

## LEGENDS

## Two stories behind soupy buns

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*Xiaolongbao*, or literally, “little basket bun”, is the delicate steamed dumpling filled with pork and soup often thought to have originated in Shanghai.

Legend has it that its inventor was a man named Huang Mingxian, the owner of a restaurant called Ri Hua Xuan in Nanxiang, a district of Shanghai. In the 1870s, he invented the dumpling by adding aspic to his pork mince – upon steaming, the aspic would become liquid, thereby filling the dumpling with soup.

He decided to market this delicate creation (the best are supposed to have 14 pleats at the top) under the name of *Nanxiang da rou mantou*, meaning a large meat-filled bun from Nanxiang. His rationale was that the actual, petite size of the dish that arrived would stun customers, making it memorable.

Customers flocked to his restaurant for the dumplings, but the name didn’t stick entirely. People began calling it Nanxiang *xiaolongbao* – while the geographical detail and the bun



(*bao*) reference stayed, customers rightfully named the dumplings *xiao* (small), and *long* (basket) because they were always steamed and served in baskets.

Another story goes that Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799) tasted the dumplings in Wuxi, Jiangsu province, while travelling through the region. He travelled along the river and so was given the nickname of Youlong, or Swimming Dragon.

On his trip, he was given *xiaolongbao* to try as a local speciality, and he apparently raved about them. The *xiaolongbao* of Wuxi thus became famous, and some even say that the *long* in *xiaolongbao* should be dragon rather than basket (the two words are homonyms) in his honour.

## KITCHEN CONTENDERS

## Cream of the croque



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Croque monsieur, a popular snack, appeared on French menus in the early 20th century and, according to *Larousse Gastronomique*, is “a hot sandwich, made of two slices of buttered bread with crusts removed, filled with thin slices of Gruyere cheese and a slice of lean ham”, that is “lightly browned on both sides either in butter in a frying pan or under the grill”.

It adds that it may also be topped with béchamel sauce and cooked au gratin. *The Oxford Companion to Food* agrees with this definition in terms of ingredients and cooking methods but notes that it should be cooked until crisp, suggests thick slices of cheese and adds that it is sometimes dipped in egg and breadcrumbed before frying.

French chef Daniel Boulud calls it more simply the “ultimate ham and cheese sandwich”.

What is not known is how it got its name, which generally translates to “crunch mister” or “munch mister”, or how it came into existence.

In Hong Kong, this French take on a toasted cheese and ham sandwich is a crowd pleaser at both The Langham’s Main St Deli and The Lobby at The Peninsula Hong Kong. But which does it better?

The Lobby has a refined, classical

ambience befitting such a grand hotel. It has spaciously placed tables, comfortable seating and warm lighting, with tones of blue and brown offset by the tall white columns and gold detailing on the ornate ceiling. The sounds of The Lobby Strings wafting from the mezzanine balcony add to the elegance. The service is faultless. The à la carte menu describes the croque monsieur as “served in Paris in 1910 – white bread filled with shavings of bone ham and Gruyere toasted in butter until golden brown”. The 1910 reference is a nod to those, including *Larousse Gastronomique*, that suggest it was first served that year in a Parisian cafe.

Presented on a rectangular glass plate with a small bowl of coleslaw and a side of fries, the sandwich has been cut into three large crustless fingers. It has the appearance of a club sandwich with three slices of bread and layers of ham and cheese in between. The coleslaw is tasty, and the fries excellent, although not seasoned. A rich combination of



Both sandwiches will satisfy the cheese lover, and lean towards the munch over the crunch

butter and Gruyere, the sandwich’s predominant taste is of cheese, despite the generous amounts of flavourful ham. The bread is not as golden brown as expected, and some parts not brown at all, so it does not have much crunch or textural contrast – that’s probably why the slaw is there. Texture aside, there is no denying this is one scrumptious and extremely satisfying toastie.

With its crystal chandeliers and bevelled edge mirrors, The Langham’s Main St Deli is a somewhat upmarket version of a bustling New York deli. Other design features, such as the semi-open kitchen, tiled floor, simple furniture, booths, and black and white images of classic American scenes, add to the atmosphere, and simple art deco touches give it a sense of history.

Quality of service varies from server to server. Delivered with the menus are a complimentary bowl of coleslaw (too sweet for us) and two dill pickles (good). The restaurant serves a selection of toasted sandwiches on Wednesday nights only, but popular choices are likely to be introduced to the à la carte menu. All include a cup of tomato bisque and two small toasted cheese “soldiers” served on the same plate as the sandwich, a side salad and dressing. That’s a lot of bread.

According to the restaurant manager the diners’ favourite is the restaurant’s own spin on

a croque monsieur, which includes wilted spinach and mornay sauce, and a dip in beaten egg before frying. The sandwich itself is presented in four crustless triangles, again in a three layered format, with two layers of fillings. The overall taste is of cheese and sauce; the ham, at only one thin slice per layer, provides a salty note but doesn’t add much flavour; the spinach provides some textural contrast but not a lot. Again there is no crunch, which, given its French-toast-like egg finish, is more understandable but still disappointing.

Despite that, it is a tasty, gooey, warm cheesy sandwich, and the salad provides a clean, crunchy contrast.

**Verdict:** both sandwiches will satisfy the cheese lover and seem to be leaning towards the munch over the crunch. The croque monsieur at The Lobby is the better of the two owing to its richer taste, better quality ham and larger serving.

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