



Where to Eat in Chinatown in San Francisco

Aug 14, 2018 Sandy Bornstein 0

On a weekend getaway, food and travel writer, Sandy Bornstein got a “taste” of authentic Chinese food and where to eat in Chinatown in San Francisco. Let’s follow along on her culinary journey.



Dragon's Gate in Chinatown in San Francisco. A perfect place to meet up, to start a food tour.

It's not surprising that tourists flock to San Francisco's Chinatown. It is the oldest Chinatown in North America and the largest outside Asia. By participating in a three-hour Chinatown food tour, I tasted authentic Chinese food while strolling up and down the streets of this notable part of San Francisco.

At a preset time, we met Robert, from the **Local Tastes of the City**, at the corner of Bush and Grant Streets, in front of the Dragon Gate also known as the Chinatown Gate. This tour company offers a handful of food tour options and is easy to reach via email or by phone. Our tour was small, just one other couple. This made our journey through the crowded Saturday streets easier than anticipated. Even though Chinatown's boundaries are officially 24 square blocks,

our tour concentrated on two historical sites and three food stops within the allotted three hours.

Robert effectively added texture to the tour by interjecting historical facts about the neighborhood and its Chinese residents. He pinpointed four historical events that shaped the community—the Gold Rush in 1848, the influx of Chinese immigrants who supported the building of the railroad in 1851, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the devastating earthquake in 1906. All of these events affected the livelihood of the Chinese immigrants and the growth of the population. The Gold Rush caused the Chinese population to soar while the earthquake destroyed almost everything in its wake. In between these milestones, Chinatown was the home to thousands of immigrants who lived in tenements. Today, San Francisco’s Chinatown is the most densely populated American neighborhood outside of New York City.

As we stood in the shade under the roof of one of the smaller passageways of the Chinatown Gate, Robert told us that the structure’s materials were a gift from the Taiwanese government in the 1960s. The green roofed gate has three distinct passageways that reminded me of our Beijing tours of Imperial Chinese sites. My Internet search confirmed that the entrance conforms to Chinese traditions by having a larger entryway for dignitaries with two smaller passageways for ordinary people.

St. Mary’s Square—Sun Yat-Sen Statue and Old St. Mary’s Cathedral

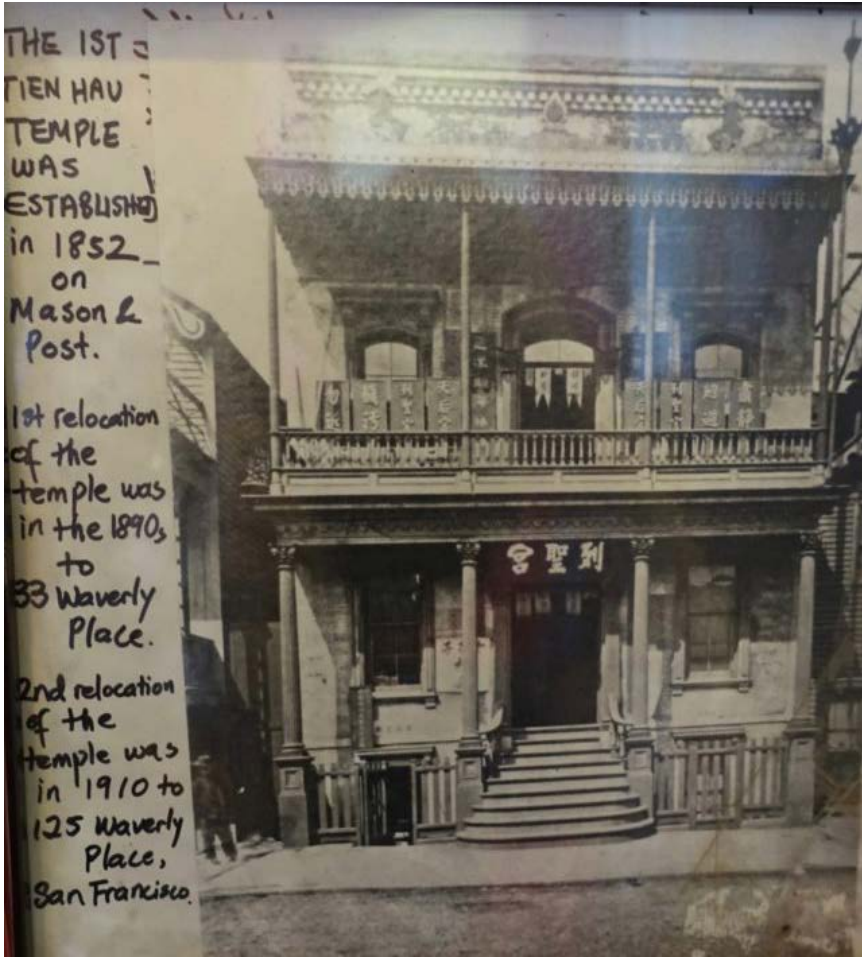
From the gate, we walked to St. Mary’s Square, a pocket park, and stood in front of the 12-foot granite and stainless steel statue of Sun Yat-Sen (1866—1925). Dr. Sun Yat-Sen is considered the father of Modern China. He helped to overthrow the Qing Dynasty in 1912. While he was in exile in the early 1900s, he visited San Francisco to gather support to overthrow the Manchu Empire and oftentimes spent time in St. Mary’s Square. The Chinese characters on the Dragon Gate represent one of his sayings. From this vantage point, we looked toward the Old St. Mary’s Cathedral that sits directly across the street from the park. In 1854 it became the first cathedral of the Archdiocese of San Francisco and the tallest building in San Francisco. Remarkably, the exterior brick walls and the bell tower of this Victorian Gothic church survived the intense fires that ignited after the 1906 earthquake. The church was restored and nowadays conducts church services in Cantonese, Mandarin, English, and Latin. Robert had intended to take us into the church to view photos taken after the earthquake. Unfortunately, all of the doors were locked.



The Du Yat-Sen statue.

Tin Hou Temple

Next, we visited the Tin Hou Temple, the oldest Taoist temple in San Francisco and one of the oldest still functioning Chinese temples in the United States. The San Francisco Taoist community dates back to the mid 19th century. We climbed up narrow steps to the top floor of a four-story building to visit the small temple that was built in 1910 after the original structure was destroyed by the earthquake. Believers of the Chinese sea goddess, Mazu, have been worshipping for more than a century in this small room. Unlike other temples in Asia, we were not permitted to take any photos inside. One of our fellow tour participants paid a small fee to have her fortune revealed. While waiting in the stairwell, I was able to take a picture of a black and white photograph of the exterior of the original temple.



The Tin Hou Temple.

Where to eat in Chinatown in San Francisco

Eastern Bakery

By the time we left the temple, I was eager to eat. The owners of the **Eastern Bakery** were expecting our arrival. Decades earlier, they were not prepared when President Clinton made an unannounced visit in 1996. Pictures from this noteworthy event are proudly displayed near the front of the store. Most patrons come for their signature dish, dim sum steamed pork buns.

Since we do not eat pork, our plates had four traditional non-meat items—a small shrimp dumpling, a miso entrée with 2 pink dots on the top, a sesame seed fried ball with a plum and black bean filling, and a rectangular rice cake. The portions were substantial and the food arrived steaming hot from the adjacent kitchen.



A few non-meat items to sample at the Eastern Bakery.

The shrimp dumpling and the rectangular rice cake were unremarkable. However, I was surprised to find a vegetable filling inside the item with the two pink dots and absolutely loved the diverse textures in the round ball coated with sesame seeds.

To finish our feast, we tasted an excessively sweet moon cake and a milk chocolate covered fortune cookie. While I'll never say no to chocolate, I was not expecting to eat a fortune cookie dipped in chocolate.

Even though the original owners no longer own the shop, it has the distinction of being the oldest bakery in Chinatown. Its doors opened in 1924. My only regret is that we didn't purchase any of the bakery items in the glass display cases.



The interior of the Eastern Bakery.

Vital Tea Leaf

I have been drinking tea on a daily basis for decades, but I have never spent much time learning about the more than 3,000 varieties of tea available in China. Maggie, a cheerful Chinese woman, provided an informative session to everyone sitting at the long counter that ran the length of the **Vital Tea Leaf** store. She gladly welcomed all shop visitors to sit down and try various blends of tea before making a purchase.

As she prepared each vessel of tea, she shared tidbits of information by explaining some of the distinct

characteristics of six types of teas—pu-erh (Chinese black tea), red, yellow, oolong (half roasted), green, and white. She explained how the tannin levels in green tea are oftentimes too harsh on people's stomachs and that there are high levels of antioxidants in both white and green teas. Until I listened to her presentation, I never realized that white tea is a "baby" form of green tea or that a longer seeping process will produce more tannin that may shock the body.

Maggie's method was incredibly quick. Tea leaves were hydrated in a colorful container with hot water. She quickly used the container's lid to make sure the leaves were adequately immersed in the water. This quick rinse wakes up the leaves. When asked about the water's temperature, she highly suggested using boiling water that had cooled for a minute or two. Boiling water shocks the tannins. The tea leaves were then seeped in a vessel for only 20-30 seconds. The strained warm beverage was poured into miniscule cups for everyone to taste. This relatively quick process did not diminish the flavor.



A demonstration at the Vital Tea Leaf Shop in San Francisco.



Tea leaves re-hydrating and expanding.

One time, she placed a handful of tea leaves in a clear container. We watched as the leaves expanded dramatically as they absorbed the water.

As an advocate of traditional Chinese medicine, she strongly discouraged the use of decaffeinated coffee and tea. Both processes introduce chemicals into a naturally healthy beverage. She dismissed the notion that the caffeine in tea causes over stimulation. She gleefully chirped, “Have you ever seen a hyper monk?”

I never realized that the roasting process associated with oolong tea removes some of the tannins and thus decreases the intensity of the flavor. By adding ginseng to the tea, consumers can get a double dose of energy while also stimulating the desire to remain hydrated. I ended up purchasing a bag of Blue People Ginseng Oolong tea leaves.

During an earlier trip to Asia, I had learned about the medicinal value of pu-erh tea that is oftentimes sold in a round dense cake form. This cake is stored in the earth and aged for 12-15 years. Practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine claim that pu-erh is the easiest on the stomach. In China, I heard that it helps to reduce cholesterol levels.



A Pu-erh Tea Cake at the Vital Tea Leaf Shop.

When asked how much tea she consumes in a day, she stated, “I already lost count. Drink as much as you like.”

Pot and Noodle

This open kitchen restaurant allows visitors to freely observe the cooking area. According to Robert, the **Pot and Noodle** signature dish is a hot pot filled with two types of beef, a pork ball, assorted vegetables, and a bubbling brown colored broth. The restaurant accommodated our dietary restrictions with vegetarian options. We were served a generous portion of a delicious marinated cucumber salad made with sesame oil and a large vegetarian hot pot.



The Meat Hot Pot from Pot and Noodle restaurant.



The Vegetarian Hot Pot at Pot and Noodle.

We used a ladle to scoop out individual portions into bowls. Some of the oversized vegetable pieces cascaded off the ladle when we moved the food from one container to the next. As we consumed our food, an open flame continued to heat the remaining food.

One of the added benefits of taking a food tour is the time getting to know other participants at each food stop. Our conversations flowed freely as we nibbled on tasty Chinese food. By the time the tour was over, everyone felt satiated and content. We had consumed a variety of foods and beverages and had learned a bit about Chinatown’s history. I didn’t stop once to look at my watch or phone. I remained engaged and interested throughout the three-hour experience.

Despite the limited number of stops, the quality and quantity of the food were more than sufficient and, most importantly, the tour allowed me to taste authentic cuisine while also learning about the history of the area. A food tour was a great way to find out where to eat in Chinatown in San Francisco.

Where to stay: While in San Francisco, I stayed in an upper floor hotel room with a balcony that had lovely views of the bay. On the first night, we were able to see an unexpected fireworks show. If you find yourself in San Francisco and would like to stay in centralized location, I recommend the [Hilton San Francisco Union Square Hotel](#).


— Article by Sandy Bornstein. Photos by The Traveling Bornsteins.

Hungry for more? Read Sandy’s story about the food tour she experienced in Hong Kong, [here](#).

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Sandy has visited more than 40 countries and lived as an international teacher in Bangalore, India. Sandy’s award-winning book, *May This Be the Best Year of Your Life*, is a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle and living outside their comfort zone. Sandy writes about food, family, intergenerational, and active midlife adventures highlighting land and water experiences, historical sites, and Jewish culture and history. You can follow Sandy on Facebook and Instagram.

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