

CITY BREAK

TAIPEI

From the city's night markets to its Michelin-starred restaurants, influences from China, Japan and beyond come together to create a cuisine that's distinctly Taiwanese

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A sleepy island perched on the far western edge of the Pacific, Taiwan has a rather unusual national identity. Its formally called the Republic of China, and while it regards itself as its own country, it's not recognised as such by mainland China. And over the centuries, there's been much debate about what it means to be Taiwanese. The island has experienced several waves of colonisation — by the Dutch, the Chinese and the Japanese — and prior to that it was inhabited by indigenous tribes of Malay-Polynesian descent.

The fascinating side effect of this mixed cultural heritage is a dynamic food scene, which can be readily experienced in the capital city, Taipei. Here, Japanese-style tea houses sit between skyscrapers, and night markets snake around the perimeter of elaborate Chinese temples. The food of Taiwan is decidedly fusion. The Japanese brought bento boxes, rice balls and oden (dashi broth studded with fishcakes, boiled eggs and more) to the island, and the Chinese introduced soup dumplings and beef noodle soup. The Dutch are responsible for the presence of turkeys on the island, and the birds' meat served shredded over rice has become a classic. Over time, however, many of these

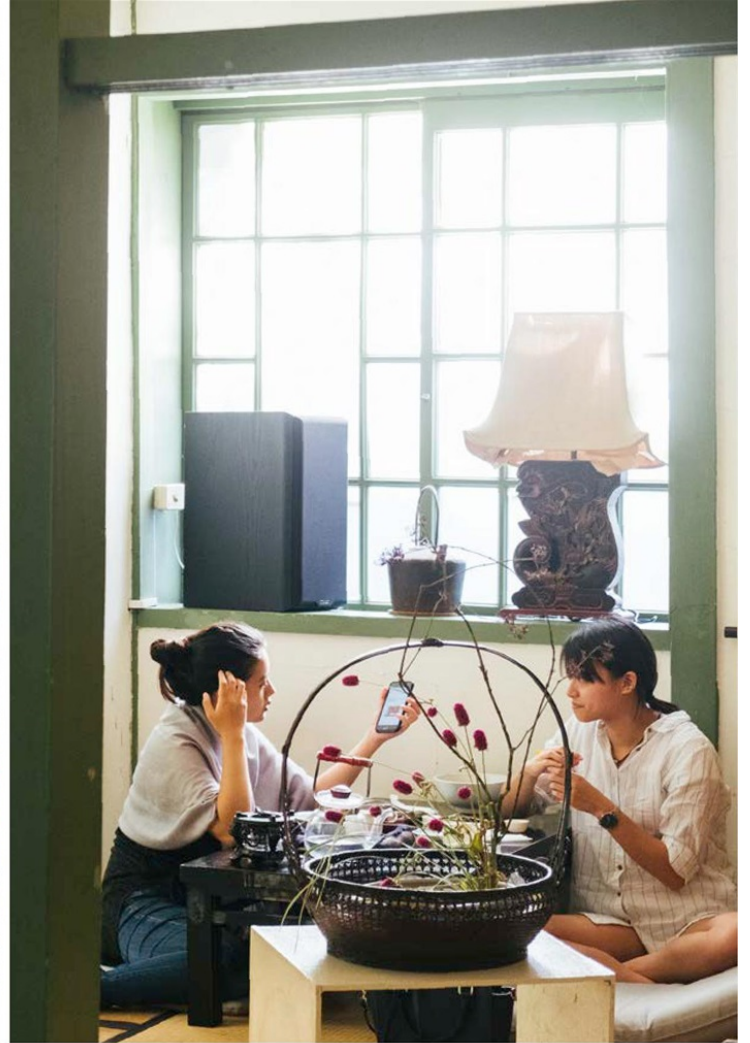
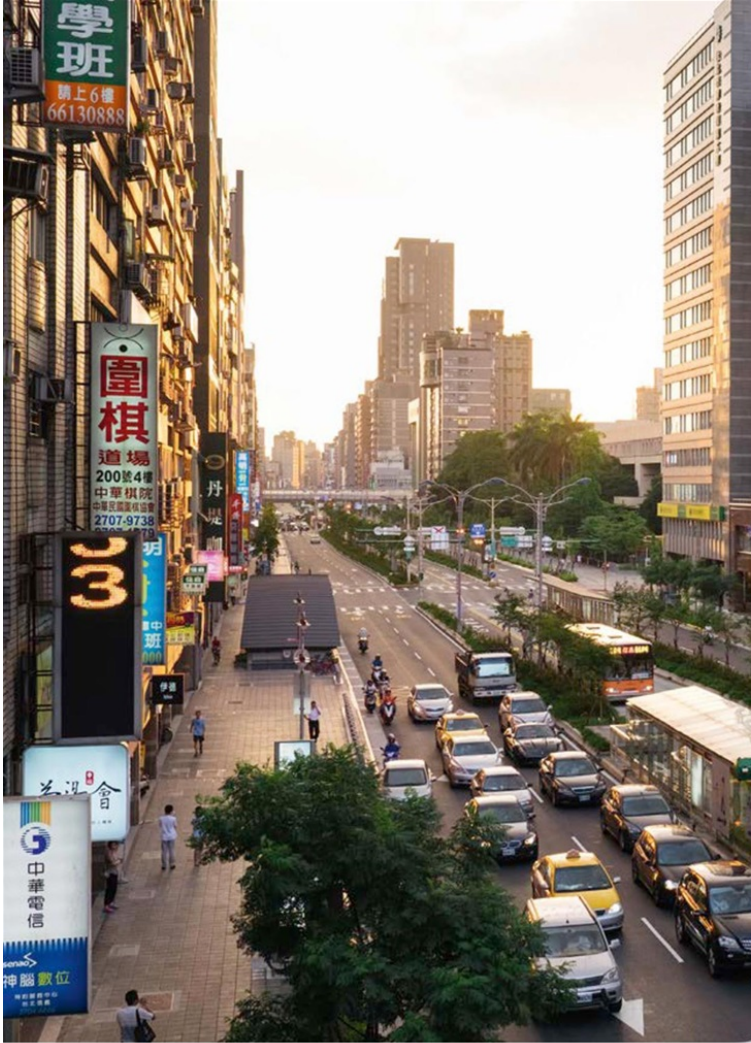
dishes have evolved so much they're virtually unrecognisable from their original versions. Rice balls in Taiwan are fatter and more oblong, stuffed with minced pork and braised egg. Beef noodle soup is almost sweet, rather than the spicy Chinese recipe, due to the addition of cherry tomatoes and rock sugar.

Although there's a long-running affinity for all things Japanese (sushi bars and Japanese hot pot can be found in nearly every neighbourhood), Taipei's eating habits are constantly changing. Over the past decade, there's been a boom in fine dining — a movement spearheaded by young, local chefs who've trained abroad and returned home to make use of their new skills. They're harnessing indigenous ingredients such as mountain peppercorn and red millet to create delicious dishes and, more profoundly, a cuisine that's distinctly Taiwanese.

While it certainly embraces haute cuisine, the nation's culinary culture still centres around family-owned establishments that have served the same dishes for generations, and street food markets that are always busy. These places reflect the true spirit of Taiwanese food — generous portions, flavoursome dishes and diners eating late into the night.

Clockwise from top left: Sunset on Xinyi Road in Taipei's Da'an District; inside Wistaria Teahouse; local ingredients and Japanese techniques are combined at Logy; barista serving a latte in a Taipei cafe

IMAGES: SEAN MARC LEE; GETTY; LOGY



A DAY IN

DADAOCHENG & XIMENDING

Dadaocheng is one of the oldest districts in Taipei, home to a lively tea export industry in the 17th century. The architecture here features a fascinating mix of baroque, Chinese and Japanese influences.

Start the day at Dihua Street, the oldest street in the city, and grab breakfast at **Old Noodle Shop**, a champion of hot sesame noodles. Afterwards, cross the street to try your luck at **Xiahai City God Temple**, which houses more than 600 statues of deities and is popular among those praying to find love. Right next door is **Yongle Fabric Market**, the largest of its kind on the island. As well as a vast array of fabrics and haberdashery in various colours and styles, you'll find a busy wet market on the first floor.

Stay on Dihua Street and pop into **Yong King**, which sells traditional kitchen utensils,

such as woks, hand-carved spoons and bamboo steamers. Or, stop by **Da Chun's Soap**, a family company that's been making soaps with local ingredients since the 1950s. For lunch, head to **Black Spot Chicken**, which serves briny cold cuts of chicken on warm rice, before visiting **Wang Tea**. Founded in 1890, the tea shop also serves as a de facto museum.

Head south to the neighbourhood of Ximending, which is to Taipei what Times Square is to New York. **The Red House Theatre** is a popular gathering spot and event space for the LGBTQ+ community, and is surrounded by a bevy of bars catering to it. For dinner, order deep-fried pork chops and rice at **Jin Man Yuan Pai Gu**. Finish off with craft beer at **The 58 Bar**, which features a roster of Taiwanese craft brews, including some varieties infused with local tea.



FINE DINING

Logy

This is a cosy 13-seater combining Japanese culinary techniques with Taiwanese ingredients (above). Its gorgeous plates have earned the restaurant many accolades, including two Michelin stars, and reservations are difficult to snag, so plan ahead. On a given day, you might be served mussels with Taiwanese red quinoa, or snapper with dried and fried betel flowers. logy.tw

RAW

RAW is the darling of Taipei's haute cuisine scene, with a tasting menu that changes seasonally and taps into the spirit of indigenous cooking. Each menu revolves around 24 key ingredients; in the past, these have featured everything from rice porridge with seafood to oysters topped with tapioca pearls. The two-Michelin-starred restaurant offers a dramatic experience that unfolds on sculpted wooden tables amid hushed diners. raw.com.tw

Gen Creative

'Gen' is the Chinese term for 'root', and this approachable fine-dining establishment is the brainchild of three chefs from Taiwan, Guatemala and Korea. Their menu is divided into three sections: 'earth', 'land' and 'sea', and all the dishes pay homage to local cuisine. Standouts include the pork chop with blue corn tortilla, and a ceviche laced with sour plums and taro. gentaipei.com



A DAY IN DA'AN & GONGGUAN

Despite their close proximity to some of the busiest parts of the city, the Da'an and Gongguan neighbourhoods are wonderfully laid-back. Come here to explore pretty, residential streets replete with ferns, quiet coffee shops and Japanese-style houses-turned-restaurants.

Start the day with a fat rice ball from the **Mama Liu** food truck, where the servers dole out dreamy portions of sticky rice packed with pickled radish, braised egg and pork floss (a type of dried meat with a fluffy texture). Then, stroll over to Yongkang Street for a flaky spring onion pancake topped with egg, cheese and basil at **Tian Jin Onion Pancake** — it's a local breakfast staple.

This area is saturated with boutique cafes and tea salons, so grab a cup at nearby **Yaboo Cafe**, where sleepy cats recline on top of the espresso machines. Once refreshed, take some time to stroll through **Da'an Forest Park**, the largest park in the city. It's a nature-lover's paradise, teeming with indigenous birds — and birdwatchers.

Just around the corner is **Wistaria Tea House**, a Taiwanese tea house in a 1920s Japanese-style home, where government officials used to congregate. They're sticklers for tradition here, so the tea is served gong fu-style, in small teapots and tiny teacups on a wooden tray. Staff will happily explain the process to the uninitiated.

Stroll through **Shida Night Market** for some light snacks before dinner. The standout outlets here are **Lan Jia Gua Bao**, which specialises in steamed buns packed with chunks of stewed pork belly, and — for the non-squeamish — **Zhen Ji Pig Blood Cake**, for umami-heavy rice sticks dipped in pig blood.

Experience dinner at a traditional recho, the Taiwanese equivalent of a Japanese izakaya bar, where beer and salty stir-fries are the centrepieces. At **Baxian Grill**, the best orders include spicy clams immersed in black bean sauce, claypot chicken, and stir-fried ferns. End the evening with a nightcap at **Blue Note**, Taipei's longest-running jazz club.



Clockwise: Wistaria Teahouse's wooden interiors; Dihua Street; a dog waiting for its owner in Da'an



NIGHT MARKETS

Raohe Street

Building regulations and licensing laws have eroded the vibe of many night markets, but Raohe remains a local favourite. Positioned next to a magnificent temple, it's one of the city's oldest. Look out for Fuzhou black pepper buns, baked to order, and wild boar sausages seasoned with indigenous peppercorns and served with slices of garlic.

Keelung

Around 15 miles north east of Taipei proper, in oceanside Keelung City, Keelung Night Market is a great place for seafood. With more than 60 vendors spread out across multiple blocks, it's expansive, with a huge amount of variety. Go there for barbecue-sauce-coated squid, creamy butter crabs, eel noodles and plump oyster pancakes.

Ningxia

This is a good pick for a more intimate experience right in the heart of the city. Ningxia also has the longest operating hours of all the night markets, starting at 4pm and running until 2am. The standout main course here is sesame chicken, while for dessert it's deep-fried balls of taro. For the more adventurous, the grilled stinky tofu is sublime.



Taiwanese beef noodle soup is sweet, spicy and packed with umami

SPOTLIGHT

BEEF NOODLE SOUP

Beef noodle soup arrived in Taiwan with the families of Sichuanese air force personnel, who fled China after the Chinese Civil War ended in 1949. They brought with them an affinity for spice, in the form of chilli peppers and spicy bean paste. Over the years, the dish has evolved into something more Taiwanese, marked by the addition of sugar and cherry tomatoes; Taiwanese food tends towards sweetness, and this spice-heavy, umami bomb of a dish is no exception.

There are many famous beef noodle soup shops in Taipei to choose from, and every establishment claims it's the best — but it all comes down to personal taste. For the uninitiated, start in Xinyi District, at **Muji Beef Noodles**, which uses local beef in a complex, slow-

cooked broth made with beef bones and a proprietary blend of spices.

If noodle quality is your priority, head to Da'an, where **Shan Xi Knife Cut Noodles** does thick, belt-like noodles, shaved using knives, a technique appropriated from North China. They're served in a fantastic, spicy, anise-laden beef broth that's heavy on the tomatoes and garnished with a heap of pickled mustard greens.

At **Drbeef East Gate**, near Dongmen, exquisite, thinly cut, medium-rare beef is the pièce de résistance. The beef is plated raw over noodles and cooked tableside by the sheer heat of the broth. Unlike many other noodle soup establishments, this one uses a relatively light soup base, which really helps the Taiwanese-raised beef slices shine.

BARS

23 Public Craft Beer

Beer is big in Taiwan, and this local institution, owned by a craft brewery of the same name, serves beers on tap. There's a sizable basement, which has ample seating space, along with a calendar of comedy shows and other events. facebook.com/23Public

R&D Cocktail Lab

At this tucked-away bar, mixologists make bespoke drinks based on your preferred flavours or alcohol. Themed after a Chinese medicine bar, R&D uses Taiwanese ingredients such as oolong tea, osmanthus and basil. Non-alcoholic drinks are also available. r-d.tw

Kavalan Whisky Bar

Taiwanese whisky is world-class, and Kavalan Whisky is the name that's been propelling it into the global spotlight. The distillery in Yilan County, in the north east, offers tours, while its city bar serves up a host of whisky varieties and cocktails. kavalanwhisky.com

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Taipei is typically served by China Airlines nonstop from Heathrow, and indirect by the likes of Cathay Pacific and KLM. china-airlines.com cathaypacific.com klm.com

WHERE TO STAY

On the edge of Lijiang Street Night Market in Da'an, design hotel Folio Dan Taipei is set in a former bank workers' dormitory. Doubles from 3,200 NTD (£86), folio-hotels.com

MORE INFO

taiwan.net.tw