

Bringing it home

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Chef Joseph Poon shows how to shell a longan during a tour of Asian supermarkets along Washington Avenue.

Noodles, Lychee and Tofu, Oh My!

Chef Joseph Poon's guided tour of Asian groceries reveals a world of super fresh seafood, exotic condiments and fantastical fruit. Don't worry, says Poon, just try it.

BY SEAN SCULLY, PHOTOS BY MIKE MERGEN

It is likely that when you read the words "grocery store," you think of the gleaming aisles of Acme or Superfresh, or the organic delights of Whole Foods.

But there is a different world hidden in plain sight in Philadelphia at a series of Asian supermarkets that line Washington Avenue in the vicinity of the famed Italian Market. They're not impressive to look at — in one case a huge store is concealed behind a deceptively small entrance that makes it look more like a local convenience store.

Yet inside is an entirely new realm of products, a mishmash of the many cultures that have quietly accumulated in the area.

Philadelphians may be aware of the Asian stores in Chinatown, but the stores along Washington Avenue are different, starting with the not inconsiderable fact that they offer easy and free parking. They also offer a wider variety of cultures and cuisines to choose from. The stores carry familiar Chinese products, of course, but they also cater to customers from Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines.



All of the stores offer unusual fresh vegetables, many locally grown and exclusively available in these markets. They offer startlingly fresh meat, often directly from local farms and poultry markets. And there is no fresher fish to be had without catching it yourself — they all have live fish swimming in display tanks. A customer can watch as the fish-seller selects and cleans the fish and packages it to take home.

At the same time, however, these stores can be daunting for anyone not steeped in Asian culture, language and cuisine. Often as not, the labels on products are in Asian languages. And even when there is a label in English, it's not always clear how the product should be used.

Dried miniature shrimp? Canned kohlrabi? A bulk pack of chicken feet? Even professional Western cooks might find these products puzzling.

So we turned to the man probably best suited to explain, famed Philadelphia Chef Joseph Poon, the founder of the celebrated Sang Kee duck house and lately the leader of a popular series of classes and walking tours that introduce foodies to the delights of grocery stores in Chinatown.

Poon guided us on a tour through one of the three largest Asian markets on Washington Avenue, the 1st Oriental Grocery Store at 6th Street.

The secret, he said, is not being afraid to ask questions.

"Just have some kind of attitude," he explains with a shrug. "You walk in there, don't worry; be happy. Just walk inside,

ask any question. Pick up anything to ask some questions. You don't understand? ... worse comes to worst, copy down the name, go back and look at the dictionary, they're the best ... I learn from the dictionary."

Many staff members at the stores, he says, speak poor English. But not all of them. And they are all eager to help outsiders understand their cuisine.

"I wish more Asian people could communicate in English," he says. "It's not that they don't like to talk to you ... [if they can't answer you], don't give up. Ask the manager. At least the manager speaks English."

The labels on the products have to have at least some English; they have to list the ingredients. That isn't always very

enlightening, of course, but at least it provides something to look up on the Internet. And sometimes, the label is enough to explain all you need to know.

"Read the label — what the heck is this guy," Poon says, picking up a pack of a gelatinous substance from a refrigerator case and turning it over to look at the ingredients list. "Jellyfish? You eat raw. They have the sesame oil, all the ingredients in there. You just mix it up, with vinegar; done deal... This is Vietnam style."

"You read the label, you'll understand," he promises, patting the package and tossing it vigorously back on the pile. "Jellyfish — we hate it, but we love to eat it."

Not everything in the market, of course, is as unfamiliar to the Western palate as a snack of raw jellyfish mixed with oil and vinegar.

The produce aisle, for example, is stocked with a huge selection of green vegetables and interesting fruits. Even if you don't know specifically what something is, he says, try using it.

Bok Choi and Chinese cabbage work perfectly well as substitutes for Western greens in Western dishes, for example. You don't really need to know much about it — just try it.

Same with Asian herbs. The basil and mint and chives look similar to their Western cousins, and can be used interchangeably with them, although they will add interesting and unusual nuances to dishes.

"American chive is very stiff and you have to cut it; this is soft," he says, pulling at the long, flat chive leaf and sticking a small piece in his mouth. "Also, very sweet. I like it very much. I eat a lot. Sweet, garlicky, onion flavor ... this is much better, because of the flavor."

The fruits are a little more daunting, though a little adventurous experimentation will pay off. Red lychees and tan-colored longans, for example, look like large grapes with thick, rough outer peels. If you pop open that outer shell, however, you will be rewarded with a pale white, translucent fruit that is juicy, sweet and hauntingly exotic. You can eat them raw or peel the flesh off the inner seed to make a sweet sauce.

"When you pick these things, you pick firm, not too soft," he says, holding up a

big bunch of lychees. "Too soft, no good. They are juicy, but the sweetness is not so much."

Much will be familiar in the Asian stores — there are several types of bananas, including a small, sweet one that Poon strongly recommends.

But much will be strange to the point of difficult to believe. In one bin, for example, Poon points to a huge, irregular object that looks like some kind of weird space rock, deep brown with bubbly skin. It is a durian, a fruit grown in Southeast Asia that contains a custardy, delicious pulp but an unappetizing smell that has been likened to stinky feet.

"This is amazing fruit," Poon raves. "It looks like pineapple, but you eat it this way," grabbing his nose and holding it closed.

Just a little knowledge goes a long way in stores like this, he says. For example, note the difference between the pre-cooked noodles — which tend to be soft and are

often in the refrigerated section — and the dry noodles, which are stiff and usually on the shelves. With that little bit of information, you can figure out the best way to prepare noodles — cook a long time in boiling water or simply heat up in a pan or stir-fry — without having to know a lot about the original or customary use of the noodle.

The vast selection of teas can be daunting as well. Where a Western grocery store may have a dozen teas on the shelf, Asian stores may have hundreds of brands.

Faced with such a huge choice, Poon says, just relax — it's hard to go wrong.

"I am looking for green tea, or black tea, oolong tea ... pick up the most inexpensive one. It doesn't matter," he says, rifling through the boxes. "Look at this packet, 55 cents. Doesn't matter ... tea is good. Green tea is best, but all tea is good."

Another basic is tofu, he says. The supermarket has many different kinds: firm or soft, packaged in paper or fresh in a water-filled bin, fried or raw. All you really need to know is that the firm stuff can be cooked in stir-frys and the soft stuff should be used as a spread or eaten like yoghurt. The fresh stuff should be used within a day; the boxed stuff can be stored for days or weeks.



Wrappers such as these may be made with or without eggs and can be used for wontons, gyozas or similar dumplings interchangeably.



WHERE TO SHOP

Visit these stores on your own, or, join Chef Joseph Poon on one of his "Wok 'n Walk" tours of supermarkets in Chinatown (www.josephpoon.com, 215-500-9774).

1st Oriental Market

1111 S. 6th St.
215-271-2528

Hung Vuong Supermarket

1122-38 Washington Ave.
215-336-2803

Hoa Binh Supermarket

1601 Washington Ave.
215-735-9365

The soy sauce aisle can be overwhelming, with dozens of brands and types. A few rules will help navigate it, he says. All the sauces will be good, just remember that "light" soy sauce is salty, "dark" soy sauce is not. Sauces that don't say "light" or "dark," such as the familiar Kikkoman, are somewhere in between, often more on the salty side.

Likewise, the freezer section can be intimidating. There are dozens of kinds of dumplings, buns and fruits. But they all have at least basic instructions and, in the end, all of them will taste good, even if you have very little idea what you're eating.

The ramen noodle section stretches the length of the store, offering a bewildering array of choices. Asians invented this kind of quick-preparation soup, says Poon, and therefore you can't go wrong trying any you find in an Asian store.

The key to all this, Poon says, is not to worry. Try something unusual. Don't be afraid if you don't understand something.

"Read the label. You will learn something, but you won't learn completely because it [takes a lifetime] of culture [to understand everything you're seeing] ... what, you expected to come here and learn everything? No way," he says. "But keep learning, don't give up, don't give up. Don't give up." ■