

EATING TAIWANESE

台味飄撇：食好料的所在

Drawing on extensive field research and linguistic investigation, these essays are much more than an homage to the local ingredients, flavors, and foods that make Taiwanese cuisine “great”. They examine how each iconic dish is prepared and explore their ineluctable place in Taiwan’s culture, history, and palate.

With two decades of culinary exploration under his belt, author Tēnn Sūn-Tshong weaves linguistic whimsy, in-depth observations, and honest passion into his latest exploration of traditional Taiwan snacks, food and beverage watering holes, interpersonal relationships, and cultural pillars. By transforming the sights and smells of favorite foodie destinations into compelling text, these essays dissect the flavors of spotlight dishes and decipher the unique character and lasting appeal of each.

The book is organized into four easily digestible sections. The first offers a master-class-level dive into the culinary highlights of Chiayi, with special emphasis on the city’s widely lauded turkey rice. The second takes readers to some of the author’s favorite restaurants and food vendors in four cities – Kaohsiung and Tainan in the south, and Taipei and Keelung in the north. The third delivers in-depth breakdowns of classic Taiwanese eats, including scallion pancakes, cold noodles, and stuffed, leaf-wrapped sticky-rice dumplings. In the fourth and final section, the author offers answers to questions he and countless foodies have about Taiwanese culinary quirks. Why, for example, are Taiwanese so particular about their food having just the right balance of firmness (chew) and crispness (bite)? This gastronomic idiosyncrasy even has its own descriptor, “Q”, and featured write-up in the *New York Times*.

Food culture has always been an important facet of Taiwan literature. For Tēnn, Taiwan’s culinary landscape is the product of both irreverent



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inventiveness and warm generosity. While deceptively simple in appearance, iconic dishes stand or fall on the perfect execution of every meticulous step in their recipes. Deftly mixing personal passion, literary aplomb, and a deep knowledge of culinary history and culture, the author has created in *Eating Taiwanese* a page-turning dive into why Taiwanese cuisine is so uniquely and deliciously special.

Tēnn Sūn-Tshong 鄭順聰

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EATING TAIWANESE

By Tēnn Sūn-Tshong

Translated by Beverly Liu

Life's Little Pleasures: Turkey Rice

I went to a lunch buffet at a luxury hotel in Yilan. The spread leaned Japanese, with sushi, sashimi, oden, and assorted pickled dishes lining the counters. As I made my way through the usual Japanese-style offerings, I stumbled upon a “DIY turkey rice station” at which each ingredient for this iconic southwest Taiwanese dish was presented separately, allowing diners to assemble for themselves their “ideal” turkey rice dish.

I normally avoid eating turkey rice outside of Chiayi (the city famed for this iconic dish). But this fun DIY station tempted me to assemble my own bowl. I found myself mimicking the motions of the turkey rice shop owners I’d seen – scooping steaming white rice into my bowl, pressing it gently with a spoon, layering slices of turkey on top, and arranging a few slices of pickled yellow daikon along the side. I even reluctantly sprinkled in a few fried shallots despite being not overly fond of them. The final touch was a drizzle of lightly golden rendered chicken fat – the pure essence and heart of this dish.

Eagerly, I brought my bowl back to the table, shoving the plates and cups aside so I could finally taste my creation. Bite after bite, I felt rather proud of my handiwork. It looked the part, and wasn’t half bad. But then came that crucial last bite. There it was again – that unmistakable, dreaded whiff of gamey chicken. Sigh...

This hotel’s minimalist dining area, reminiscent of a sterile chamber, was sleek, refined, and free of extraneous elements. Given the hotel’s highly skilled chefs and the meticulously selected ingredients they had to work with, one would expect nothing less than excellence. And yet, the turkey rice still fell flat.

As my eyes went wide examining the exquisitely designed white porcelain, my mind drifted back to the bowl of turkey rice I had just assembled. The top-grade rice flown in from Japan was off in texture. The skin-on chicken was firm but cut into cubes, which had broken the meat’s natural grain. And that final drizzle of rendered chicken fat – if you think using high-quality chicken is the single key to perfection, you’re underestimating the old masters of Chiayi turkey rice.

Without *mê-kak*, you lose life’s little pleasures. How should I put it? Let’s start with a word-by-word explanation:

Mê-kak, a Taiwanese Hokkien language (Taigi) term written as 銳角 refers to the tiny but crucial detail that makes all the difference.

The term little pleasures (小確幸) comes from the Japanese word しょうかつこう (shōkakkō), which describes life's small joys – little moments of happiness you can count on.

Once everything is spelled out, it all clicks. Those tiny, seemingly insignificant steps? They're actually the ones that matter most, that shape the quality of your day in every step, every pause, every bite. Miss just one little move, skip one tiny ingredient and, suddenly, it all feels a bit off, like something essential is missing.

The little pleasures of turkey rice lie in its subtle mê-kak. At that Yilan hotel I mentioned earlier, the chefs, wanting to showcase the superb quality of their ingredients, cut the turkey meat into perfectly uniform cubes. In doing so, however, they disrupted the natural grain of the meat and its fatty structure – the very source of its rich, savory aroma. The so-called “turkey rice” concoctions sold in stores typically use shredded chicken instead of actual turkey. While the soft shreds are easy to mix with rice, they don't convey the full-bodied flavor into the bowl the way real turkey does. In contrast to actual turkey rice, these everyday versions come across as sloppy and fall short of the full flavor.

Come to think of it, why do turkey rice stalls in Chiayi always set a whole bird on display out front? Beyond the promise that the stall serves real turkey meat, it's part of the overall culinary performance. For each order, the owner leans over at the perfect angle to slice off just the right cut of meat with practiced precision.

Taigi has several words describing the act of carving meat. One, 拆 (thiah), literally means “dismantle” and describes the tearing off of large chunks of meat. Another, 剗 (liô), is defined in the Ministry of Education's Taiwanese Dictionary as “to use a knife to shave off thin layers or to slice into pieces.” For example, when preparing sesame oil kidney stir-fry, the surface of the pork kidneys is first scored in a decorative pattern using a carving technique known as 剗花 (liô-hue). This scoring helps the kidneys cook quickly, absorb flavor more easily, and open up beautifully like a flower in bloom.

When performing the liô-liô (剗剗)¹ carving technique (in Mandarin Chinese or Taigi writing system, repeating a character indicates a continuous or repeated action), both skill and experience are needed to slice meat in a manner that respects the natural curves and grain of the turkey carcass. It's important to keep in mind that the meat covering a turkey is full of curves and contours, and that each part varies in thickness, firmness, and fat content.

Properly executed, liô-liô carving brings out the full aroma of a cut of meat all at once.

Proper use of the liô-liô technique preserves the complete aroma of each piece of meat. Mastering this method requires experience and time. A simple bowl of turkey rice showcases this delicate craftsmanship, offering quiet, steady “little pleasures” in everyday life and the chance to savor each and every bite.

Without the subtle, little touches of mê-kak, life's little pleasures cannot endure; at best, life is just about getting by, not truly flourishing.

¹ Translator's note: In Taigi, 剗剗 (liô-liô) refers to the carving action, but it also plays on the word 攏攏 (lóng-lóng), implying “all together” or “completely”.

Even amid political turmoil, social clamor, and economic uncertainty, good days can still be found in a small eatery, where a humble bowl of rice offers brief, yet certain moments of joy and contentment. And, when the meal is done, the bowl gleams with an oily sheen and the tongue sweeps up any and all remaining grains, savoring them fully.

Finding calm in the midst of chaos, and moments of happiness in a simple meal.

For Taiwanese people, these little pleasures are crafted by skilled cooks' hands and woven into the fabric of daily life, filled with warmth and human connection. There's no sense of distance, no empty words – only a steady, genuine way of living, marked with *mê-kak*, the subtle sharpness that gives life its edge.

The True Meaning of Turkey Rice

I returned to my alma mater, National Chiayi Senior High School, to give a talk. Strolling around, I could sense the pulse of youthful energy. Glimpsing the courtyard's rain tree, still lush and full, I was transported back to the age of seventeen, when my mind was clouded by melancholy and my body weighed down by tension. Ultimately, I channeled all of this adolescent angst into fiery sprints across our red clay track.

The school is located in Suann-á-tíng (山仔頂), which, as the name suggests, sits on a hillside on the eastern side of Chiayi City, facing Alishan². From there, one can gaze westward for a sweeping view of the city. After my speech, I walked out through the school gates into the gentle warmth of the winter sun. I slowly strolled downhill, heading down a memory lane awash in youth-filled experiences.

In recent years, Chiayi City has seen a flourishing of cultural and creative ventures. Along the alleys where old wooden houses mingle with concrete buildings, cafés have been opening one after another, and I had the sense that somewhere along one of these alleys, a cup of coffee awaited me. Since moving to Taipei for my career and marriage, I've accumulated more time in northern Taiwan than in my hometown of Chiayi. Life in the big city gradually reshaped my habits: coffee quietly replaced the high-mountain tea I drank in my youth and soon became my indispensable afternoon pick-me-up.

To my surprise, in Chiayi City's East District, the hip cafés all closed by four in the afternoon, and the older café establishments serving simple set meals didn't interest me. As the winter evening wind grew sharper, I still couldn't find a cup of coffee that suited me.

Walking along the wide Minzu Road, I passed Democracy (Minzu) Turkey Rice on my left before turning right onto Heping Road, heading toward the East Gate roundabout.

It was then that a massive figure suddenly loomed in my path. I gasped in surprise. It was Ling Ming-Liang, the fourth-generation leader of Chang Yi Ge Hand Puppet Theater. Right behind

² Translator's note: Alishan, a mountain township in Chiayi County, is home to the world-famous Alishan National Forest Recreational Area, known for its misty seas of clouds, breathtaking sunrises, and ancient cypress forests.

him, Huang Chin-Chang, the troupe's third-generation leader, emerged from the back of a van parked at the roadside.

This chance encounter on the street was just like the thrilling opening scene of a Taiwanese puppet show. In a twist of perfect timing, I just happened to be standing right at the doorway of Chang Yi Ge Hand Puppet Theater's homebase (khí-ke-tshù in Taigi, the very place where the troupe was founded and that now served as the private residence of its leaders) – truly a perfect twist of fate straight out of a martial arts novel.

Unable to refuse the warm invitation, I accepted their offer to go inside for a chat over tea. Although the second-generation troupe leader had long since passed, the living room wall was still decorated with his plaques, dignified portrait, and awards celebrating the glory of his achievements. I happened to have visited on a Wednesday, the day all the children and grandchildren return home to visit Grandma (wife of the second-generation troupe leader). Rooted in budaixi³ traditions, the family was close-knit and affectionate. Everyone gathered around and, attentive and caring, fussed over her with gentle concern.

Founded in 1945, Chang Yi Ge Hand Puppet Theater stands as one of Chiayi City's most distinguished performance troupes. From mountain peaks to coastal villages and urban neighborhoods to temple courtyards, the troupe has brought traditional folk theater to countless stages. They have also helped shape the face of modern budaixi by reimagining local history and legends for contemporary audiences. In this uniquely reinvented art form, the past and present intertwine, emotions run deep, and every performance – whether literary or martial – enralls audiences. The dialogue is delivered in authentic Chiayi-accented Taiwanese and in a natural, conversational style in place of the formal, literary language employed in traditional texts. Northern-style beiguan percussion⁴ provides the meticulously arranged, highly skilled backstage ensemble. With its masterful execution and complete instrumentation, Chang Yi Ge embodies a living tradition, carrying Taiwanese traditional puppetry boldly into the future.

Not wanting to bombard them with earnest questions about the troupe's history, I shifted the subject to Democracy Turkey Rice. The troupe's third-generation leader, Huang, a regular there, told me the menu is quite extensive and the place is always buzzing. The fried shallots in the turkey rice are prepared fresh daily and fried in hot oil until golden and crispy – a simple touch that steals the show.

In Taiwan, there are two distinct approaches to eating rice dishes like turkey rice. Huang is in the bold, unapologetic, “mix-first” camp. He combines the meat, rice, and sauce thoroughly, letting the melding of flavors and aromas awaken all of his senses, before diving in with bold, exuberant bites. I, on the other hand, belong to the slow-savoring, “no-mix” camp – the kind that

³ Translator's note: Budaixi (布袋戲) is a traditional Taiwanese glove puppet theater, known for its elaborate performances and dramatic storytelling.

⁴ Translator's note: Beiguan percussion (北管鑼鼓) is a traditional Taiwanese ensemble that is commonly used in folk and puppet theater performances. It features drums, gongs, and other instruments and accompanies the unfolding action and dialogue.

takes one piece of turkey, one bite of rice, then a sip of soup, savoring each mouthful slowly to uncover the subtle layers of flavor in this dish.

Usually so composed, Huang allowed himself a rare flicker of pride. Gesturing around the living room, he told us we were right beside Chiayi City's East Market – ground zero for turkey rice, where shops cluster thick and the competition keeps everyone at their best. Here, he said, is the true front line of the city's most beloved dish.

Growing up in Chiayi, turkey rice was simply part of daily life and, as such, something I hardly gave much thought to. It wasn't until I moved away for work and found that people around me were curious about this iconic Chiayi dish that I began to ponder the true essence of turkey rice and wonder what made it so unique?

Huang recalled the days when the well-known Liu Village Chief Turkey Rice was still just a street stall near the Chiayi City East Public Retail Market. The old owner's culinary skills were remarkable. You could sit down anytime, order a simple bowl of rice with soup, and get a taste of true local flavor. Just around the corner from Chang Yi Ge Hand Puppet Theater's homebase is another favorite, Dongmen Turkey Rice. Here, Huang shared a tip from his fellow Chiayi native, A-Jie: "Sliced turkey with skin, extra garlic, and a sunny-side-up with runny yolk." Another notable spot is San Huo Turkey Rice, hidden deep in an alley. In the old days, their stall opened at one in the morning, serving as the late-night canteen for the city's nightlife crowd.

Chiayi turkey rice is the humble, comforting flavor that settles the weary, wandering worker – a familiar dish available at no set time or place. Just thinking of famous turkey rice joints like A-Ming, A-Lou, A-Hong, Gu's, Wan Za Rong, Dai Shi, A-Xi, and Park makes my mouth water – I'm tempted to dash out the door and dig into a bowl immediately.

Huang's eldest sister, sitting at the desk, called out, "That's it – 'phang-thâu (芳頭, aroma)!"

That's the phrase! That's the phrase! I thought to myself. For years, I had wandered in search of the elusive word that could capture the magic of turkey rice. I had tasted it everywhere, pondered it endlessly and, just when I was at a loss – after failing to find a coffee spot that day, I unexpectedly stumbled upon "phang-thâu."

This can only be expressed precisely in Taigi. The word "phang (芳)" refers to aroma – from the house-specialty sauces, hand-shredded turkey, plump grains of rice, or even the lingering richness of the turkey fat left in the bowl after finishing a meal. "thâu (頭)" is a suffix that conveys the culmination of all these aromas.

The ultimate essence of a bowl of turkey rice lies in its phang-thâu – the mê-kak of turkey rice.

My Mental Turkey Rice Tasting Session

Each time I eat a bowl of turkey rice, it's like holding a private tasting session in my mind. I savor its aromas and the experience in every detail.

The private tasting session is divided into eight main categories: the meat, the rice, the sauce, the pickled vegetables, the soup, the side dishes, the tasting order, and the eatery itself. As the meal progresses, I analyze each element with meticulous care. The following outlines my critique session's structure:

The Meat

Turkey must be used for the meat component. Farm-raised or free-range chicken, or anything else for that matter, all fall flat, as these other types of proteins shred too finely, causing the meat's rich, savory aroma to dissipate. A drizzle of soy sauce on top is overkill, turning the dish into shredded chicken rice, not turkey rice.

Authentic Chiayi turkey rice must be made with a whole, freshly slaughtered turkey. The bird should be plump and generously sized. After plucking and cleaning, the entire turkey is simmered in a large pot of hot water over high heat. This cooking method, called "hip (翕)" in Taigi, locks in the juices and preserves the meat's tender texture.

When it comes to handling turkey meat, the process involves more than just chopping or slicing. It may be roughly divided into three techniques. Thiah (拆), the most commonly employed, involves tearing the meat off the bones and separating it into sections. Liô (剝) is a more precise technique, involving slicing with a knife. Finally, there's phih (a phonetic word only, not definitively associated with a Chinese character). Phih is a precision, almost surgical, technique used to remove the small bits of meat clinging stubbornly to the bones.

Depending on the size of the meat, turkey rice may be categorized as either shredded or sliced. Shredded turkey rice features meat roughly pulled into thin strips or small chunks, and is the style most widely associated with Chiayi turkey rice. Sliced turkey rice features larger slices of meat, and eateries usually indicate this specifically on their menus and signage.

The meat is divided into white meat and dark meat. White meat comes from the breast and wings and has a firm, fibrous texture. Dark meat comes from turkey thighs – the most active parts of the bird – and is tender and juicy.

If you happen to get a piece of meat with a small piece of glistening turkey skin, consider it a beautiful bonus!

Sliced turkey rice is best prepared using thigh meat, which yields pieces that are less uniform than breast meat slices. Meticulous eateries will arrange the slices neatly over the rice to preserve the dish's visual appeal. Connoisseurs specifically seek out sliced turkey rice.

The Rice

The rice used in turkey rice is typically prepared in large electric rice cookers that hold twenty to thirty servings each and then covered and allowed to rest before serving. As texture and moisture can differ between bottom and top layers, shops often use a large mesh wrap to flip the rice to even out the quality. Every so often, you'll catch a glimpse of the staff carrying out a pot of freshly cooked rice and pouring it into the rice buckets at the serving counter – a scene that perfectly captures the bustling charm of Taiwanese eateries.

The rice must be cooked khiū-sim (餛心 in Taigi; a texture similar to pasta cooked al dente), which gives each grain a springy resilience. Moreover, the longer you chew, the more flavors emerge, with a lingering, pleasant starchiness. The grains should be plump and well-defined. The texture must be just right - neither too wet nor too dry, otherwise the rice will absorb all the turkey drippings. Ideally, each grain is thoroughly coated in the drippings, remaining moist, glossy, and translucent.

The Sauce

The sauces at turkey rice eateries generally fall into three categories: white-oil, black-sauce, and shallot-oil, though proprietors often combine them in various ways. White oil is a blend of rendered chicken fat and pork lard. Black sauce refers to each eatery's proprietary soy-sauce mix, with ingredient suppliers and blending ratios differing from one place to another.

The shallot-oil style describes turkey rice topped with crispy fried shallots, with the best flavor coming from shallots freshly fried that same day. Preparing the shallots is a labor-intensive and time-consuming process. They must be thoroughly peeled and prepped by hand, then finely chopped and fried in oil. They have to be lifted from the hot oil just before they're fully cooked, allowing the residual heat to finish them to perfection. If they're taken out too late, their flavor turns bitter. Timing is everything – even a single second off can ruin the whole batch.

The three styles of sauce each have their devoted followers. But whichever the style, a sauce that is too bland or greasy won't do. Most importantly, it should never overpower the rice or the turkey but rather play a supporting role, guiding the bowl toward that lingering aromatic finish known as phang-thâu.

In Chiayi, there are as many secret sauce recipes as there are turkey rice shops. The swirl of sauce over hot rice, capped with a splash of shallot oil, is the quintessential sensory image of the city.

Whereas braised pork rice (Lu Rou Fan), another iconic Taiwanese dish, draws its essence from a pot of braising liquid bubbling and boiling, the soul of Chiayi's turkey rice rests in a mysterious sauce that is kept hot but never allowed to boil.

The Pickled Vegetables

A bowl of turkey rice usually comes with a side of pickled vegetables, typically salted greens or pickled cucumbers. Some eateries also serve slices of bright yellow pickled daikon called "takuan-zuke" (pronounced "thák-khú-áng" in Taigi), said to have been invented 300 years ago by the Japanese monk Takuan. Introduced to the Chiayi region during the Japanese colonial period and sold at pickle stalls, it gradually became a common staple in Taiwanese households.

The pickled daikon served with turkey rice is a crisp, crunchy sidekick with a refreshing bite that cuts through the richness. It adds layers of flavor and texture while helping pace the meal. For me, a bowl of turkey rice isn't truly authentic without two or three of these bright yellow slices.

The Soup

The three soups typically served with turkey rice are meatball soup, miso soup, and seaweed soup. Unlike most Taiwanese soups that use pork bones as a base, these are typically made with chicken broth, giving them a gentle, savory richness that has kept Chiayi locals coming back for a lifetime.

Many turkey rice shops boast an almost overwhelming variety of soups. Sometimes their soup menu is even more extensive than their side dish offering. Pork offal-based options include giblet soup, large and small intestine soup, pork diaphragm soup, liver soup, heart soup, and pig's blood soup. From the sea, you'll find oyster soup, shrimp soup, and milkfish belly soup. Vegetables bring lighter choices like dried bamboo shoot, daylily, napa cabbage, winter melon, and cucumber soups. There are also hearty bowls such as mushroom thick soup, pork rib meat soup, bamboo shoot with ribs, bitter melon with ribs, pickled cabbage with pork tripe, and sesame oil chicken heart soup. For something more unusual, there's turkey giblet soup and even chicken testicle soup.

Where there's turkey, there are turkey feet. In Chiayi, this means turkey feet soup! With only two feet per bird, both the turkey feet soup and the braised turkey feet are limited treats. So come hungry, be bold, and taste the real thing.

The Side Dishes

Popular turkey rice shops generally cater to the demands of their regular customers by offering a wide selection of side dishes that include assorted meat and seafood cold cuts, fried snacks, and braised delicacies. Some even double as self-service bento shops, with an impressively wide variety on offer.

Chiayi's signature cold vegetable dish is refreshingly simple: a variety of vegetables, lightly blanched and left unseasoned for a clean and refreshing taste. Behold this army of greens: green bamboo shoots, water bamboo, cabbage sprouts, green beans, asparagus, eggplant, broccoli, cauliflower, white and green bitter melon, baby corn, celery, okra... Each veggie is cooked and cooled with precise timing and technique, perfected by generations of Chiayi locals. On sweltering days under the city's 23.5°N sun, these chilled vegetables are a crisp, cooling delight.

When ordering turkey rice, the staff will usually ask if you want a fried egg on top. If you choose the runny-yolk option, there's nothing quite like piercing it with your chopstick and watching the golden yolk cascade over the rice – utterly satisfying!

The Eating Order

Some people like to sprinkle white pepper or add chili sauce when eating turkey rice. I prefer it plain. Writer Chen Chun-wen goes even further: "Each shop takes pride in its own flavor. A true turkey rice eatery won't have chili or garlic sauce on the table. At most, there's white pepper, which is meant for the soup. People in Chiayi prefer the original taste, without any additional seasoning that could upset the perfect balance the shop has created."

Regarding strategies for savoring your meal, it's all about carefully picking up small bites of turkey and rice - one bite at a time - and savoring the layers of flavors. By contrast, the mix-first style is all about diving in – sticking the chopsticks straight into the bowl, stirring everything

together, and eating in big, hearty mouthfuls. To experience a combination of both approaches, you can order two bowls. Eat the first slowly to uncover the hidden aromas of the turkey drippings at the bottom of the rice mound, satisfying both body and soul. Then, generously mix the second bowl, allowing the fragrances of rice, turkey, and shallot oil to meld in a fragrant burst. There's a satisfying sense of hands-on accomplishment in this method, followed by big bites that hit you with a rush of flavor.

The Eatery

From Chiayi City to Chiayi County, across the towns and villages of the Jhuluo Plain – from hills and farmland to the seaside – there are easily three to four hundred turkey rice eateries, each with its own character. Some are humble roadside shops, others are stalls tucked into busy temple corners or carts rolling out from traditional markets. In recent years, chain restaurants and trendy spots drawing long lines of tourists have added new layers to Chiayi's turkey rice culture.

Sometimes, rather than going to my usual spots, I'll take a chance and wander through downtown Chiayi, looking for hole-in-the-wall shops tucked away in back alleys. These nameless eateries serve simple menus with honest ingredients and keep their prices as down-to-earth as the owners who treat you like family.

The attentive care invested in the art of turkey rice is rare for Chiayi, which gives the impression to outsiders of being warm, laid-back and easygoing. Its character is shaped by the spirit of the plains and the city's gentle scale. It is a place where hospitality always seems to be in perfect balance.

This little personal tasting critique session in my head began with nothing more than a simple craving – and it doesn't end just because my stomach is full. The flavors linger on my tongue and in my heart, the rich aroma of turkey drippings following me as I go about my day. When life gets tough, come eat a bowl of turkey rice in Chiayi! All it takes is ten minutes and all your worries will melt away, gray clouds lift, and the world tastes a little brighter.