

P.32 PROCESSORS DEVISE
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P.43 INDUSTRY CONFRONTS
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REVITALIZATION

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STEAMED, BOILED *or* FRIED?



Laoban pork and chive dumplings inspire a mix of cooking methods — and reactions

Photo by Getty



PRODUCT

Laoban pork and chive dumplings

PRICE

\$6.99/8-oz. package
(3.5 servings)

PLUS

Natural ingredients

PROBLEM

Price for the package size

Many world cuisines feature a dumpling of some sort, but none is more popular than the Chinese dumpling. As Americans explore multicultural foods, demand for dumplings and other Asian products has skyrocketed. According to Datassential, 60% of U.S. consumers currently “love” or “like” dumplings.

We recently spotted an array of frozen Laoban dumplings in our local supermarket, and selected the Laoban pork and chive dumplings for our tasters to prepare at home. Laoban got its start as a “humble dumpling shop in Washington, D.C., where it crafts delicious dumplings from scratch using all-natural, premium ingredients.” Their pork and chive dumplings feature Berkshire pork, Chinese chives and garlic. Let’s see what our tasters had to say.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Our participants were all familiar with Asian dumplings, having eaten them at a restaurant, ordered them for take-out, and/or prepared them at home.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND APPEARANCE

Our taste-testers had a variety of comments to make about the product’s packaging. One loved the “very catchy” packaging colors, and another

noted that the relatively small size enables the dumplings to fit into a small freezer. One wished that the packaging had a picture of the product, while another wished the package had microwave directions.

Finally, a participant gave a nod to the “cute graphics” on the package, and added: “‘Pork and chive’ is a classic filling for dumplings, and ‘Berkshire Pork, Chinese Chives, Garlic’ denote quality ingredients. ‘Laoban,’ the brand name, means ‘boss’ in Mandarin, so, of course, I’m expecting this to be close to exceptional.”

The ingredients, particularly the inclusion of Berkshire pork, drew a number of comments from testers. “I love that they’re using clean ingredients, and that the first ingredient is Berkshire pork,” one opined. “I know they’re not using fillers or inferior ingredients.”

Another found the use of Berkshire pork to be “interesting” and said their household enjoys it “once in a while. I love that they note the eggs are cage-free, and everything in the ingredient list is natural and identifiable. That’s a huge positive. This is definitely a premium dumpling.” Another commenter needed a little clarification: “What is Berkshire pork? It isn’t explained anywhere.”

TASTE *test*

“**Delicious!** Good flavor. Not salty at all.”

TASTE, TEXTURE AND MORE

Taste testers tried a mixture of boiling, steaming and pan-frying the dumplings, and while the majority enjoyed them, positive feedback was hardly unanimous.

One who tried all three methods said pan-frying was a delicious but messy experience. “Once the water evaporates, the pan starts spattering all over since it had oil in it to start,” the tester wrote. “My stove was a mess. I scanned the QR code on the back to see Chef Tim cook the dumplings, and I could hear his splattering, too.”

Another who pan-fried them said they seemed a bit oily on the outside, and

suggested using less oil than recommended. And a third tester who pan-fried the dumplings said they looked great and tasted good, except that “the chive flavor was just a little too strong, and it made my house stink.”

A couple of testers who boiled the dumplings said they had good results. One enthused that it was “very straightforward. Even I can boil water! The taste and smell were similar to other dumplings we recently had. These had a nice texture and overall good taste.”

Another boiled them, had them for lunch with a little soy sauce and “loved them!” The person added, “They were not

waterlogged after boiling. The texture of the dough was very good, and they didn’t stick together like some other brands.

The pork was flavored nicely, and I really enjoyed the chive.”

One person who steamed the dumplings wished they came with a sauce, “especially since most other dumplings come with a sauce,” and another who wished the same also said, “I am concerned about adding water to a pan that already has oil in it. It doesn’t seem very safe.”

A couple other tasters who didn’t specify their cooking methods had negative things to say about the Laoban dumplings.

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TASTE *test*

“They were disappointingly underwhelming,” one wrote. “There is very little flavor in the filling. Where’s the chive, and what happened to the garlic? And the pork was very greasy and had an odd, slimy texture.” And another opined that they “were odd tasting. Seemed like it was lacking seasoning, and after I removed the cover from cooking, they made a mess.”

A couple others provided positive counterpoints: “The dumpling dough was thick enough so the filling did not burst through the wrapper,” one wrote. “It crisped up well. We could taste the mild garlic and ginger, but the pork was somewhat benign tasting. I kept waiting for some gristle in my bites, but it never happened.”

The second happy taster said, “Delicious! Good flavor. Not salty at all. The outside is really chewy, in a good way – just a good, chewy dumpling.”

UPSHOT

Bottom line, only some of the tasters potentially see themselves becoming regular purchasers of the Laoban dumplings. One said they would buy them again “on sale,” and another said they “would want a bigger bag.” A third taster wrote, “My

son and I would buy and eat this again, and I actually searched for them online to see what other flavors they had.” And a fourth said, “Would love to see them expand the line and add sauces.”

A few others were either ambivalent or imagined sticking with other products. One taster said they preferred another brand of dumplings “partially because I’m used to them,” and another wrote that while “these were good and similar to any restaurant,” and probably

“I would just order dumplings from the local Chinese restaurant.”



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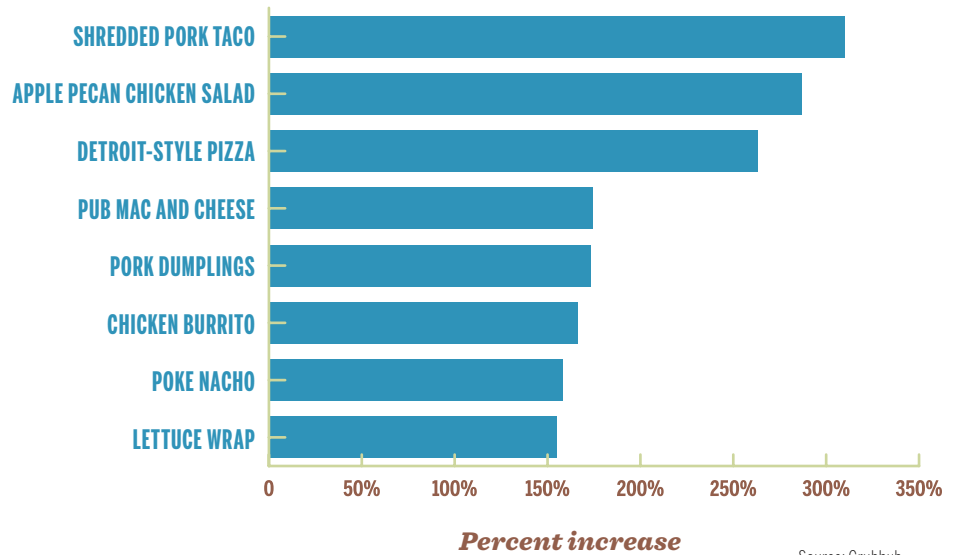
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A porky RISE

According to an analysis from Grubhub, pork dumplings were among the fast-growing menu items for American eaters in 2021, with orders up 173%. Another pork item, shredded pork tacos, led all meat items with a 310% rise.



more cost-efficient to boot, “I would just order dumplings from the local Chinese restaurant.” A third said they were very good, but “I don’t think I would purchase them because they’re a little pricey for that small of a bag. At a club store I can get a bigger bag for a better price per ounce.”

Overtly negative reactions included reiterated complaints about the lack of dipping sauce and the lack of explanation about Berkshire pork. Probably the most disappointed tester was a native Taiwanese, raised in Asia, who now lives in the U.S. “Dumplings have been a part of my life since my earliest

childhood memories,” the person wrote. “I have never tasted dumplings this boring. Dumplings should be full of flavors in the filling, but these are so muted they almost sucked the joy right out of dinner for me.”

CONCLUSION

The surge in popularity for dumplings makes it a perfect time for Laoban to be offering their crafted array of products. The response from our tasters was mixed. Some disliked the product due to either their flavor, price, and lack of specifics about the stated ingredients, while others enjoyed Laoban pork and chive

dumplings and found them, for the most part, easy to prepare and enjoyable.

The call-out for some was the missed dipping sauce (for the price, this is probably even a bigger miss!). Offering microwave preparation directions would be a welcome addition, and perhaps providing a “hack” for the pan-fried method would be great, given less spattering would be appreciated. We recently saw Laoban soup dumplings in a bulk pack at a warehouse store, which will help Laoban address our tasters’ concerns regarding package size and price points. Finally, package graphics overall were a plus.

by **Jacqueline Beckley, The Understanding & Insight Group, and Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, U&I Collaboration LLC**

Food product development and consumer research veterans, Jacqueline Beckley, Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, join Meetingplace Magazine as regular contributors to MeatingTaste, a consumer sampling of new products featured in our monthly Taste Test column. Here’s how the program works: The meat item is distributed to consumers, including the core demographic, for preparation in their own houses. No instructions are provided to the consumer, other than to write their overall impressions of the product, as well as to evaluate the flavor, texture, packaging and ease of use. Beckley, Cesario and Vahalik look for common threads by using Getting It!, a system developed to listen to consumers about products. The sample of people is not intended to be a “taste test” in a controlled setting, nor is it intended to simulate a focus group. Others are doing both. Rather, the intent is to interpret the response of the people who might purchase a product like this and use it, simply based on their encounters with the product in their individual, unique home environment. That is how U&I has been developing cutting-edge product and people understanding since 1999.