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chinatown chow

2015 Narcissus Queen Erica Wong shares some favorite food spots

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Erica Wong, 23, remembers days as a child, waking up just after dawn on the weekends to hit the streets of Chinatown alongside her mother.

"I was always the bag carrier," Wong said, a title she grew to love as she bonded with her mother, Darlene, during their shopping trips.

Years later Wong walks the streets of Chinatown with a new title: 2015 Narcissus Queen.

After four years away from Hawaii dancing professionally with the Ballet Theatre of Maryland and Milwaukee Ballet and studying in

London for a semester, Wong entered the 66th Annual Narcissus Festival Queen Pageant to reconnect with the island, her Chinese culture and her family.

She was crowned queen Jan. 10 at the pageant hosted by the Hawaii Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Wong also won the talent award for her self-choreographed performance combining Chinese fan dancing and ballet.

"I could have easily just done ballet, but I wanted to do something that incorporated my Chinese background," said Wong, who has been dancing since age 5 and is now a Hawaii State Ballet instructor.

Wong's coronation also marked the first time siblings have worn

the Narcissus crown. Her oldest sister, Lisa, now a dentist, was the 2009 queen.

According to Wong, Chinatown has always represented a place where friends and family gather over food to enjoy one another's company.

"Chinatown is a place to bring people together," she said.

Even as a full-time civil engineering student at the University of Hawaii, she continues to frequent Chinatown for lunch with friends, family dinners or to reprise her role as mom's bag carrier.

In celebration of Chinese New Year, we asked the Narcissus Queen to share her favorite Chinatown food stops.



1. ROYAL KITCHEN

The bao here always satisfies Wong's hunger pangs. The kitchen, in the Chinatown Cultural Plaza, serves baked bao, a filled bun also known as manapua, as well as other dim sum and Chinese food. Wong's favorites are the classic char siu bao, black sugar bao and bao with lup cheong, a type of Chinese sausage, because she likes a little bit of salty mixed with a little bit of sweet. Other varieties range from sweet coconut to savory chicken curry at \$1.40 apiece.

Chinatown Cultural Plaza, 100 N. Beretania St., entrance off River Street Mall; parking available from North Kukui Street; 524-4461; royalkitchenhawaii.com



2. YING LEONG LOOK FUNN FACTORY

"Anyone who knows me knows that I can eat noodles every single day for every single meal," Wong said. She loves to peek into this small mom-and-pop shop in the Kekaulike Mall and marvel as the workers churn out soft, moist batches of look funn, wide sheets of rice noodle. The menu offers it rolled up with pork or shrimp, but Wong's family prefers to purchase the noodles plain to take home and cook in a stir-fry or soup. One roll of shrimp or pork look funn is \$2; a plain roll is \$1.40.

Kekaulike Mall, 1028 Kekaulike St., 537-4304



3. JIN DUI

During Chinese New Year, Wong also loves to pick up a bag of jin dui, sweet fried mochi balls made from rice flour and covered in sesame seeds, from vendors at the Chinatown Cultural Plaza. Wong says the sweet pastry is best eaten fresh. "Pretty much when you're able to take the heat, you bite into it and it's crispy on the outside, chewy on the inside. ... Oh, it's so good," she said.



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4. THANH FRENCH COFFEE & BUBBLE TEA

Wong and her mom always make it a point to pick up a fresh bubble drink from this Maunakea Marketplace counter to keep them cool as they shop around Chinatown. "This is how my mom would bribe me to carry her grocery bags," Wong said, holding up a cup of delicious milk tea. Her mom often opts for durian, which Wong says "stinks up the car when we drive back." A 24-ounce cup is \$3 or \$3.50, depending on the flavor.

Maunakea Marketplace, 1120 Maunakea St., 524-3409

5. JAI

Jai, a Buddhist vegetable medley stew, is a popular dish eaten on Chinese New Year. Every year, Wong excitedly awaits the many vendors serving jai that fill the Chinatown Cultural Plaza during the holiday celebrations. The hodgepodge dish contains vegetables, seeds, nuts, tofu, noodles and fungus. Wong said that depending on who makes it, "there can be 10 different types of fungus — it's crazy how many options there are."



Video at staradvertiser.com

Scan this QR code with your smartphone to access a video of Erica Wong touring Chinatown for her favorite eats.

