

HONG KONG'S SKYLINE FARMERS

By Bonnie Tsui March 13, 2017



A rooftop farm at the Hong Kong Fringe Club, in Central District.

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It was a breezy afternoon in Hong Kong's central business district, and the view from the roof of the Bank of America Tower, thirty-nine floors up, was especially fine—a panorama of Victoria Harbour, still misty from the previous day's rain, bookended on either side by dizzying skyline. Andrew Tsui nodded at the billion-dollar vista—"no railings," he said—but he was thinking of the harvest. Specifically, he was examining a bumper crop of bok choy, butter lettuce,

and mustard leaf, all grown here, at one of the most prestigious business addresses in the city. Spade in hand, Tsui scraped at the electric-green moss that had begun to sprout on the sides of the black plastic grow boxes—a result, he said, of the damp sea air off the harbor. “I really like this work,” he told me, still scraping. “It’s soothing, like popping bubble wrap.” A faint breeze ruffled the lettuces.

Tsui is a local boy, born in Beijing and raised in Hong Kong. Two years ago, with Pol Fàbrega and Michelle Hong, he founded Rooftop Republic, the company behind the Bank of America farm and nineteen others around the city. Though Hong Kong now imports ninety per cent of what it eats—mostly from mainland China—Tsui will remind you that, only half a century ago, sixty per cent of the supply was homegrown. “We are not trying to go back to growing everything here—that’s impossible,” he said. “But city people are pretty vulnerable when it comes to food.” Recently, Tsui noted, concerns over safety and contamination—milk and baby formula tainted with toxic melamine; pigs illegally fed growth-enhancing asthma drugs—have driven residents to look more closely at the regional food chain. A decade ago, organic farms in Hong Kong’s rural New Territories were nearly nonexistent; now there are more than four hundred and fifty of them. Meanwhile, Hong said, demand for Rooftop Republic’s urban-farming classes and projects has spiked. “Food labelling and organic certifications may not be clear or fully transparent here, so many people have become keen to grow their own food, at least in part,” she told me.

The Bank of America skyscraper farm was the first in Hong Kong’s commercial district, and a critical proof of concept for Rooftop Republic. It is situated on a decommissioned helicopter landing pad—the “rooftop of all rooftops,” Tsui called it. When I visited, in November, he and his colleagues had just finished harvesting some Chinese vegetables, which would be trucked off to a local food

bank, cooked, and packed into lunch boxes for the poor. Tsui picked a mustard leaf and handed it to me. It was bracingly peppery and spicy, with a wasabi finish—indiscernible, in other words, from mustard grown on terra firma. And this was no small accomplishment. The helipad site is windy, and when Rooftop Republic got started there it also lacked water access. Undeterred, Tsui and Fàbrega set the beds low on the roof, so they wouldn't blow away during typhoon season, and installed pumps and an automatic irrigation system. They rotated crops with the seasons—amaranth, Chinese spinach, and sweet potatoes in summer; romaine lettuce, radishes, and kale in winter. Dedicated farmers come every one or two weeks to tend the crops. "This batch of soil—we know it now," Hong said.

Each project that Rooftop Republic designs is equally site- and client-specific. At its farm atop Cathay Pacific's headquarters, near Hong Kong International Airport, airline employees perform the labor. They choose the crops they want to grow, harvest the produce, and take it home. At the EAST Hotel, in the Tai Koo area, Rooftop Republic helped set up a small garden on a long, skinny deck near the fourth-floor swimming pool. The week I visited, the hotel employees had just harvested their first okra, which would go into the restaurant's vegetarian curries, and green beans and peppers were beginning to sprout. Jonathan Wallace, EAST's manager, said there are plans to expand. "Our rooftop doesn't do much outside of housing a window-cleaning gondola," he told me. Indeed, outdoor space all around Hong Kong tends to be underutilized. Aside from satellite dishes, cooling vents, and the odd deck, many rooftops are empty.

This has left Rooftop Republic with plenty of room to grow. In the past two years, the company has averaged one new farm a month; by the end of 2017, it expects to have set up about fifty farms and transformed forty-five thousand square feet of skyline into urban farmland. And its influence goes beyond Hong Kong. Recently, the city of Seoul invited the group to an agricultural conference; Tsui and Fàbrega are also consulting with organizations in Beijing and Singapore. Their priority now is to train more personnel, including through a certification course created jointly with an N.G.O. called Silence, which focusses on the hearing-impaired. "We're not short on weekend farmers, but we need to find more skilled full-time farmers," Tsui told me. "At the same time, there's no shortage of disadvantaged people in Hong Kong." It's a stabilizing thing to create that workforce, he said. And the rooftops could soon need them.

*Bonnie Tsui is the author of "American Chinatown." She is writing a book about swimming for Algonquin. **More***