

T+L  
BEST  
BITES



## DUMPLINGS

DE FA CHANG, XI'AN

Travelers may head to Xi'an to gawk at the scowling terra-cotta warriors, but it's the food that often causes them to stay. Most find themselves drawn to the Muslim Quarter, where vendors hawk cumin-dusted lamb skewers, sticky-sweet persimmon fritters, and *rou jia mo*, a wonderfully messy flatbread laden with braised beef or lamb. Justly famous as these street delicacies are, when visiting politicians are in town, they head for a more refined, although no less unique, kind of eatery. **De Fa Chang Restaurant** takes the humble dumpling and elevates it to an art form. Yes, the usual pork-stuffed *jiaozi* are here, but they're accompanied by more whimsical variations often resembling their filling. Miniature ducks bulge with *kaoya*, while wrinkly walnuts are stuffed with a sweet-savory spiced nut mixture. Some of the offerings—Lilliputian frogs that stare up at diners with their beady yellow eyes—are so detailed that you have to marvel at the patience of the army of chefs in the back. For the full experience, order the tasting menu, which comes with more than a dozen varieties. Kitch has never tasted so good. 3 West St., Lianhu; 86-29/8721-4060; dumpling menu RMB120. —DIANA HUBBELL



FROM LEFT: Pasteur Street's Imperial Chocolate Cyclo Stout uses local Marou chocolate; Lac Brewing's Lucas Jans samples a beer.



“My house looks like the lab in *Breaking Bad*,” Lucas Jans laughs. “Blue Sky: ninety-nine point one percent purity.” Scoping out his backyard in the quaint suburban District 7, I see his point. The series of vats, siphons, air locks and buckets could have been designed by Heisenberg himself. This is **Lac Brewing Company**, what might be Saigon's smallest brewing operation, and it churns out beers that are much-loved and lauded by local connoisseurs. Today, Jans is making an Oatmeal Session IPA designed to complement Vietnam's hot climate. A “session ale” is a beer made with a light body and lower alcohol content. “The sessionable beers do very well here,” Jans says. “It's not the right climate for a heavy beer. Mostly people just want to feel refreshed and enjoy the taste of an ale.” After taking a small sip, I can vouch for that. When it's finished it will likely make its way to the menu of Quan Ut Ut, where Jans's beers are regularly served. “My current recipe calls for six different hops added at 11 different times,” he says. “The best way I can describe the flavor is drinking Jolly Rancher orange juice.”

I'd like to stay and sample more, but I've got a date to check out the brewery in Can Giuoc where Gustafson's BiaCraft beers are made. We straddle two 1990s motor scooters and he leads the way on a

two-hour ride to a remote district of Saigon, where shrimp farms dot a landscape of mangrove wetlands inhabited by rare species of wildlife. I'm quickly beset by the jarring soundtrack of phantom swiftlets incessantly chirping. I complain about the ear-splitting shrieks and Gustafson explains that this highway is lined with structures broadcasting the chirping out of loudspeakers to attract the birds to build nests that the ranchers collect and sell—what is dubbed the “caviar of the east,” used in traditional medicine. The noise is enough to drive someone insane, but Gustafson remains unfazed. “Anything in the name of beer,” he says.

That quote might well end up his epitaph. Gustafson says it has been a harrowing journey to perfect beer production, balance supply and demand, navigate baffling government regulations, cut through import logistics and overcome tropical acts of nature (“We carried a giant metal fermenter three blocks in a thunder storm. It was most important that the beer arrive safely”), but now BiaCraft Artisan Ales are finely polished and flowing faster than a monsoon tide through Saigon's coolest bars. The Lun Ma Lao Blonde ale is my favorite of their offerings, light and easy-drinking, perfectly suited for the often cruel Vietnamese heat. This brew goes >>