have lost its original ambience," he says.

Room for improvement

Interior designer Lulu Li visited the revitalized Central Market on its opening weekend and came back underwhelmed, largely because of the hype generated around the event. While she "liked what AGC Design did with the exterior," Li felt the market's interior design could have been more customer-friendly. "I walked along the pedestrian footbridge onto Central Market's upper level to be greeted by a wall of about eight air conditioner units — not very welcoming."

"I appreciate that Central Market requires revenue generating tenants, but why are there two Lucullus shops on the same floor?" Li asks. "I feel there are too many of the same types of trendy retail and not enough produce on offer. It is like a theme park. The red lamps and replicated stalls are too gimmicky."

"Chinachem runs the market with an initiative to encourage and support local businesses," notes Au. "We offer a plug-to-operate concept with basic fixtures and fitting-outs supported by a comprehensive point-of-sales system and a flexible lease plan. By lowering set-up costs, we hope to encourage startups to find their footing and take their first steps on their business journey at Central Market. More than 90 percent of the stores there are local brands."

In, on her part, is delighted with the changes. "It was brightly lit and popping," she says. "I saw couples, families, expats, locals — the place was a hub of activity. Central has really changed since I lived there."

"Central now is less residential and more commercial," she notes. "The previous Central Market wasn't a proper use of the site once the neighborhood evolved. Now it is. Heritage buildings should not be preserved just for the sake of heritage alone."

Chinachem has been gathering feedback from tenants and users since the new-look Central Market's opening day. "We will review our program based on their preferences and suggestions," Au notes. "Our grand opening event, titled *Celebrations for All*, took place on November 12 and phase two will open by the third quarter of 2022."

Food



Heidi Nam, general manager, Impossible Foods Hong Kong, says their faux pork combines a mild savory flavor with umami richness.



GoodBBQ Executive Chef Sandy Keung says Impossible Pork retains much of the simulated flavor when cooked.



By JOYCE YIP

When Sandy Keung, founder and executive chef at GoodBBQ, launched Impossible Char Siu (barbecued pork), she wasn't thinking of health or the environment, only trying to give her customers one more option. It remains one of the few non-mince dishes made with faux pork on the restaurant's menu.

The cooking process of this vegan version is similar to that of pork *char siu*. In both cases, one starts by marinating the "meat." But while real pork is then skewered and roasted in hung ovens, the plant-based variation is baked in molded trays to retain its shape.

Keung says Impossible Char Siu has been met with enthusiasm since its debut, especially from newly converted vegetarians.

"Honestly, I had no clue who would come for faux *char siu*. But to me, *siu mei* (barbecue meats) isn't limited to pork or duck, it's a style of cooking; so why not give plant-based options a shot?" says Keung.

She herself is yet to be convinced about the health benefits of consuming plant-based meat, believing that those who go for it often do so to earn bragging rights. However, looking at it from a chef's point of view, she can appreciate that cooking Impossible Pork entails less wastage. And the simulated flavor of pork is better retained post-preparation, compared to certain other brands.

"I've worked with another brand of imitation pork before: they don't take in the flavor as well, which means you start to taste the core ingredients of grains and mushrooms," she adds.

Impossible Pork is targeted at Asian markets, unlike Impossible Beef which was aimed at a more Western clientele. China alone accounts for more than 40 million metric tons of pork consumed this year, i.e. double that of EU countries, according to the United States Department of Agriculture. This explains why Impossible Pork's campaign trail started in David

Chang's Momofuku Ssam Bar — a fusion Korean restaurant in New York — followed by 40 restaurants in Hong Kong, including the ones under Maxim's Group as well as in outlets of the supermarket conglomerate ParknShop before heading to Singapore. Like its beef predecessor, Impossible Pork boasts a parade of environment-friendly and healthy features, like reduced water and land usage, lesser greenhouse gas emissions, no animal hormones and antibiotics, to name but a few.

Heidi Nam, general manager of Impossible Foods Hong Kong,



A variety of faux meat dishes made using plant-based Impossible Pork, suitable for bento box offerings.

says the brand's faux pork features a mild savory flavor and balanced umami richness; and its minced texture makes it perfect for Asian dishes like spring rolls, stuffed vegetables, dumplings, steamed meat loaf and stir-fries.

"Impossible Pork was designed with a focus on Asian cuisine applications. While cows and chickens are America's favorite meat sources, pig is the most widely eaten animal in the world," Nam says. "Some of our chef partners (in Hong Kong) recreated amazing Cantonese classics like suckling pig and *char siu*, taking it beyond its original minced application."

Juan Gimenez, director of Food & Beverage with Ovolo Hotels Hong Kong, however, says he plans to keep faux meats away from Veda — the city's first fully vegetarian hotel restaurant run by the group. He would rather celebrate vegetables in their "true forms."

"Meat is so prevalent in Chinese cuisine, removing it from a Hong Kong person's daily food intake is

not an easy task," he says. "Our goal is to highlight the natural vibrancy and flavor of vegetables — we want to celebrate them instead of masking them as products that taste like meat."

Veda's Asian-fusion menu features momos stuffed with spinach and ricotta and laced with tomato chutney; and meat in *khao suey* replaced with tofu and mushrooms.

"In an ideal world, we'd all be eating whole foods and just eat enough to survive," says Keung, who is in the middle of experimenting with a variety of plant-based "pork belly." "Is Impossible Foods gimmicky? Maybe. Is it a part of the solution for sustainable farming? Maybe. Can it help solve the problem of food supply? Probably," she says, responding to her own set of rhetorical questions.

Her logic for using Impossible Pork is quite straightforward and driven purely by economic necessity. "If I made *char siu* with carrots or eggplants alone, people probably won't want to try it."