
THE CHANGING TASTE OF TAI O SHRIMP PASTE

Time-honoured brands turn to
mainland shrimps after local trawling ban

By Natale Ching, Venice Lai & Wing Chan





At the top of a rusty, and narrow staircase, 51-year-old Cheung Chi-ming proudly introduces his rooftop workshop. Cheung carefully opens the cover of a pot and stirs the thick sludge-like content with a wooden stick. A pungent aroma quickly escapes from nearly 50 plastic containers sitting on the rooftop. The barrels all contain a traditional Chinese seasoning, shrimp paste.

Cheung was born and raised in Tai O, a small village on western Lantau

Island. The remote village has long been renowned for its high quality shrimp paste. Back in the 18th century when salt production was a thriving industry in Tai O, pickled shrimps and rice were the main food of Tai O residents. Almost every Tai O resident knows how to make shrimp paste, especially those living in traditional stilt houses.

Cheung spent much of his childhood helping out with the family business, Sun Kwong Cheung Choi

Kee, making shrimp paste even though he was reluctant to do so. "My parents used to hit me with plastic slippers if they found me sneaking out to play," Cheung laughs.

Most shrimp paste factories are family operations and production takes place between May and September as this is when shrimps are available in Hong Kong waters and the sun is strong.



Cheung recalls that the procedure was laborious and repetitive. First, a worker had to pick out the shrimps and separate them from the impurities. Then he had to pour salt on the krill to act as a natural preservative during fermentation. The shrimps were then ground using stone mills, and later on by machinery until it becomes paste. Next, the paste is exposed to strong sunlight for months, with occasional stirring before it is dry and aromatic enough to be sold on the market.

However, this traditional practice can no longer be seen in Tai O. On December 31, 2012, trawling, the dragging of a net on the seabed to catch marine animals, was banned by the government to protect the marine ecosystem. Since shrimps, the core ingredient of shrimp paste, are collected by trawling, the shrimp paste factories in Tai O had no choice but to turn to the Mainland to supply their raw materials.

Cheung complains that the factories in the Mainland sometimes mix in other species of shrimps and add impurities like black shrimp brain, intestine and hard shells.

The change in the source of shrimp has not discouraged restaurants from cooking with Tai O shrimp paste. Ms Lo, who did not want to give her full name, is the owner of Lin Heung Tea House, a Chinese restaurant at Kat Hing Street that has been using Tai O shrimp paste for decades. According to Lo, local shrimp paste factories are time-honored brands which give her confidence in their quality and taste. Yet, she can tell that shrimp paste in the past had a stronger aftertaste than now. "The shrimp pastes now can never compare to those in the past," she says.

Although Tai O shrimp paste is still a prestigious product, the factories have suffered from soaring production costs. The price of mainland shrimps is higher than the Tai O shrimps and the cost of transportation increases overheads significantly.

Cheng Kai-keung, 59, has devoted over half of his life to making shrimp paste in the 74-year-old Cheng Cheung Hing Shrimp Paste Factory. He criticises the government for neither consulting him on the trawling ban nor compensating him for affecting

his means of livelihood. Only fishermen were compensated for their loss, but Cheng thinks the fishermen and shrimp paste factories are interdependent so the ban influences them indirectly.

Faced with higher costs and a shrinking local shrimp harvest, he decided to embrace machinery. It takes an electronic motor mill only 15 minutes to produce one bucket of shrimp paste, whereas it takes 45 minutes using a stone mill. Using machines does not adversely affect the shrimp paste quality, but increases productivity.

Li Kam-ping, owner of the 85-year-old Sing Lee Shrimp Sauce & Paste Manufacturer, does not just buy his shrimps from the Mainland. The 57-year-old has also shifted most of the production to mainland factories too. His factory co-operates with three counterparts in Guangdong. Trawling, grinding and fermentation are all done in the Mainland. The Hong Kong operation is now only responsible for further fermentation or drying, quality checks and packaging.



To ensure mainland factories can produce quality products, Li has transferred shrimp paste production skills to mainland workers, including the correct duration for fermentation, the salt-to-shrimp ratio, the smoothness standard and the method of storage. Despite this, he sometimes receives products that are below standard. If that happens, Li grinds and stirs the shrimp paste again to achieve the desirable texture and aroma.

The shift in the source of raw material is not the sole challenge shrimp paste producers are facing. The shrimp paste industry in Tai O has shrunk from six factories during the boom period to just three now. As it is hard to attract youths to join the labour intensive industry, people working in shrimp paste factories are mainly middle-aged men who have been working in it for decades.

Roy Li Hok-bun, Li Kam-ping's 29-year-old son, has been helping with the family's shrimp paste business since 2008. When his father's health deteriorated, he quit his previous job of training chefs in a restaurant to return to the shrimp paste factory.

But Cheng Kai-keung is not so lucky. He thinks there is little chance that his next generation will take over his 74-year-old factory. Since Hong Kong is a society that values academic results above practical knowhow, Cheng believes that although his children are willing to try making shrimp paste for fun, they will not be committed to it, let alone inherit the factory. Yet, Cheng does not think it is a pity. "I should not limit the development of my next generation just to sustain the industry. It is too selfish," says Cheng.

The ban on trawling has brought tremendous changes to the shrimp paste industry in Tai O. Current owners are doing whatever they can to adapt. "We need to find our own way to survive. If you wait for help, you and your industry will cease to exist," Cheng says. ✓

Edited by Jeffrey Loa

