

Enduring legacy of Nanxiang *xiaolong*

Bao Ling and Hu Min

Jiading District's Nanxiang *xiaolong* steamed buns has a history spanning over a century and continues to enjoy immense popularity.

The clear wrapper offers a faint glimpse of the savory broth within. "One bite to open the wrapper, the second to drink the soup, and the third to finish it all," as the delightful soup and rich pork filling tantalize the taste buds of diners.

Numerous restaurants serve Nanxiang *xiaolong*, a traditional delicacy from Shanghai. Around 30 *xiaolong* restaurants in Nanxiang Town sell nearly 24 million *xiaolong* buns each year, with annual sales reaching nearly 36 million yuan (US\$4.99 million).

In 2015, the town launched the Nanxiang Dumpling Culture Experience Center, featuring a DIY area that attracts nearly 70,000 visitors annually.

Nanxiang *xiaolong* making methods have evolved over the years. Malantou (Indian Kalimeris herb)-flavored buns taste like spring, while lotus root-stuffed buns with spinach, dragon fruit and lotus root juice help to cool off in the summer.

Black truffle and pork buns with squid ink wrappers are trendy and appealing to kids and teens.

Fancy variations hide tight industry norms. The nine-step process includes dough kneading, rolling, filling and steaming.

Except for dough kneading, all steps are handmade. Every *xiaolong* must have a 1.5-millimeter wrapper, 8 grams of weight, 16 grams of filling, and 18 pleats. Ingredient freshness, precise ratios and nuanced heat control are hallmarks of workmanship.

Li Jiangang, the sixth-generation inheritor of Nanxiang *xiaolong*, believes that there are more ways to set standards than just relying on traditional talents, which he considers essential for safeguarding the brand.

Nanxiang *xiaolong* making was included on the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2014. Li then founded his studio to train skilled apprentices and chefs.

Chen Haiyun is the seventh-generation inheritor of Nanxiang *xiaolong* under Li. She learned to make buns from her mother at a young age.

"I've known Master Li since I was a child, so choosing this career was natural," Chen explained. After graduation, she worked at the Guyi Garden Restaurant for over two decades, leading her team to develop 10 *xiaolong* varieties to meet diverse tastes.

"Enter a room with four walls, and think of nothing but making *xiaolong*," Chen said as she described her job. "In fact, many young people can't endure the repetitive work."

Chen was crowned a Shanghai Model Worker this year. She attributed her success more to perseverance than innovation.

Since Li retired, Chen has shouldered the responsibility of the "seventh generation of inheritors" at the restaurant, where cultivating the eighth and ninth generations is a top priority.

Demanding job

Zhang Xiaoping, deputy general manager of the restaurant, acknowledged that few young people are eager to learn.

"Making *xiaolong* is a technical and physically demanding job. A chef who can produce one *xiaolong* in six seconds after pressing the wrapper demonstrates superior hand speed and technique and ultimately earns a higher bonus."

Nong Wei, a recent graduate from a vocational school in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, interned at the restaurant through a school-enterprise cooperation program. After successfully passing the assessment, he became a full-time employee in 2023.

"With meals and accommodation



Nanxiang *xiaolong* — IC



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Li Jiangang

The sixth-generation inheritor of Nanxiang *xiaolong*

provided, I earn an average monthly salary of 6,000 yuan. I can learn *xiaolong*-making skills here, and I aspire to build my career around this special skill."

Since 2007, Nanxiang has hosted the Shanghai Nanxiang Xiaolong Culture Exhibition annually to promote cultural exchange and heritage.

As the Nanxiang *xiaolong* industry expands, thousands of workers have discovered career and entrepreneurial opportunities here. Steaming hot buns not only warm diners but also inspire the employment and entrepreneurial aspirations of many individuals.

Chang Xing Lou, a century-old catering brand in the town, was initially established in two rundown buildings. In 2009, Chen Aigen took over Chang Xing Lou and embarked on his own business journey.

Currently, Chang Xing Lou operates seven upstream and downstream

industries across the country, generating jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities for thousands of people.

In Jiading, the craft and culture of Nanxiang *xiaolong* have become integral to the daily lives of the community.

"Shanghai is an international metropolis, but locals need a place to reconnect with their roots and a way to evoke feelings of nostalgia for their hometown," said Li.

Alongside more than 30 local *xiaolong* restaurants in Nanxiang, establishments serving Nanxiang *xiaolong* can also be found at Yuyuan Garden Scenic Area, Jiading Zhouqiao Scenic Area and various tourist attractions throughout the country.

Xiaolong restaurants have also been established in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, Australia and other countries.



Foreign guests enjoy *xiaolong* buns in Nanxiang. — Xu Chenyi