



It has become a year-round treat, but the hotpot is most satisfying when there is a chill in the air. Photo: Warton Li

Best of broth worlds

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Once a seasonal treat, Hong Kong restaurants now offer hotpot all year round. But the dish is at its most gratifying on a cold winter's night.

There are fans who argue that the best hotpot is one you have prepared yourself at home with all your favourite ingredients bought at the wet market.

However, unless you are good friends with stall owners who reserve the best cuts of meat or you are expert at making your own soup base, you might try one of these restaurants.

FF Hot Pot (G/F, 340-344 Jaffe Road, Wan Chai; tel: 2838 9392) is heaven for beef lovers. Although it's an old restaurant and a bit run down, it has some beef cuts and offal that are hard to find elsewhere. Owner Hui Fat-bo and his staff are always ready to give recommendations.

To my guest's delight, first up is ox testicle. The cook cuts it into very thin slices for a slightly chewy texture. Ox testicle is not my thing, so I'm glad Hui introduces us to beef paddywhack, a tendon from the neck. It doesn't take long to cook and has a rich, unctuous flavour.

You may get similar cuts from a butcher, but this place earns credit for sourcing good beef and cutting it well: the slices even have good marbling, making the meat tender. A swift dunk in the pot and it's ready.

While the homemade assorted balls – pork, fish, squid and shrimp – don't bring much to the party, the homemade Chiu Chow style steamed spring roll is worth a try; the flavourful minced fish and bean curd wrap make a nice combo.

Another place with homemade goodies is **Megan's Kitchen** (5/F Lucky Centre, 165-171 Wan Chai Road, Wan Chai; tel: 2866 8305). The creative combination of ingredients surprises without being over the top. One of our favourites is a deep-fried pastry stuffed with shrimp paste. You might expect the dough to get soggy when it's placed in the hotpot broth, but it stays crunchy.

The salty ox-tongue cheese dumpling is another highlight. Wrapped in a silky smooth skin, the melted cheese adds moisture and richness to the filling, although we suggest ordering it only for large groups, as a little goes a long way.

The menu is quite extensive and quality is generally high. There is a seasonal seafood menu of the day. The ambience is nice – it is clean, spacious and you can get a booth if you book early. Tables are spaced so that it's not too crowded or noisy.

While freshness of ingredients is very important in a hotpot, it's a mistake to take the soup for granted. You learn exactly how crucial it is when you get an awful broth.

The Sichuan spicy soup at **Him Kee Hot Pot** (1-2/F Workingfield Commercial Building, 408-412 Jaffe Road, Causeway Bay; tel: 2838 6116)



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is so bad that it almost ruins the meal. It doesn't have enough herbs, lacks fragrance and has a medicinal bitterness that is off-putting. The fish head soup we order for the other half of the pot isn't very good, either. The crystal char siu bao is acceptable but not great, as the transparent wrapper lacks elasticity.

Redeeming features? It is famous for its seafood, including lobster and geoduck, which doesn't get much fresher. We also try the eel, which is very good. The chive dumplings are a winner, tasting as if your grandmother might have made them.

Fans of Sichuan spicy broth can also head to **Golden Valley** (1/F The Emperor Hotel, 1 Wang Tak Street, Happy Valley; tel: 2961 3330). We order a three compartment pot so we can try the fish soup and mushroom soup base. But the Sichuan spicy soup is so good, we barely touch the others.

The Sichuan broth is not

overwhelmingly hot but is balanced and fragrant. The Sichuan pepper gives it that tingling feeling on the lips. It goes well with lamb and offal such as pig's liver as it masks their odours and adds a tang.

Golden Valley's DIY condiment bar is worth a mention. It's equipped with a mortar and pestle for you to crush your seasonings and there are instructions on how to make a Sichuan-style sauce. The restaurant charges each diner a condiment fee.

While FF Hot Pot's fish soup with tomato, potato and sweetcorn, and Megan's Kitchen's tomato spotted crab broth, are both recommended, the tomato crab soup from **Old Man Hot Pot** (25-31 Cooke Street, Hung Hom; tel: 9089 7732) is outstanding and easily the best. It's a neighbourhood venue with its tables spilling onto the street, and its crab and tomato soup base is a dish in its own right. It is a lot richer and stronger than those from Megan's Kitchen, and a whole crab – usually a meaty mud crab – is used.

Those looking for an even more authentic hotpot experience should try a coal hotpot. Said to offer more evenly spread heat, especially when used with a clay pot, it may take a bit longer to come to the boil, but it simmers evenly – unlike some induction or gas hobs.

For a hint of nostalgia, try **Canton Kitchen** (10 Kong Pui Street, Sha Tin; tel: 2686 1778) or **Woo Mei Kitchen** (282 Reclamation Street, Mong Kok; tel: 2388 4018).