

Franks a million

Hot dogs are loaded with salt, often have additives and preservatives, and are not known for containing prime cuts. So what is it about this less than healthy food that makes it so appealing to so many?

"Hey, they're bad for you, we know that and you don't really want to know what's in them. But once in a while the combination of frankfurter, bun, ketchup, mustard, relish and sauerkraut is one of the great joys in life," says Scott Murphy, a New Jersey native and long-time Hong Kong resident.

For Murphy, a good hot dog should look and taste like a meal that leaves you feeling satisfied. The frankfurter should have the requisite snap when you bite into it.

"Toppings are really important, too: the more relish, sauerkraut, onions, chilli, you name it, you can put on a dog, the better," he says.

Hot dog enthusiast Ned Kelly, originally from Scotland, says it is about quality: "Toppings are important, but they shouldn't be there to hide poor quality franks. Quality is paramount, served, of course, in a fresh bun."

DJ and F&B professional Andy Curtis, a Briton who has lived in Hong Kong for much of his life, looks for a bite that is "juicy, tasty meat, not dry, with a crunchy but not chewy skin served in a soft, warmed bun".

An increasing number of outlets in Hong Kong are getting the recipe just right. The Frank, which opened in mid-September, is one. Candace Suen got inspiration for the 11 dogs it offers when she visited the US.

All the classics such as the New York (with mustard and sauerkraut), the Coney Island (mustard, sauerkraut and onions) and the Chicago (mustard, onion, sweet pickle relish, pickle, tomato, chillies and celery salt) are available.

The outlet also offers Asian-inspired hot dogs created by Suen, such as the Thai (spicy chorizo frank, Thai chilli mayo, pork floss, crispy onion and fresh chilli). For spice lovers there is the suicide (spicy chorizo, grilled onions, spicy mayo, jalapeno, crispy onions). Customers can also create their own hot dog by choosing from five franks and 18 toppings.

Hongkongers are tucking into the humble hot dog with increasing relish, writes Vicki Williams

Expect to see The Frank opening in other locations.

Wonderdog was opened at the end of May by Patrick Chen, whose love of dogs goes back to his childhood.

His father would place frankfurters and buns on the table, with Chen free to add whatever toppings he wanted. Chen believes a frank and a bun are a blank slate on which to create. Wonderdog has 10 offerings.

Nothing is run-of-the-mill here. The Caesar, for example, combines a frankfurter with romaine lettuce, croutons, Parmesan cheese, Caesar sauce and aged balsamic vinegar. Brave diners should sample the devil dog, which comes with a warning on the menu: "This dog is friggin' spicy". It's a warning repeated by the server.

Despite the warning, many have returned it, complaining that it is too hot. The vivid, blood-red sauce is a mix of habanero chilli, mayo, and beetroot juice (for colour). Describing it as hot is an understatement.

Shirley Wong is another Hongkonger with a love of dogs. This stems from many years spent in England. Wong opened Pi Hot Dog Gallery last December.

The small cafe-style business offers a staggering 29 options, including the classic house dog, the popular Chicago hot dog, and more

inventive choices such as the wasabi egg salad dog. Another customer favourite is the spicy chilli dog, an extra-long grilled cheese frankfurter served on a heated bun and topped with hot mustard, jalapeno, sauerkraut and ketchup.

That is good enough to make the journey there worthwhile. The tiny Hotdog Family, on the floor below, is also co-owned by Wong, attracting a grab-and-go clientele.

With its mostly alfresco dining on a tree-lined pavement, JHD American Gourmet & Bar feels a world away from the usual hustle of the city. The ambience of the venue, which opened last year, is more reminiscent of Sydney or Brooklyn.

There are only six choices (as well as burgers and pasta): US relish, sweet grilled, hot chilli, farm fresh, original cheese and Japanese, with an option to have a frankfurter or bratwurst.

On a day that involved eating five hot dogs, the farm fresh appealed, as it included tomato, cucumber and onion, finished with salad cream (an idea that worked). The only complaint was that the bun was longer than the meat.

One recommendation of Murphy's is Sidewalk. Located in the heart of Lan Kwai Fong, it is one of the few places to get a dog in the small hours, after a few pints. "They seem to care about their dogs," he says. The three choices (beef, chicken or pork) come with onion, mustard and sauerkraut, with an option to include ketchup.

It is the generous amount of delicious sauerkraut balanced by cooked onion that makes them top dogs. The frankfurters were not the best we tasted. They no doubt taste better at 2am.

Curtis recommends Big Dog. This hole-in-the-wall establishment serves eight dogs. All have interesting condiment combos. For example, the Vienna comes with corn, egg salad and pineapple, while the frankfork is a tasty combo of

frankfurter, fresh tomato, sauerkraut and bacon, finished with lashings of mustard and ketchup.

While they may not be visually appealing, with the bun dressed rather than the dog, they are served very hot, and taste as a good hot dog should.

Given its long lunchtime queues and its afternoon tea crowd buying boxes of hot dogs to take back to the office, Wing Lok Yuen Restaurant is probably a good place for what is referred to as a "local-style" dog. The frankfurters are the small variety that come in a tin, as the cans on the floor demonstrate.

But the secret sauce really makes these something special. Smothered on both sides of the warm bun, the pale yellow sauce tastes like a mix of melted cheese and mayonnaise, with hints of gherkin and mustard. It was surprisingly delicious. The franks have a peppery taste that is offset by the slightly sweet sauce. The best option for flavour balance is the double dog, which has two franks on one bun.

Brat attracts a well-heeled clientele and is much more expensive than the others we visited. It is the only one to add a service charge. There is a choice of 12 dogs, including a vegan option. They can all be washed down with a beer or glass of wine. Each brat (and the one frankfurter) is given its own flavour profile, such as the Italian (black pepper, fennel seed, red pepper). We tried the classic Frank (mustard, paprika, onion, garlic).

Diners select a bun (signature or rye), a condiment from a choice of eight and a mustard from a selection of five. Additional toppings cost extra. Expectations for the sausages were high. The restaurant describes them as artisanal, using only the best ingredients, with meat free from hormones and antibiotics, and all natural casings. On the plus side the frank had a great snap, the bread was warm and soft, and it was tasty. But it's costly for what you get.

"A hot dog before a night out isn't a bad idea. A hot dog after a night out always seems like a good idea. But to me, a hot dog any time is a great idea," says Kelly. With such variety, Kelly and other dog lovers are well served. foodandwine@scmp.com



They're bad for you, and you don't want to know what's in them. But the combination of frankfurter and bun is one of life's joys

SCOTT MURPHY, FRANKFURTER FAN