Christopher St Cavish has created The Shanghai Soup Dumpling Index, a scientific examination of the city’s quintessential snack, *xiaolongbao*. His research has taken him to dozens of restaurants and seen him encounter some fascinating stories along the way – here, he shares some of the best.

Soup dumplings are one of Shanghai’s classic creations. Unlike hairy crabs, *hongshao rou* (red-braised pork) or *sheng jian bao* (pan-fried pork dumplings), the standards for what makes a good soup dumpling are easily measured with a few simple tools.

Zhi duo, pi bao, rou duo, rou xian (a lot of soup, a lot of meat, thin skin, savoury meat) – these are the standards any Shanghaiese will tell you make a proper soup dumpling (though those in Suzhou or Wuxi will certainly disagree). A sensitive scale and a set of callipers are about all you need to measure the first three, and that’s exactly what I’ve been doing since December 2013. I’ve since visited more than 50 places serving the city’s iconic dumpling that either purport to be experts themselves, or are represented that way by others. I have dissembled hundreds of dumplings right from the steamer with a pair of hair-cutting scissors, a scale that measures to the hundredth of a gram and Japanese digital callipers sensitive enough to measure the thickness of a piece of paper. I won’t eat another for a long time.

The perfect *xiaolongbao* is an engineering challenge

The goal has been to eliminate all of the subjective factors that go into a decision about what is the ‘best’ soup dumpling. To some, a dirty hole-in-the-wall connotes authenticity. To others, it just means dirty. Some like strong pork flavour and others put the strong ones right back in the basket. Price is also held up as a common measure of goodness – ‘yes, they are very good, but they’re 10 times the price!’ For all the soup dumplings I’ve eaten, I’ve yet to find one that tastes like money. No, the goal has been an objective reckoning of the engineering challenge that is the *xiaolongbao*, Shanghai’s home-grown soup dumpling. It is a delicate balance. If the wrapper is too thin, the filling will break the dumpling. If the filling is limited, there won’t be enough soup. Even if this balance is achieved, the steamer is another hurdle. Thin wrappers break easily after steaming, a major foul at the dumpling party. A delicate wrapper won’t hold indefinitely in a steamer, waiting for a customer. It will absorb water and become mushy, compromised. So, the perfect dumpling must not just meet the engineering standards but also be steamed fresh, ideally to order, to arrive at the table just so: looking exhausted, collapsed, wrapper folded over to one side, hot soup pressing...
at the insides, threatening to throw all the work into chaos. And that’s to say nothing of the thickness of the top, where the folds mean there are, the least fattiness and clarity in the soup, if there is sugar or spring onion or ginger in the filling...

The result is the Shanghai Soup Dumpling Index, a scientific survey, a printed guide and a map to 20 of the city’s best places for xiaolongbao. Notes about the methodology, ‘what happened to flavour?’ and how to get a copy are below. In the course of this incredibly serious study, the stories of several places stood out. And while I have tried as hard as I can to suppress the human element, the personality, and anything else that might compromise my rigid scrutiny, my absolute objectivity and my scientific approach are just too human. Fortunately, they also happen to serve some of the best soup dumplings in a city famous for them.

The science bit
How The Shanghai Soup Dumpling Index works
The Shanghai Soup Dumpling Index is a wholly scientific solution to one of the most pressing problems in the world. If someone tells you a xiaolongbao at their favourite place is ‘good’, what exactly does that mean? Where does ‘good’ fall on their rating scale? What’s ‘good’ about it?

The Shanghai Soup Dumpling Index, a year in the making, addresses this vagueness with science. Starting in December 2013, I have visited 53 xiaolongbao shops and a few restaurants known for their dumplings. In the process, I have weighed a total of 7,244.76 grams of dough, 2,456.99 grams of pork, and 2,313.34 grams of wrapper. I have devised a simple formula that calculates the engineering of a soup dumpling by dividing the thickness of the skin by the total weight of the filling, and then categorised these restaurants in three classes, based on their results.

To my everlasting regret, ‘flavour’ has had to be judged subjectively, given a lack of access to analysis by potentiometric solid-state electrodes or near-infrared spectroscopy. The result is a 49cm x 59.4cm publication that lists the full results of the survey, and indexes all 53 restaurants accordingly. The front gives the most essential information in infographic form; the back gives detailed measurements from all restaurants. In addition, there is a discussion about regional variations, a map with precise coordinates for all Class A and Class B locations, a detailed methodology, and a greater volume of data.

The full Shanghai Soup Dumpling Index, in both printed and electronic form, will be available via stcavish.com.

Take the owner of upscale Japanese restaurants and a chef who cooked for Deng Xiaoping during his sojourns, and you’ll get… a fast food restaurant catering to Zhongshan Park's office workers.

That is Ding Xin Di – the Shanghainese pronunciation of dianxin dian, or dim sum shop – a testing bed for a planned city-wide chain. Owner Yu Junyang and chef Gui Jianmin go way back, to when they both worked at the State Guest House in Hongqiao during the 1980s. Yu was a server while Gui was a dim sum chef. After many years in Japan, Yu returned to his native Shanghai, sampled the top 20 xiaolongbao places – as listed on Dianping.com – and decided he could make them better. Enter Gui, the standards of the State Guest House, his steamed-to-order dumplings, and tales about cooking for Deng.

Yu ‘We took the flavours from the ’50s and ’60s in Shanghai but added some creativity. When I was a kid, we used to go to Nanxiang [in northern Shanghai] to eat xiaolongbao. Looking back, they weren’t really that good – the skin was thick, the flour was yellow-ish, not high quality, the pork wasn’t that good either. China was poor then. Now, after trying so many, we know how they can be better. I’ve used my experience from Japan to really standardise things – our standard is the same as The State Guest House. For example, every dumpling skin has to be made using seven grams of dough. No more.’

Gui ‘I was at The State Guest House from 1984 to 1992 and I learned from Jiang Haiping, the head chef there. At the time, Deng Xiaoping would come to Shanghai once a year, around the New Year, and stay for a month or two at The State Guest House. We cooked dim sum for him every day. The xiaolong for Deng were definitely a bit different. All of the ingredients were supplied especially for government leaders. The pork was only used for him. The soup in the xiaolong was different too – we’d use an old hen to make the stock. But you can’t do that in other places. Too expensive.’

Gui ‘I didn’t choose to become a dim sum chef. When I graduated from school, The State Guest House picked me. They assigned me to the kitchen. You know how they assign you to different jobs in the kitchen? By height. The tall ones, they’d be sent to work the woks, The average ones, cutting. The short ones, like me – dim sum. Short people have small hands, good for doing dim sum.’

Yu ‘Our signature is the xiaolong. The best xiaolong need to have thin skin, a lot of soup, and be fragrant but not fatty or greasy. The top is very, very important. If it is too thick, that’s all you taste – dough. The biggest difference is that our xiaolong are freshly made. Also, we don’t use MSG in our soup for the wontons – we use katsuo, the Japanese dried fish. Our fresh pork mooncakes are better than Lao Da Fang – we make 300 or 400 and they sell out in three hours – but that’s only for this season. I’m going to do the classic wontons with sesame sauce soon. I’ve already got people wanting us to open stores in other places, but we are still tinkering. Once we get everything exactly how we want it, we’ll start expanding – probably early next year.’

Ding Xin Di Basement, Zhaofeng Plaza, 999 Changning Lu, near Huichuan Lu, Changning district (no tel). Open 10am-10pm daily.

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It’s not easy to turn a 6RMB basket of soup dumplings into a white Porsche, but that’s exactly what husband and wife duo Guo Jinlong and Yang Huiying have done. Their flagship store, a fairly classy-looking place for a dumpling shop, draws customers from all over the city to their leafy residential street in Putuo district every weekend. Or rather, their soup dumplings do.

Yang and Guo insist on cooking just two things at their shop, xiaolongbao and wontons. ‘Any more and you can’t focus!’ That’s no good,’ Guo says. Like most of the other shops in this article, they insist on the quality of their ingredients (a special cut of pork from a US joint venture farm, flour from the Shanghai Flour Factory) but pride themselves on keeping prices down. When you’re selling dumplings priced at about 1RMB each, getting to a position where you own a Porsche is no easy feat.

‘We started in 1994. I was working at a food department store and saw how well the xiaolongbao were selling in Caojiadu, so I got a space and opened the shop. I hadn’t made xiaolong before, and didn’t know how to make them very well. For the first eight months, we didn’t make one cent. We lost between 10,000-20,000RMB each month, and back then, that was a lot of money!’

‘Through some connections, I was able to hire three cooks from Cheng Huang Miao. They were experts at making the skin, but they didn’t know anything about the filling. So I took a job at another xiaolong store to learn the process. Of course, they don’t tell you the recipes for the fillings.’

‘After that, I just made batch after batch of fillings, a little more salt here, a little more huangjiu, Chinese yellow wine, there. I would make one batch, taste them, spit them out, drink some water, and try again. That’s how I found the right proportions.’

‘When we finally got it right, so many people were queuing for our xiaolong that we couldn’t make them fast enough. This all happened in 1994. When we started, a steamer of xiaolong was nine mao, and it was a luxury, something your mum might treat you to for a special breakfast.’

‘In 1994, the best xiaolongbao were at Guyi Garden. But the skin was thick – really thick. Too thick. They haven’t really changed since then, but they are a state-owned company, you know? They can’t really progress. We’ve made progress: a thinner skin, better soup. We only use the clearest portion of the soup for our dumplings. After you cook and cool the soup, and it firms up, there’s fat on top and sediment on the bottom. We take off the fat and leave the sediment behind, so our soup is particularly clear and porky.

‘Our xiaolong are classic. Nowadays, people are making all kinds of xiaolong like spicy ones, or adding mushrooms to the filling. We’re protecting the classics and tradition to give Shanghainese the flavours of their childhood.’

Shang Wei Guan 520 Xingshan Lu, near Guixiang Lu, Putuo district (no tel). Open 5:30am-8pm daily.
Gao Le didn’t pick xiaolong. The government picked her. Since being assigned to this dim sum shop in 1981, she has risen from dumpling maker to manageress, and picked up no small amount of pride in the process. The first time I visited, the elderly couple across the shared table (they are all shared) looked up and across their plates. ‘We grew up in this neighbourhood. It used to be our breakfast place. We moved away 15 years ago, but every weekend we take a 20RMB taxi back here to eat.’

Months later, the no-nonsense Gao was dressed in jean shorts and a pair of Vans sneakers, casually holding court as waitresses delivered money from the day’s lunch and open-shirted chefs popped in to tell her that they were going for a smoke. She then chomped into a sweet potato and talked business.

‘This store has been here since 1953. It started as a dim sum and breakfast place for the residents of You Dian New Village, around the corner. Those houses used to be for employees of the Post Office and the Electric Company. A lot of people from that neighbourhood grew up with us, and they are still customers. They go to other places, but the flavour isn’t right to them, so they always come back here.

‘We’re part of the Hongkou District Food and Beverage Management Company. There used to be hundreds of stores like ours, all with the same parent company, in Hongkou. Each of them had a different name: Fu De, Wan Shou Zhai... all subsidiaries of the same company. But in the last five or 10 years, most of them have gone out of business. Property prices are too high! They can’t survive. I don’t know why we’re still here. Luck, I guess. Will we be around in 10 years? Hard to say.

‘We’re a laozihao [time-tested brand], still state-owned, sort of. About 10 years ago, they collectivised the company. You could invest your salary to get shares, and that’s what I did, but we’re not a private company. Our specialty is old, classic Shanghai dim sum: guotie, shengjian, xiaolongbao. Also noodles. Cold noodles, noodle soup with duck blood, glass noodles with beef... our baozi – meat baozi and vegetable baozi – and our shaomai are also famous.

‘Hey, you’re from America? Where? Let’s go there and do business. I’ll invest half, you invest half. 50/50. How much do you make as a writer? [Cringe] We can make more doing this... Go to San Francisco, open a small shop. I have cooked here for more than 20 years – I can make everything. We can start with a small shop. If it works, then we open another, and another, and another. Can you manage the stores? If it doesn’t work, fine, we can do it for just a year, and just forget about it. What do you think?

‘Why are our xiaolongbao good? The food quality – flour from the Shanghai Flour Factory and other factors. We’re also clean, hygienic, and delicious. Plus we’re Shanghainese. Outsiders can’t do this. They would just take all the training and go somewhere else to do it for cheaper.

‘We have one lady, she is the second generation to work here. Her mother retired and gave her the position. The daughter was 17 when she started. Now, she’s 59. ‘Din Tai Fung is too expensive. They look better than ours but the taste is the same. They have a nice environment, good decoration, serious about their standards, but they’re nothing special. We’re more authentic. Our flavour is stronger, the Shanghainese flavour. ‘Hey, I’m going to Australia to see if there’s any business opportunities there. If you know of a good place in Shanghai to set up shop, though, we can do business together here. What do you think?’

You Yi Cun
591 Siping Lu, near Xingang Lu,
Hongkou district (6508 4002). Open 5am-9pm daily.
Like You Yi Cun, this store in Hongkou district started as part of a state-owned food company before being spun off about 10 years ago. Since then, it has become a destination for both young Shanghaiese and the older neighbourhood locals willing to brave the notorious crowds for its smaller-than-average soup dumplings.

Waitresses dodge and weave through the packed shop with hot bowls of wonton soup or steaming baskets of dumplings, as the scrum slowly advances to a window at the back of the store, waiting their turn. Hu Meifen has been making xiaolong here since the very beginning.

‘Compared to other places, the xiaolong here are smaller. Most shops also have six in an order but we do eight. Why? It’s our style. The bigger ones don’t taste as good. The small ones are better.

‘We’ve been here since 1947 but only became private about 10 years ago. Before that, it was a state-owned shop, under the Hongkou Food and Beverage Management Company. I came here in my 20s, about 30 years ago. When I came, they just did dabing and youxia. About 20 years ago, we added xiaolongbao and it became popular for them.

Word of mouth. We haven’t changed them since. The flavour is the same.

‘You could say that our specialty is the type with pure pork flavour. We don’t put anything else – no spring onion, no ginger, no huangjiu, nothing. It’s just the dumpling skin and pork. And a little sugar. That’s the Shanghaiese flavour – salty and a little sweet. And our broth isn’t fatty. After we make the stock, we take off all the fat, and just use the pork stock.

‘What were the xiaolong like when I was a little girl? We didn’t have them! We were such a poor family back then, we didn’t have xiaolong. At home, we ate boiled rice and that was it. I didn’t have xiaolong until I started working here. Now, I won’t eat them at other places. They’re definitely not as good as ours. I think ours are perfect.

‘Din Tai Fung? What is Din Tai Fung? I’ve never heard of them.

‘Nanxiang and Guyi Garden are so famous for xiaolong but those places are meant for tourists. I mean, you go there, you have to eat the xiaolong. Our customers aren’t tourists – they’re old customers. Trust me, if we made xiaolong like at Nanxiang and Guyi Garden, we wouldn’t have any customers. I haven’t been there in years.’

Wan Shou Zhai 123 Shanying Lu, near Jixiang Lu, Hongkou district (no tel). Open 5am-10pm daily. Hongkou Football Stadium. 虹口区山阴路123号，近吉祥路
Zhou Qiang is the second generation at Jia Jia Tangbao, which grew from a six-square-metre-shop in the 1980s to a requisite stop on many a modern tourist itinerary. Though he came into the business late, he now says he can tell whether a man or a woman made a particular soup dumpling by sight (women are more nimble and wrap better), and that his training is simple: a three-minute talk.

‘In three minutes, I can explain how to make my xiaolong. But it’ll take someone six months to understand what I’m saying.’

The unfailingly affable Zhou is still behind the counter at the flagship store on many weekends. On a fall weekday, over dumplings at Ling Long Fang, another soup dumpling chain also in the family, he tells of the improbable story about how China’s class revolution led to one of the city’s best-known dumplings.

‘How long has it been now? Ah… 20-something years. 27? 28? My father’s cousin started this business in the 1980s. The cousin and his wife both came from well-known families. The wife’s mother is related to Li Zongren, the last vice president of the Kuomintang Party before Liberation, and the husband’s father was a rice tycoon in Nanhui [now part of Pudong]. So when the Cultural Revolution came along, they weren’t part of the right class. And then after the Cultural Revolution, they couldn’t get jobs.

‘But they both grew up in wealthy families, and they each had cooks at home when they were young. They’d go around to the homes of their friends, who also had cooks, so they learned what good food was early on.

‘They still remembered the food from that time, so in the 1980s, when they couldn’t find work, they decided to open a Shanghainese dim sum place, making steamed buns and other snacks. They had six square metres on Henan Lu, and they weren’t successful at first. Eventually, their xiaolong got better and better, and they stopped making the other dim sum. They had six square metres on Henan Lu, and they weren’t successful at first. Eventually, their xiaolong got better and better, and they stopped making the other dim sum. They learned what good food was early on.

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‘That was the first store. It’s gone now. The second one was the store on Huanghe Lu. The original family didn’t have a son, so I came in about 10 years ago.

‘I try our competitors’ xiaolongs almost every week. If someone says they are good, I’ll go to their stores, buy their uncooked xiaolong, and then bring them back here to steam, right next to my own. That’s the only way to really tell. I’ve tried about all of them.

‘The ideal soup dumpling… it must have thin skin, a lot of soup, it shouldn’t break, the top should be small, and when you lift it up with your chopsticks, the bottom of the xiaolong should sag. The soup shouldn’t be oily – it’s supposed to be fragrant.

‘The crab dumplings really represent Jia Jia. If we’re talking about just the filling of the pork ones, there are some places that are similar to ours. But for crab? There’s not one place that can match us. We stir-fry our crab meat in soybean oil, not pork lard, which obscures the taste of the crab. Some other places, they cook crabs in pork lard at low heat until the crab flavour the lard, and then they just use the lard to flavour the filling.

‘We serve the crab dumplings all year. But they are best eaten now [between mid-Autumn festival and December], when the crabs have more roe. In March and April, the crabs are mating, and we have to add more seasoning to the crab meat to compensate.

Jia Jia Tangbao 90 Huanghe Lu, near Fengyang Lu, Huangpu district (6327 6878). Open 6.30am-6.30pm daily. 9 People’s Square, 黄浦区黄河路90号, 近凤阳路

There’s not one place that can match our crab dumplings
**HOW TO**  
(MAKE XLB)

1. **BOIL** pig skin and water until it makes a gelatin.
2. **COOL** that mixture so it firms up.
3. **MIX** that with the ground pork.
4. **MAKE** dough and let it rest.
5. **CUT** dough off into small bits.
6. **ROLL** out dough.
7. **PUT** filling in dough.
8. **MAKE** the folds on top to close the dumpling. (Fast magic)
9. **STEAM.**
10. **SERVE.**

*APPENDIX*  
(the eating process)

- **BITE** a little hole on top to let the steam out.
- **SUCK** the soup.
- **ENJOY** the rest.

Spicy stuff (can add)

Vinegar (to dip into)