



# *H*omegrown *M*OVEMENT

With farming resurgent in its rural spaces and rooftops, Hong Kong-grown food is back on the menu



Care for a Malaysian durian?

That will be HK\$600.

Too expensive? How about a Tasmanian cherry? Just HK\$550 apiece.

Such, indeed, are the Yau Ma Tei market going rates for the kind of exotic produce that proved the centrepiece of last year's Ridiculously Expensive Fruit Fad, a passing food affectation that was the talk of water-coolers the world over.

Inevitably, the media, too, was caught up in this fascination with the far-from-free bounty of sundry shrubs and trees, with one news agency breathlessly informing its readers, "On the shelves of *City Super*, a single Japanese strawberry recently fetched a whopping HK\$168, with each fruit nestled on a paper pillow, encased in a glossy cardboard box..."

Upon closer examination, all such pricey produce had two things in common – it was universally acknowledged as clean and fresh and, crucially, it was produced Anywhere But China.

Indeed, if there is one common denominator among the world's most distinguished diners, it is a desire for dishes guaranteed to be mainland-free. And that's not just snack-related snobbery or plate-based prejudice. Over recent years, China's food chain has become renowned for having the odd missing link or two.

In 2008, for instance, parents in China's Gansu province were horrified when traces of melamine – a toxic, nitrogen-rich chemical – were found in baby formula, a discovery that came too late for the six infants that had already received fatal doses.

More recently, Hong Kong was gripped last year by a sudden pork shortage when pigs across Jiangxi – the south-eastern Chinese province that supplies 20% of the city's pork products – were found to have illegally high levels of Salbutamol and Clenbuterol, two anti-asthma drugs also thought to artificially enhance the growth of livestock.

There has, however, been one positive dividend from the fear of Yunnan yoghurt and Liaoning lettuce that now seems to pervade nearly every Frangrant Harbour household – never before, in modern times, has there been quite such an appetite for Hong Kong-grown produce. Indeed, the most palpable consequence of the SAR's food fears is a hugely visible return to domestic farming.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the New Territories, the more rural region of Hong Kong where such agricultural endeavours were once deemed to be almost extinct. Wind back 10 years and there was not a plough nor a furrowed field to be had. Now, though, it's very different.



Organic agriculture has surged over the last decade. Where once the land lay fallow, there are now more than 500 eco-friendly farmsteads in the New Territories, with their number seemingly growing by the day.

Overall, this phenomenon seems to have been driven almost as much by personal disillusionment with Hong Kong's high pressure way of life as by the fear of Ronchenge's radioactive radish crop. Becky Au is typical of this new generation of the back-to-the-land brigade.

In 2011, she was just one of many Hong Kongers who found themselves disillusioned with all things corporate. Unlike countless others, though, she had a focus for her discontent and found herself continually hankering for the life she had lost many years previously when her idyllic childhood on a farm in Ma Shi Po, a New Territories village, gave way to an office job.

Reflecting on the time she spent away from the land, she says, "I tried to work in the city for almost three years, but I hated it. I realised that only getting back to nature would make me happy. When some of my friends suggested I should run a farm, straightaway I thought, 'Why not?'"

Today's urban farmers are not primarily turning to agriculture as means to make a profit. Far from seeing it as a revenue generator, they are in it for food security, education and community-building, according to a study published by the *British Food Journal*

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Today she manages the **Ma Po Po Community Farm**, an eight-year-old organic agriculture venture based in the Fanling area of the New Territories. Typically, the farm grows potatoes, eggplants, corn and pumpkins. The majority of its produce, which ranges from fresh fruit and vegetables to beauty oils and jams, is sold either via local farmers' markets or through its own website.

Summarising her transformed life, Au says, "I think I am incredibly lucky. I have my own farm and I can eat the finest and freshest food whenever I want. My grandparents and parents were all full-time farmers and, now, I want to follow their example and grow old here."

For those Hong Kongers, however, who don't yet feel up to the challenge of





dispensing with their urban trappings and decamping to the far-flung fields of the New Territories, there is another alternative. If you can't go to the farm, why not bring the farm to you?

That, in essence, is the thinking behind **Rooftop Republic**, a Hong Kong-based social enterprise that has pioneered the rise of high-altitude allotments across the city's urban sprawl. At present, the company provides a full range of services for those looking to transform their veranda into something a little more verdant.

Expanding upon the company's philosophy, co-founder Andrew Tsui says, "For us, urban farming is not just about creating a more sustainable lifestyle. It also allows city dwellers to re-establish their relationship with the environment, while also nurturing the growth of local communities."

To date, Rooftop Republic's most high-profile project is set squarely on top of the Bank of America Tower. It was here that a



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A worldwide trend of urban farming has seen unused spaces in cities all over the globe being converted into green plots to grow vegetables, herbs and other plants



Text: Julianne C. Raboca Photos: Ringo Cheung of aperture.com.hk, AFP, Virginia Duran and Rooftop Republic

decommissioned helicopter landing pad, some 39 floors above ground level, was converted into a far-up farm, with its fresh produce donated to local food banks seasonally.

Since launching in 2012, the company has undertaken 34 major projects throughout Hong Kong and now offers a range of services to would-be vertical gardeners, including site assessment, bespoke farm design, seedling deliveries and edible wall installations. In a bid to build awareness, it also holds a number of seminars and workshops throughout the year.

It is not the only business focusing on high-rise crop-rearing, however. According to Assistant Professor Matthew Pryor, head of Landscape Architecture at HKU, there are now 60 rooftop farms in Hong Kong, some created by specialist companies, some by individuals. At present, he is heading up a study looking at just how many such projects the city can accommodate. While the final figure is not yet available, he is, however, willing to hint that the number could be more than expected – "Let's just say there's far more space to be had up on high than there is at street level..."

He now hopes that his study will play a key role in persuading the Hong Kong government to properly integrate rooftop farm spaces into future city planning initiatives. Outlining his case, he says, "It's not just about providing fresh produce. These kinds of



### GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY

**GrowingSmart.HK** – Permaculture-based programmes, workshops and volunteer activities. [www.growingsmart.hk](http://www.growingsmart.hk)

**Evergreens Republic** – Order locally grown organic produce (harvested and delivered within 24 hours) from the largest and only USDA-certified organic commercial Aquaponics farm to operate in Southeast Asia. [www.evergreensrepublic.com](http://www.evergreensrepublic.com)

**HK Farm** – An organisation of Hong Kong farmers, artists and designers who grow local food, curate exhibitions and design products/services relating to urban agriculture. [www.hkfarm.org](http://www.hkfarm.org)

**Eat Fresh** – An organic e-Grocery delivery where you can get packaged organic products like gluten-free brownies, fresh seasonal produce subscriptions or coconut body milk. [www.eatfresh.com.hk](http://www.eatfresh.com.hk)

**Go Green** – An organic pineapple park and BBQ/camping/events venue in Yuen Long. [www.gogreenlife.com.hk](http://www.gogreenlife.com.hk)

**Nature's Harvest** – A natural environment connecting visitors with their local food system whilst escaping to a rural retreat in Clearwater Bay. [www.naturesharvest.com.hk](http://www.naturesharvest.com.hk) [www.veggies.hk](http://www.veggies.hk)

**Homegrown Foods** – An e-grocery delivering premium, sustainable clean food to most anywhere in Hong Kong, seven days a week. [www.homegrownfoods.com.hk](http://www.homegrownfoods.com.hk)

green ceilings can actually deliver a high level of thermal and sound insulation, potentially resulting in a huge reduction of the energy consumption levels in many of the city's biggest buildings."

For those yet to be convinced of the potential of such loft-level landscapes, Pryor's own HKU-sited rooftop farm is open for inspection. Impressively, the whole project was put together by faculty members and students using solely recycled materials sourced from construction sites across the city.

Whether high-priced or high-reared, Hong's Kong's resurgent love affair with domestically-produced fruits and vegetables is a true 21st century wonder. While the world becomes ever more homogenised, with cookie-cutter careers, homes and cuisine, it's hugely refreshing to see a small band of organically-minded entrepreneurs willing to challenge that orthodoxy.

As they say in France when championing the maverick and the iconoclastic, "vive la différence" and, of course, "vive la révolution" – whether that be on the city's rooftops or in its more rural environs. In the meantime, you couldn't possibly spot me a Malaysian durian till payday...? 🍌