

Heritage

Slow boat to sheer bliss!

The humble flat-bottomed country boats afloat on Hong Kong's waters are playing host to promotional events and heritage tours, noodle lunch included. **Faye Bradley** reports on the sampan's second coming.



Left: The number of sampans seen in Hong Kong's harbors today is a small fraction of the hundreds of thousands of vessels that served as a popular mode of public transport in the '50s. Lately, some of them have got a new lease of life as vehicles of heritage tourism. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Right and below: Tour guide Kiyo Fung (right photo, left) poses with his guests before commencing a sampan tour of the Aberdeen Harbour and more happy tourists from the same trip.



Clockwise from above: Two dishes, including a vegetarian version of the typhoon shelter crab (right), served at a "Sparked on a Sampan" event; guests tuck into a vegetarian meal; Simran Savlani, owner of the handmade condiments brand Sparks, gets a selfie with her guests.



Left: Virginia Chan, founder-owner of the tour operating company Humid with a Chance of Fishballs, has been lauded for whipping up the authentic flavors of a sampan meal. **Above:** Guests signing up for the "Eat Typhoon Shelter Crab on a Sampan Fishing Boat" tour offered by Chan's company also get to find out about the evolution of sampan food recipes.

This past summer, cookbook author Simran Savlani was looking for an innovative way to promote her handmade condiments brand — A Spark of Madness. That's when she hit upon the idea of hosting the promotional events on a sampan — small, flat-bottomed wooden country boat used for fishing or short trips across the watery expanses surrounding Hong Kong.

Sampans, and particularly the on-board restaurants, are mostly run by women, or "sampan aunties", as they are fondly called. Many of them are descendants of the Tanka people — a Sincized ethnic group whose members have resided in South China, including Hong Kong, for generations together. Savlani decided to approach the sampan aunties for help with hosting her event.

It took her a while to convince the aunties about going all-vegetarian for the event. The suggestion was met with outright rejection, as the aunties had never served vegetarian food to their guests before. But Savlani was persistent. At one point the aunties told her, via the translator app they used to communicate with each other, "Stop insulting us; we are a seafood restaurant." Then, just as Savlani was ready to give up, one night, at 2 am, the aunties got back to her with a revised menu.

Called "Sparked on a Sampan", the eight dinners they hosted, with 45 to 50 guests attending each, was a sellout. Savlani served an eight-course Cantonese vegetarian meal, with wines and a selection of Spark sauces. The aunties had worked out a vegetarian version of an out-and-out seafood-based menu. For example, the crab in the typhoon shelter crab dish was substituted with eggplant and paired with noodles tossed in soy sauce.

Diminishing returns

The sampan used to be a popular mode of water transport in '50s Hong Kong. Hun-

dreds of thousands of these boats sailed in and out of Aberdeen Harbour — which was more like a floating village and a home to a large section of the city's Tanka community.

Lisa Lim, associate professor at the School of Education at Curtin University in Perth, says that the Tanka people in charge of Hong Kong's sampans have been around "since prehistoric times, traditionally managing the commerce of the seas, and living in small colonies of boats in Aberdeen, Tai O and later in the city's typhoon shelters".

"About 200,000 Tanka boats were anchored in Hong Kong in the mid-20th century," Lim adds.

As the number of sampans moored on Hong Kong's waterfront keeps shrinking, the obvious way of preserving and promoting such heritage seems to be to invite tourists to take rides on them. Lim says, "Hong Kong has already made some headway" in that direction, by offering "sampan tours to fishing villages and traditional houseboats".

A culinary journey

Evidently, sampan food is the new favorite of Hong Kong's gastronomes and heritage lovers. YouTubers like Sam Evans of the *Hong Kong Hoods* channel have raved about the boat noodles sampled at Lau Kee Sampan Noodles in Aberdeen.

A number of foodies have signed up for the "Eat Typhoon Shelter Crab on a Sampan Fishing Boat" experience offered by Humid with a Chance of Fishballs. Virginia Chan, the tourism company's founder-owner, says that the tour is a perfect vehicle for getting to find out about old Hong Kong, including the lifestyles of its boat people, and how the city's love of fish and seafood is tied to its history as a fishing hub. Riding a water taxi on their way to a sampan, guests "pass the now-defunct floating Tin Hau temple, offering a glimpse into the past, when the Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter used to be filled with moored sampans. Nowadays it's

mostly yachts," Chan says.

She mentions that in the old days, shopping around for sampan food was a somewhat different experience. Each sampan offered a specific food item — be it noodles, seafood or drinks. Humid with a Chance of Fishballs tour guides ensure that their guests understand these historical differences.

Chan points out that the recipes have evolved as well. For instance, what passes for typhoon shelter crab nowadays is a preparation with fried garlic, whereas the traditional variety was cooked in black bean sauce.

Sampan tours are also available without a dining element. Freelance tour guide Kiyo Fung is keen to ensure that the sampan rides led by him "not only offer scenic views but also a deeper understanding of the history of Hong Kong's fishing community, besides close-up views of traditional houseboats, modern boat houses, the Aberdeen Fish Market, and the currently idle Tai Pak Floating Restaurant, among other special attractions".

"As Hong Kong's history is closely linked to its fishing culture, taking a sampan tour around the typhoon shelter while listening to the guide's narration helps tourists to better appreciate where Hong Kong's roots lie as well as see a side of the city that's different from its modern, bustling urban areas," Fung says.

Protecting a local heritage

Savlani's sampan-dinner series was a winner on several counts. The initially reluctant sampan aunties took good care of the guests, making sure that they boarded and disembarked from the boat safely. Also they kept plying the guests with a never-ending supply of food and drinks throughout the event.

Part of the profits from the "Sparked on a Sampan" dining series was spent on much-needed renovation of the fishing boats. Also the aunties have since begun offering vegetarian dishes to customers.

Lavina Ahuja, an art historian who attended one of Savlani's dinners, says, "My most favorite part was the overall concept and knowing that we were supporting a local heritage that is possibly dying."

Tarana Somani, founder of the brand The Crockery Hut, was especially delighted with the experience, being a vegetarian. "Getting to experience a fully vegetarian dinner on a boat is definitely unheard of in Hong Kong," she says.

Chan, of Humid with a Chance of Fishballs, says customers have called her tours "very Anthony Bourdain" in their ability to re-create a taste of the authentic flavors of a sampan meal.

She adds that the sampan restaurant she collaborates with for the tours is the last of its kind — which probably explains the popularity of her tour. "We need to support them as without customers they risk closing down."



This chimp will make you dance to his tune

By AMY MULLINS

As soon as the words "musician's biopic" are uttered, we as audience members are within our rights to swear under our breath and let out a deep sigh. The genre's rote rise-fall-rise pattern — the predictable spiral into some kind of addiction, the montages of concert tours and spinning headlines — are all maddeningly familiar. However, every so often, a film comes along and turns convention on its head. *The Greatest Showman* director Michael Gracey's Robbie Williams biopic *Better Man* is one such.

Former Take That member and currently solo singer Williams has gone on record saying that he often saw himself as a trained chimp, performing at other people's behest. The trained-chimp metaphor works for a lot of entertainers, hence Gracey decided that a literal interpretation of the idea could make a fine biopic. He was right.

If you can wrap your head around

Williams being "played" by a computer-generated imagery chimpanzee who wears pop-star costumes, snorts cocaine, prances around with Williams' distinct mid-1990s spiky hair and sings *Come Undone* when he's dropped from the successful boy band, you'll be on board with *Better Man*. Williams is also an executive producer on the film — a potential red flag, but this is an artist who has always worn his heart on his sleeve. The film is brutally honest in a way that *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Bob Marley: One Love* were not. In exchange for permission to use copyrighted material, notably the original songs, filmmakers had to make the artists look good.

Better Man follows Williams — himself voicing Jonno Davies' motion-capture performance — from his working class Stoke-on-Trent youth to his career peak, playing to 700,000 people at Knebworth Festival over three days in 2003. In between these formative moments, we see how young Robert picked up an appreciation for Rat Pack-

Better Man



Directed by Michael Gracey, written by Simon Gleeson, Oliver Cole, Michael Gracey. Starring Robbie Williams and Jonno Davies. UK/USA/Australia, 135 minutes, IIB. Opens Thursday.

style entertaining from his frequently absent father, Peter (Steve Pemberton); the crucial bond between Robert and his grandmother, Betty (Alison Steadman); and how Take That manager Nigel Martin-Smith (Damon

Herriman) turned him into "Robbie", among other career landmarks. What really sets *Better Man* apart, though, is the effortlessness of its fantasy as well as the flawlessly rendered music. You don't have to like or even know who Williams is to enjoy the film. Gracey's music-infused language is pitched perfectly, and leaning into the monkey business, as it were, lends a bestial, raw physicality to Williams — a physicality that says just as much as his lyrics do. Most of Williams' best-known songs are dropped into the action in emotional, rather than chronological, order. And

the montages are pieced together with such liquid elegance by the film's five editors that the cuts are often invisible. The script — by theater actor Simon Gleeson, first-timer Oliver Cole and Gracey — isn't afraid to be as cheeky as Williams himself. The absurdity of seeing a giant chimp engaged in a bit of clandestine carnality in a nightclub serves as a meta commentary on stardom, and on the dangers of getting one's wish.

If there's one moment, however, that could easily win fence-sitters over to the subversive brilliance of *Better Man*, it's the glorious one-shot *Rock DJ* number. Unfolding up and down London's Regent Street, the sequence shorthands Take That's rise to fame and recalls *From Now On* or the swirly, swooping opening number, *The Greatest Show*, in the *Showman* film, affirming that Gracey is the ideal filmmaker for the material. *Better Man* may not be perfect, but it's a big, creative swing and deserves respect for taking a minute to consider something new.

