

# Underground eats

TAKE THE 7 TRAIN AND THE STAIRS TO A NEW DIMENSION IN CHINESE COOKING

By Jake Lemkowitz for USA TODAY

In Flushing, Queens, the signs are in Mandarin, the sidewalks buzz with frenetic energy, and incredible food is everywhere you look. It's New York's most vibrant Chinatown.

You could spend a hundred years trying to eat your way through this neighborhood's dim sum banquet halls and steamy noodle shops. But adventurous eaters who want to get the most out of a visit have an even better option: Go underground.

Flushing's subterranean food courts are like another world. Located in the lower levels of shopping centers across the neighborhood, these shops serve authentic dishes at cheap prices. Stuff yourself silly without spending more than \$20. The more you try, the better. Leave General Tso to the suckers.

## FLUSHING MALL

The Flushing Mall is scheduled to be demolished sometime in late 2012 and most of its street-level retail businesses are already shuttered. Thankfully, its fantastic food court is still going strong, so check it out while you still can. All of the menus have English translations. Just like in an American food court, friends hang out, children run rampant, and (Chinese) pop music plays softly in the background. Don't mistake the cooking here for fast food, though. Everything is made to order.



Photo by Xi'an Famous Foods

Cold skin noodle might not sound great, but boy do they taste good. Liang Pi is a top seller at Xi'an Famous Foods.



A melding of Middle Eastern and Chinese dishes happens at this countertop restaurant in the Flushing Mall. Xi'an Famous Foods has four locations and has been praised by celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain.

## QUEENS



### QUEENS

New York's largest and easternmost borough, Queens has thriving urban neighborhoods, business districts, and the tallest skyscraper (One Court Square) in New York City outside of Manhattan. And some people call this the "burbs."

**POPULATION:** 2.3 million

**PRESIDENT:** Helen M. Marshall

**SQUARE MILES:** 109

**FAMOUS NATIVES:**

Paul Simon	Ray Romano
Howard Stern	Martin Scorsese
Fran Drescher	Donald Trump
Christopher Walken	LL Cool J

**SIGNATURE FEATURES:**

Shea Stadium	Queens Zoo
Museum of the Moving Image	
MoMA PS1	

### DO YOU KNOW:

The Queens Blvd Express, which is the E and F Subway lines, is one of the fastest routes in the system. The average speed between Forest Hills and Queens Plaza reaches about 60 mph.

### CURRENTLY FILMING:

30 Rock, Pan Am, *The Rememberer* (starring Poppy Montgomery), *Blue Bloods*, *Another Night* (starring Robert De Niro), *The Bourne Legacy*

### BY THE NUMBERS

# 450

Approximate age of the tallest tree in the New York metropolitan area. Standing 133 feet tall, the Queens Giant is thought to be the oldest living object in the city.

## QUEENS



Take the 7 Train to Flushing, Queens for dim sum and other Asian delights. The downtown is a vibrant area to explore, shop, and eat.

>> 133-31 39 Ave., Queens; Flushing-Main Street Subway; 718-762-9000

► HAI DI LAO: You may have to search for this stand's English name, displayed inconspicuously on the side of its sign. Just look for the women hand-rolling the dumplings, this spot's forte. Choose either traditional pork and chive (\$6) or the triple delight dumplings (\$6), which also include shrimp. Fifteen delicate steamed dumplings to a plate.

► THE SHAVED ICE PLACE: Its name has no English equivalent, and there's no obvious American analog for this brand of Taiwanese shaved ice (\$4). A hand mound of delicate shaved ice topped with fluorescent orange mango syrup, blue tapioca balls, and pale purple jellies—the ideal food court palette cleanser.

► HAN KOU STEAKS AND APPETIZERS: The Flushing Mall's slickest-looking establishment can still feed three people for about \$10. The salt and pepper squid (\$4.50) is a addictive spin on fried calamari. And the fried stinky tofu (\$4.75) is great, if you're into that kind of thing. Even if you're not, it's worth



Three bucks will buy you a Spicy Cumin Lamb Burger at Xi'an Famous Foods. "Try not to drool," writes one reviewer.

taking risks here since the food is so affordable. Place your order and then listen for your number to be screamed at you in Chinese.

► TEMPLE SNACKS: Temple Snacks specialize in xiaochi, or Taiwanese small eats. The pork belly sandwich, known here as the Taiwanese Steamed Sandwich, is a must-order (\$4). A massive chunk of tender pork belly is topped with

sweet crushed peanuts, bitingly fresh cilantro, and green onions, and stuffed into a steamed bun. If you weren't surrounded by so many other food options, you could eat four of these and call it a day.

#### THE GOLDEN MALL

The Golden Mall Food Court is where urban exploration meets destination dining. With the mall's

half-faded, half-fallen-down signage and the food court's unassuming doorway off the street, you could stroll right by this place without giving it another thought. But then you'd be missing out on one of Flushing's greatest gustatory experiences. Most vendors here do not speak English, but the menus all have pictures. Be prepared to point.

>> 41-28 Main St., Queens; Flushing-Main Street Subway

► XI'AN FAMOUS FOODS: Head straight to this legendary hole-in-the-wall and be rewarded by the pictures of famous chef and Anthology Books' dining stall #10. Xi'an is a Mecca of Flushing's Chinatown because of dishes like their tangy cold Liang Pi Noodles (\$4.50), and the terrific Spicy Cumin Lamb Burger (\$3), which can be described as the Northern Chinese equivalent of a sloppy Joe. The crisp, raw vegetable flavor of the Tiger Vegetables Salad (\$4.50) is also highly recommended.

► CHENGDU TIAN FU: World-class Szechuan food served out of a closet, otherwise known as the first stall on your left. This restaurant's take on ma la sauce, a uniquely powerful chili oil, will leave your

tongue buzzing long after the meal is done. Wedge yourself into one of the small tables, and choose Szechuan favorites, such as Dan Dan Noodles (\$7.50), Dumplings in Chili Oil (\$4.50), and Diced Rabbit (\$9), from the pictorial wall menu.

#### NEW WORLD MALL

Come hungry and take the escalator down to the second floor of over-load New World Mall to home to the newest and by far flashiest Flushing food court. The huge, modernous racous basement has more than 30 different vendors, from small businesses to chains. New World's booths tend to cater to more mainstream tastes, but the food is far from Americanized. This is where American food becomes China-fied.

>> 136-20 Roosevelt Ave., Queens; Flushing-Main Street Subway; 718-353-0551

► LIVE SEAFOOD: There's no need to ask if the fish is fresh. Just watch as a tank of live lobsters is lifted from a tank, chopped up before your eyes, deep fried, and tossed with your choice of five sauces. Go for the ginger and scallion or the intense XO sauce. Lobster prices fluctuate somewhat (\$13 to \$15) but it's still a great deal, and the luxurious fried soft shell crab (\$6 to \$8) is also worth ordering. All meals come with rice and a salad, neither of which is particularly good.

► SLICED NOODLES: Enjoy the free show provided by the man hand-pulling noodles. He stretches the dough to his breaking point, waggles it like a jump-rope, slaps it down on a counter, and repeats. When it's your turn to order, skip the noodles and do like everyone else: get the ma la xiao long xia, a massive bowl of spicy crayfish (\$10). Here, BYOB stands for bring your own bib.

► SNOOP: A psychedelic-looking dessert, Snoop's xue hua bing, snoopy ice, is a fun treat. There are cheaper, simpler options on the menu, but go for broke with an extravagant Romantic Snowy concoction (\$8). A mountain of creamy, snowy shaved ice that tastes like frozen cotton candy is topped with tiny cookies, gummydrops, Skittles, and other ingredients that are slightly more difficult to identify. It's the Flushing equivalent of a kitchen-sink ice cream sundae.