

A close-up photograph of a hand holding black chopsticks over a steaming bowl of dumplings. The dumplings are light-colored with black sesame seeds and garnished with small green leaves. The bowl is made of dark, textured wood. The background is dark, and steam is rising from the bowl.

Week in China

CHINA IN 50 DISHES

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**CHINA
IN 50
DISHES**

A 5,000 year-old food culture

To declare a love of ‘Chinese food’ is a bit like remarking you enjoy European cuisine. What does the latter mean? It encompasses the pickle and rye diet of Scandinavia, the sauce-driven indulgences of French cuisine, the pastas of Italy, the pork heavy dishes of Bavaria as well as Irish stew and Spanish paella. Chinese cuisine is every bit as diverse as the list above.

China, with its 1.4 billion people, has a topography as varied as the entire European continent and a comparable geographical scale. Its provinces and other administrative areas (together totalling more than 30) rival the European Union’s membership in numerical terms.

China’s current ‘continental’ scale was slowly pieced together through more than 5,000 years of feudal warfare, uprisings, invasions and subsequent peace treaties. This is why remarkable differences still exist across provinces in terms of language, local customs and, naturally enough, cuisine.

So where should a budding Chinese food enthusiast begin? Fortunately, there are general rules of thumb to follow. Rice is the main staple in southern China, where the warmer and wetter climate is conducive for its growth. On the contrary, flour-based dumplings and noodles are favoured in the drier, colder climates in northern China.

Chinese food experts have identified four main schools of Chinese cooking termed the Four “Great” Cuisines of China – Shandong, Sichuan, Jiangsu and Cantonese

Imported spices are generously used in the western areas of Xinjiang and Gansu that sit on China’s ancient trade routes with Europe, while yak fat and iron-rich offal are favoured by the nomadic farmers facing harsh climates on the Tibetan plains.

For a more handy simplification, Chinese food experts have identified four main schools of Chinese cooking termed the Four “Great” Cuisines of China. They are delineated by geographical location and comprise Shandong cuisine or *lu cai*, to represent northern cooking styles; Sichuan cuisine or *chuan cai* for the western regions; Huaiyang cuisine to represent China’s eastern coast; and Cantonese cuisine or *yue cai* to represent the culinary traditions of the south.

Cantonese

Cantonese cooking, or *yue cai*, is the most visible strand of Chinese cuisine around the world today, thanks in large part to early emigrants from the port cities of southern Guangdong province and neighbouring Hong Kong and Macau, who set up Chinese restaurants when they made their homes in the West.

Guangdong is a largely coastal province by the South China Sea and its (historically) more global-minded trade-



focused residents have had better access to imported premium ingredients and a generous supply of fresh seafood. Its cuisine is defined by natural and light flavours that keep the spotlight on their purity.

Vegetables are served bright and crisp, fish and seafood are often steamed, and meats are either roasted or else boiled in clear soup to accentuate their natural flavours without leaving diners with a greasy aftertaste. A signature of Cantonese cooking is the presence of *wok hei*, or wok's breath. It is a charred smoky flavour achieved by quickly wok-frying ingredients at ultra-high temperatures.

Popular dishes include *dim sum*, or little morsels of food typically served steamed in bamboo baskets with tea for breakfast or lunch; *char siu*, or roasted pork with a honeyed, reddish glaze; and *tang* or clear broths flavoured with dried seafood, medicinal herbs and bones of meat and poultry.

Fresh herbs rarely feature. If they must, Cantonese chefs prefer to use rice vinegar and salted and sun-dried seafood to accentuate a dish, rather than a heavy hand with spices. Another hallmark of the cuisine is the array of condiments such as hoisin sauce, oyster sauce, plum sauce, sweet and sour and even Worcestershire sauce that are served as dipping sauces to complement the food rather than to mask its taste.

The Cantonese are known for their adventurous palates when it comes to their selection of ingredients, so much so that an old joke prescribes that they will “eat anything



that has four legs other than a table, anything that flies other than an airplane, and anything that swims other than a submarine”. Insects, bird's nest (harvested from saliva strands in swallow nests), less premium meats such as pigeon and snake, and off-cuts and offal including animal feet, testicles and brains are found on menus alongside pricey delicacies such as abalone and lobster. You could say that the Cantonese championed nose-to-tail

dining long before the concepts became culinary trends in the West.

Sichuan

There's much more to Sichuan cuisine, or *chuan cai*, than the bold flavours and fiery levels of spice it has achieved renown for. In fact, two-thirds of the dishes from this southwestern province of China are delicate and non-spicy.

From sweet to sour, brining to pickling, the diverse array of flavours and techniques used in its cooking is a reflection of the region's uneven topography. Sichuan is also home to 1,300 rivers and comprises one of China's larger basins.

According to historians, chillis were not actually used in China until New World traders introduced them in the 16th century. The chillis quickly found their place in Sichuan cuisine as a balance to the tongue-numbing *hua jiao*, or Sichuan peppercorns, which were already iconic to the cuisine.

Another lesser known fact: the pinkish-red Sichuan peppercorns are not technically from the pepper family, but are instead dried berries from the Chinese prickly ash bush. Besides their ability to cause a unique, tingling sensation of numbness in the mouth, they are also intensely fragrant with subtle notes of citrus.

Garlic, ginger and peanuts are necessities in larders in Chengdu and Chongqing, the latter once part of Sichuan

According to historians, chillis were not actually found in China until New World traders introduced them into the country in the 16th century

province before it was spun off as a provincial-level municipality. The same goes for Sichuan *doubanjiang*, an oil-based *umami*-rich sauce made with chilli and fermented broad beans (or yellow soybeans) often called the "soul of Sichuan cuisine", particularly when they are of the prized variety from the county of Pixian.

It is often said that the true test of skill for a cook in Sichuan is if all seven flavours – spicy, sour, salty, sweet, bitter, tongue-numbing and aromatic – can be detected in the same dish.

Shandong

Shandong cuisine, or *lu cai*, may not be as widely recognised outside of China as Cantonese or Sichuan cooking, but it is considered the most storied and influential within the country. It was once the preferred cuisine of the royal court and has the longest history among the Four Great Cuisines. Some have claimed that the origins of Shandong cuisine date back to 220 BC.

As one of the earliest civilised regions in China and a key cultural centre – it is the homeland of the father of Chinese philosophy and thought, Confucius – Shandong and its cooking traditions were often held as a revered model for Beijing, Tianjin and other parts of northern and northeastern China. However, the cooking style is less commonly found in southern China and other parts of the country, even today.

The province sits on the border between the temperate

north and the semi-tropical south, so the cuisine can be thought of as a middle ground between the hearty and heavy cooking of Northern Chinese cuisine and the lighter flavours in the south. As far as native ingredients go, Shandong could not be better placed for them. Wheat, corn, millet and other temperate grains are rendered into wheat noodles, porridge, dumplings and steamed pastries and enjoyed as staples in many meals.

Due to Shandong's long coastline, fish and shellfish feature as central ingredients in many local dishes, with particular emphasis on keeping the seafood's freshness and natural briny flavours intact.

The province's location on the lower reaches of the Yellow River, where the mild climate is conducive to fruit and vegetable production, also helped Shandong earn its nickname as "one of the world's three largest vegetable gardens". Vegetables include Zhangqiu green onions, Cangshan garlic, Jiaozhou cabbage, Weifang radish; add to this Shouguang leek fruits such as the Yantai apple and Laiyang snow pear which grow in abundance and are prized across the country and abroad.

Finally, the area has a long tradition of brewing. Over a hundred producers have over a hundred different methods of brewing sweet bean paste, vinegars and liquors, which are used in cooking or sipped for their medicinal properties.

Some of the most famous Chinese cooking techniques today, such as *pa*, or frying food with a

Due to Shandong's long coastline, fish and shellfish feature as central ingredients in many local dishes, with particular emphasis on keeping the seafood's freshness and natural briny flavours intact

coating of cornstarch; *da fan shao* or tossing the wok with a single flick of the wrist so the ingredients within flip 180 degrees; and red braising or stewing food in a casserole with caramelised sugar, first originated in Shandong cuisine.

Huaiyang

Huaiyang is derived from the cooking styles of the traditionally affluent regions around the lower reaches of the Huai and Yangtze rivers.

It is the most respected of the cuisines to emerge from Jiangsu on China's east coast – though it predates the creation of that province by many centuries (Jiangsu cuisine, a little confusingly, is a more modern term that often gets used somewhat interchangeably with Huaiyang).

Huaiyang is a popular choice for officials who need to impress at government banquets, and was served at many milestone meals in the history of modern China, such as the very first state feast at the Beijing Hotel to celebrate the founding of the People's Republic of China, and at the celebratory meal that marked the country's 50th anniversary. And for good reason: the mark of Huaiyang cuisine is its emphasis on precision, whether in its aroma, in the execution of meticulous cooking techniques or in the elaborate knife skills required to turn out colourful, highly visual presentations. Even the way an ingredient is sliced is said to affect its taste.



The higher incomes and education levels in Jiangsu relative to other provinces in China mean that the refinement demanded of the cuisine goes beyond aesthetics. Many say that Huaiyang cuisine is the true test of a chef's competence, as the cook needs to be well-read on the medicinal benefits of the ingredients and astute in balancing their delicate flavours. Chefs also must be deft

with their hands in preparing the meal.

Fresh seafood is an obvious highlight of this coastal cuisine, but the non-mountainous province is also home to many rivers, lakes and ponds, so water-bred ingredients such as lotus roots, water chestnuts and bamboo shoots are menu mainstays. A hallmark of the cuisine is its ability to elevate humble ingredients such as common shrimps, Chinese yams and edible wild herbs into state banquet-worthy fare through intricate cooking techniques. Eels found in the rice fields of Huai'an, for instance, can feature in banquets where as many 108 dishes containing eel are served.

Common cooking techniques include stewing, braising and simmering to bring out the natural flavours in the wide range of ingredients while preserving their health benefits. Chinkiang vinegar produced in the Zhenjiang region features in many dishes, but other seasonings such as salt, sugar or chilli are used only sparingly. Flavours may veer towards the sweet but are almost never spicy.

In the pages that follow we feature many of the more storied dishes derived from these 'Four Great Cuisines' as well as a representative selection from other parts of China. In each case we describe the historic origins of the dish, how it is prepared and some of the best restaurants to sample it.

Xiao Long Bao

Small-Steamer Buns 小笼包

What is it?

Translated literally, **xiao long bao** means small-steamer buns in Chinese. The bite-size dumpling contains minced pork, which is then wrapped in thin flour skin pleated on the top, and steamed in a bamboo basket. The most special part of the Shanghainese delicacy is the rich savoury soup inside the dumpling. The broth is made of chicken or pork broth mixed with gelatin and then chilled to make an aspic. Heat from steaming then melts the gelatin into soup. Traditionally, only pork is used in the filling, but other variations can include crab meat, shrimp and vegetables.

When to eat it?

You can order it year round.

What do you need to know before ordering?

You can tell a good xiao long bao by looking at the skin: it should be thin and almost translucent.

Eat with a spoon, so it collects the wonderful hot soup, but be careful as it may spurt out when bitten into. You can enjoy the dumpling on its own or dip it into a dish of shredded ginger and vinegar (which is said to help cut down on the grease, so you can eat more without feeling full).

Where to eat it?

Founded in 1958 Taiwanese chain Din Tai Fung has perfected the art of making xiao long bao, and has locations around the world (including in the US, Japan and Australia). You can find the one nearest to you at: www.dintai fung.com.tw/eng/store.php?cid=4. The chain has reputation for excellent quality control and friendly service. For those visiting Hong Kong there is a large and popular Din Tai Fung restaurant in Kowloon: Third Floor, Silvercord, 30 Canton Road, Tsim Tsa Tsui; Tel: 852-2730-6928.

If you want to go back to the xiao long bao's local roots, we recommend Jia Jia Tang Bao in Shanghai, 90 Huanghe Road, by Fengyang Road; Tel: 86-21-6327-6878.

Its name literally means small-steamer buns and this dumpling – which contains a wonderful hot soup and traditionally pork – is eaten with ginger and vinegar



Xia Jiao

Shrimp Dumplings 虾饺

What is it?

Along with *siu mai* and *char siu bao*, **xia jiao** – called *hargow* in Cantonese – form the triumvirate of world famous Cantonese *dim sum*. When made properly, the steamed dumpling wrapper – made from potato starch and lard – is thin and translucent with a glossy snowy white colour. The sweet and bouncy shrimp filling, meanwhile, is a combination of shrimp, bamboo shoot and more lard.

Why is it famous?

It is believed that in ancient China, travellers along the Silk Road broke their journey by stopping at teahouses. It was thought that tea aided digestion, so many people would have some small bites along with their tea, which began the tradition of “yum cha” (drinking tea in Cantonese) and *dim sum*.

Dim Sum, hugely popular in the Guangdong Province, are small bite-size dishes that are served in steamer baskets or small plates to be enjoyed with tea. *Hargow*, meanwhile, is reckoned to have been a far more recent invention – popularised around the early 20th century in Wucun, a small village outside Guangzhou.

One of the three classic dishes of *dim sum* – in Cantonese it is known as *hargow*

Wucun was considered both prosperous and beautiful. Surrounded by a river, there were many fishing boats selling fresh seafood. It was believed that one restaurant owner concocted a dumpling with shrimp, pork and bamboo shoots. The creation quickly won over patrons. Soon, other restaurants began copying the recipe. Even though the filling has stayed largely the same, over the years, pastry chefs have perfected the wrapper, adding wheat starch to give it the glossy veneer.

Where to eat it?

Fook Lam Moon, often known as the “cafeteria of the tycoons” may be known for lavish banquets but its *dim sum* is understatedly delicious. Address: Shop 3, G/F, Newman House, 35-45 Johnston Road, Wan Chai, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-2866-0663

Maxim Palace at Hong Kong’s City Hall still keeps the tradition of servers pushing around carts of food. However, the restaurant does not take reservations and the wait time is especially long at weekends. Address: 2/F City Hall Low Block, Central, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-2521-1303.



Gou Bu Li

Dog Doesn't Care Dumplings 狗不理

What is it?

Gou bu li, which translates as ‘the dog doesn’t care’, is a type of traditional *baozi*, or steamed bun, filled with pork stuffing and soup. Shaped like a chrysanthemum, the dumpling originates from Tianjin and apparently even Empress Dowager Cixi was a fan, sending a courtier to the northern city to bring back *baozi* for her.

In 2008, in anticipation of the Beijing Olympics, officials decided to give *gou bu li* a less canine English name – “Go Believe” – to appeal to foreign visitors. This prompted ridicule among netizens.

Why is it famous?

Folklore suggests that the *baozi* were originally created in the 1850s by Gao Guiyou, a young man with the nickname Gouzi, which means ‘little dog’ in Chinese. At the age of 14, Gao left his hometown and travelled to Tianjin to be an apprentice at a steamed bun shop. There, he learned his dumpling skills before opening his own stall selling steamed pork buns. His *baozi* were so soft and fragrant that he quickly became very popular and attracted many patrons.

Such was Gao’s popularity that he was always busy at his restaurant and he had no time to talk to his customers.

People started to complain: “Gouzi doesn’t talk when he’s selling his *baozi*”. Over time, people started calling him Gou Bu Li, which means, ‘the dog doesn’t care’.

Where to eat it?

Gao’s former *baozi* stand has since spawned a chain of restaurants in Tianjin. The flagship outlet is located on 77 Shandong Road, Heping District, Tianjin (Tel: 86-22-2730-2540). In Beijing, the restaurant Goubuli Baozi also makes another type of pork bun called San Xian Bao (三鲜包). The name, which means three delicacies, uses pork, fresh shrimp and dried scallop in the filling to add a different texture and flavour. Address: 29-31 Dashilanr (pedestrian walk), Qianmen, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6353-3338.

Its name literally translates as ‘the dog doesn’t care’ and was originally concocted in the 1850s by a chef with the nickname Gouzi, which means ‘little dog’ – customer service wasn’t his strong suit, hence the dish’s name



Sheng Jian Bao

Pan-Fried Pork Buns 生煎包

What is it?

Sheng jian bao, or pan-fried pork bun, is a popular street food from Shanghai. Cooked just like fried dumplings, shengjian are sizzled in oil on one side in a flat pan, until golden brown and perfectly crispy. The other side remains soft. But while fried dumplings are crescent-shaped, shengjian are round, stuffed with pork and encrusted in sesame seeds and scallions.

Why is it famous?

Even though it is hard to pinpoint when sheng jian bao was invented, what's established is that it originated from the Shanghai area. When Emperor Qianlong from the Qing Dynasty travelled to Suzhou and Shanghai, it was documented that he had a type of pan-fried mantou (steamed bun). He enjoyed it so much he ordered the imperial chefs to learn how to make it back in Beijing.

What makes sheng jian bao so addictive and yet, so tricky to eat, is the scalding hot pork broth, which surrounds the juicy meat filling. Eating sheng jian bao properly is an acquired art. If you bite off too much of a chunk on top, the juice will come squirting out (not to mention, burn your tongue). So the trick: bite a small hole and slurp out the juice.

Where to eat it?

No one does sheng jian bao like Yang's Dumpling. The restaurant chain is Shanghai's most popular location for the delicacy.

Originally a single shop serving only two items and called Xiao Yang, the chain now charges about Rmb8 for an order of sheng jian bao and also serves an exotic variety that's stuffed with hairy crabmeat. It now has over 40 locations in Shanghai. The original is at 54 Wujiang Road but does not take telephone bookings. Local Shanghainese like to pair sheng jian bao with a bowl of vermicelli soup with tofu puffs to cut out the greasiness of the pork buns.

These pan-fried buns are a popular street food from Shanghai, containing pork and a scalding hot broth that makes eating them an acquired art



Suan La Tang

Hot and Sour Soup 酸辣汤

What is it?

Suan la tang, which means hot and sour soup, is often associated with Chinese takeouts. But in China, the soup is also hugely popular because it is packed with tangy, peppery and savoury flavours. The soup is usually made with chicken broth, along with vegetables like dried fungus, bamboo shoots as well as tofu. Vinegar, sesame oil and chilli oil and a dash of ground pepper is added to the soup before serving.

Why is it famous?

It is believed that hot and sour soup cured Yu Qian, a famous Chinese official from the Ming Dynasty. One day, after a trip to Shanxi, Yu, who had been fighting a bad cold for days, passed through Zhengzhou in Henan province where he ordered a hot soup. After eating the 'hot and sour' soup Yu sweated profusely. The next day, his sinuses cleared and he felt healthy and energetic again. The soup later became known by its simple but descriptive name.

According to theories of traditional Chinese medicine, the soup not only combines the healing abilities of chicken broth and the circulation-enhancing qualities of black fungus, the vinegar also aids digestion and promotes a

healthy appetite. Ground pepper, too, helps boost blood circulation, which is especially helpful in cold weather.

Where to eat it?

Din Tai Fung, which is known for its Xiao Long Bao, is a great place to sample hot and sour soup. Address: Shop 306, 3/F, Silvercord, 30 Canton Road, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon; Tel: 852-2730-6928.

High-end restaurant Yi Dao in Shanghai also offers a luxurious version of the soup made with fresh seafood. Address: 99 Beijing East Road, Huangpu District 201A 2/F, Yifeng Waitanyuan, Shanghai; Tel: 86-21-6333-0383.

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Huo Guo

Hotpot 火锅

What is it?

Huo guo boils thin slices of meat, seafood and vegetables in a communal pot of seasoned broth. Morsels are then plucked out as they cook. There are numerous regional variations of hotpot. One of the most popular is Sichuan hotpot, which serves a numbingly spicy soup base. Beijing is also known for its own version of instant-boiled mutton – a flash-cooking of paper-thin lamb then dipped into a sesame sauce. And if you are concerned about hygiene (lots of chopsticks in the shared pot), there's no need to be. Most restaurants offer an extra pair of chopsticks for pulling out the cooked items.

Why is it famous?

Some historians say hotpot originated as early as the Three Kingdoms (220-280) when people used bronze cauldrons to cook. Other historians claim that hotpot was already popular in the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220), when it was common to cook food in 'dou,' another type of bronze vessel. But what's certain is that by the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), there were restaurants selling hotpot. It was believed that hotpot was also hugely popular during the Qing Dynasty. Emperor Qianlong, probably China's most famous

There are numerous regional varieties of the dish with the Sichuan version coming with numbingly spicy soup base

gourmand, was a fan. Nevertheless, at the time there weren't as many variations in the broth as there are today and most people cooked the food in just boiling water.

While hotpot can be enjoyed year-round, it is especially popular in the winter.

Where to go?

Haidilao in Beijing offers authentic Sichuan hotpot, but doesn't take reservations so be ready for a long queue. 2A Baijiazhuang Road, Chaoyang District, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6595-2982).

Dong Lai Shun is also a good place to try traditional Beijing hotpot. 5/F Xin Dongan Plaza, Wangfujing Dajie, Dongcheng District, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6528-0932).

People in Hong Kong are hotpot aficionados so much so that top mainland hotpot chains like Haidilao and Little Sheep have tried but failed to compete against local establishments. One of the most authentic hotpot restaurants in Hong Kong is Ying Kee Hotpot and Seafood Restaurant. They also have several tanks of live seafood for those who want to see where their ingredients come from. Address: 19 Wilmer Street, Western District, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-2548-8897.



Xingzhi Zhufei Tang

Almond Soup with Pig's Lung 杏汁猪肺汤

What is it?

Xingzhi zhufei tang is a classic delicacy for the Cantonese of southern China and is notoriously difficult to prepare. The lungs need to be meticulously hand-washed, a process that can take two hours, before being poached in a soup base made of ground almonds.

The heat is kept low to prevent the lungs from disintegrating. A little ginger is added into the broth, along with pork loin and bones, to neutralise the lungs' steely taste. And in some preparations, the lungs are first charred in a wok at high heat to get rid of any remaining water and air inside the sacs.

The result of such dedication are marshmallow-tender cubes in a creamy, snow-white and slightly sweet soup.

Why is it famous?

The recipe dates back more than 70 years and is particularly popular during flu season. According to local folklore, dining on an animal's internal organs will help to nourish the corresponding organs in the diner, that is, eating pork liver will help one's liver, and so on.

Pig's lung is said to help ease coughing, reduce phlegm production and fortify the respiratory system in general, while almond is a popular prescription in traditional

It is said to ease coughing and is particularly popular during flu season

medicine for improving digestion, keeping skin moisturised and slowing down the signs of aging.

It is often said that putting this soup on the menu is a sign of the utmost courtesy to one's guests, as well as a demonstration of dedication to good food, because the painstaking task of cleansing the pig lungs is not one that's lightly undertaken.

Where to eat it?

Sense 8 or Yu Ba Xian (No. 8, Lane 181 Taicang Road; Tel: 86-21-6373-1888) is a Cantonese restaurant in Shanghai that is fashioned after Hong Kong's most renowned old-school teahouse, Luk Yu (located at 24-26 Stanley Street in the territory's Central district and well known for this soup). Sense 8's original branch in Zhabei shares the same decor as the Luk Yu teahouse but their Xintiandi outlet is decked out with replicas of antique furniture from Beijing's Imperial Palace and even a Sikh doorman, in a throwback to colonial Shanghai.

There's a 'no walk-ins' policy in place and a month-long waiting list for reservations. But Sense 8 serves up some of Luk Yu's iconic dishes, including the almond soup with pig's lung, which is prepared with the addition of red dates and dried tangerine peel.

PHOTO: PHOEBE CHONG



Shizi Tou

Lion's Head Meatballs 狮子头

What is it?

Shizi tou are Chinese meatballs. Originally from the region of Yangzhou and Zhenjiang in Jiangsu Province, the lion's head meatballs became a classic Shanghainese dish, following the influx of immigrants to the city.

The meatballs are made from minced pork (with an uneven ratio of fat to lean meat), and then braised in a mixture of soy sauce, sugar and sherry. In a method known (in Shanghai) as “red cooking”, they are cooked till tender. The dish is usually served in a clay pot to preserve the heat, along with napa cabbage that has been stewed in the same mixture as the meatballs.

Why is it famous?

Lion's head was originally called ‘Sunflower Minced Meat’. It was believed that during the construction of the Grand Canal (which stretches from Beijing to Hangzhou) in the Sui Dynasty (589-618), Emperor Yang travelled to various points along it, including Yangzhou city, in today's Jiangsu province. There, he was reportedly enamoured by several sights, one of which was a valley of sunflowers.

When he returned to his palace, he asked the chef to create dishes that would remind him of these sights. So the chef made a meatball that was deep-fried until golden on

Emperor Yang asked his chef to create a dish that would remind him of a valley of sunflowers

the outside, like sunflowers, before it is braised in a broth to get rid of the fat. The technique is to mince the fatty meat with lean meat into small bits so that the meat maintains a bit of chewiness even after it's cooked.

With a little imagination, the large meatballs represent a lion, with the bed of green thought to represent the lion's mane.

What do you need to know when ordering?

Sometimes the dish is served “white” (plain) or “red” (cooked in soy sauce). The white version is deemed the healthier option since it's cooked in broth.

The red version, however, is much more popular amongst locals. Many restaurants in Shanghai also offer crab meat lion's head, mixing hairy crab meat into the meatballs.

Where to eat it?

Laojishi Restaurant in Shanghai, 41 Tianping Road; Tel: 86-21-6282-9260); another alternative in Shanghai, Nanling Restsaurant, 168 Yueyang Road, near Yongjia Road, French Concession; Tel: 86-21-6433-0897).



Dongpo Rou

Braised Pork Belly 东坡肉

What is it?

Dongpo rou is pork belly, with a lot of fat. This Hangzhou classic is not for those watching their cholesterol. Despite the deceptively simple ingredients – pork belly, soy sauce, sherry, and spices – Dongpo rou can take four hours to prepare. It is simmered twice, braised, sauteed and steamed. After this lengthy cooking process, the meat should be so tender that you can easily take it apart with chopsticks.

Why is it famous?

The dish is named after the distinguished scholar and poet Su Shi, who took the pen name Dongpo. Su was an upright official serving in the Court of Emperor Shen Zong during the Song Dynasty.

As a conservative, Su did not get along with the reformists in court and was banished to Huangzhou (not to be mistaken with Hangzhou) where he had little to do but enjoy the scenery, compose poetry, and cook.

According to popular folklore, one day while Su was cooking pork, a friend dropped by. Switching the fire to gentle heat, he left the kitchen to play chess with his visitor. He was so engrossed with the game he forgot about his dish. Only at the end of the game did he remember and

rush back to the kitchen. After the additional hours of simmering, the pork had released a wonderful fragrance, while the meat was tender and flavourful.

The dish became so popular that it spread to Hangzhou and has become one of its famous dishes.

Although frowned upon by local diners, you can choose to scrape off the layers of fat. Anyway, much of the fat has already been rendered out by the long cooking process.

Where to eat it?

Louwailou in Hangzhou, 30 Gushan Road, Solitary Island; Tel: 86-57-1879-6968); or if you happen to be in Hong Kong, Hong Zhou Restaurant, 178-188 Johnston Road, Wanchai; Tel: 852-2591-1898). It also serves authentic Hangzhou cuisine.

The dish is named after the distinguished scholar and poet Su Shi, who took the pen name Dongpo



Huiguo Rou

Twice Cooked Pork 回锅肉

What is it?

Huiguo rou or twice cooked pork, (sometimes “double cooked pork”) is one of the most popular Sichuan dishes. The recipe sees pork ribs boiled first in hot water with ginger and salt, and then cooked again in a wok with Sichuan peppercorns, cabbage and bell peppers. So the dish gets its name for the meat that is returned to the wok, after an initial cooking in the pot.

Why is it famous?

According to folklore, the dish originated in the Qing Dynasty when the Qianglong Emperor (1735-1796) was touring Sichuan. He demanded a feast at every stop he made around the province. When he approached one particular village, the villagers were aghast. The crops had not been harvested and there was insufficient food to host the emperor.

So they hastily put their (already cooked) leftovers together and threw them into a wok. Clearly hygiene was not a primary concern, however illustrious the visitor. But to their surprise, he enjoyed it tremendously.

Where to eat it?

The Sichuan Provincial Office Restaurant in Beijing is one

of the most popular destinations for Sichuan food in the country's capital. 5 Gongyuan Toutiao, Jianguomennei Dajie, Beijing (Tel: 86-10-6512-2277), remember to make a reservation before you go; or try Tao Ran Ju, Kuntai Building, 12 Chaowai Dajie, West of Landao Centre (Tel: 86-10-6599-3330). In Chongqing, the restaurant Yangji Longfu pioneers a form of cuisine called “jiang hu cai”. Jianghu, which literally translates as “rivers and lakes,” is a counterculture represented by workers who've forged their living with the skill of their own two hands. In other words, the cuisine is informal and approachable. Address: Number 7, 32 Linjiang Zhi Road, Chongqing; Tel: 86-23-8655-8989.

According to folklore the Sichuan dish originated during a visit by the Qianglong Emperor and was hastily made for the touring monarch from leftovers of boiled pork – surprisingly he liked the taste of the rehashed meat



Hongshao Rou

Red Braised Pork 红烧肉

What is it?

Hongshao rou is popular in Hunan cuisine. Pork belly, ginger, cooking wine, soy sauce, chilli and rock sugar are all cooked in a large pot at a low heat. The dish is eaten with plain steamed rice or stir-fried vegetables.

Why is it famous?

Mao Zedong, a native of Hunan Province, loved the dish so much he insisted that his chefs cook it for him regularly in Beijing. It was believed that Mao Zedong first encountered the dish back in 1914 when he was studying at Hunan First Normal University and it was love at first bite. However, he refused to eat soy sauce after a visit to a soy sauce factory, complaining that the process was unsanitary. As a result, the chefs at Zhongnanhai, the headquarters of the Communist Party, had to come up with a new way to prepare the dish for the Chairman. They decided to use caramelised sugar to give the pork colour and a lot of salt to make it savoury. Mao was such a fan of the dish he was reportedly pleased with the adaptation.

The Hunan government recently released new guidelines on how to cook the dish. Only restaurants that follow them will be able to claim they serve authentic Hunan cuisine.

Where to eat it?

In Beijing you can find Hunan food at the Cui Qing Restaurant. Address: No.1 Jia, Cuiwei Dongli, Haidian District; Tel: 86-10-6825-2634.

In Hong Kong, Hunan Bistro serves authentic Hunanese cuisine in a sleek contemporary setting. Be sure to order the fish head with yellow and red chillies. Address: 409 Lockhart Road, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-2788-0897.

This staple of Hunan cuisine is made with pork belly, ginger, shaoxing wine, soy sauce, chilli and rock sugar and is normally eaten with steamed rice or stir-fried vegetables



Mu Xu Rou

Sautéed Pork, Eggs and Black Fungus 木须肉

What is it?

Mu xu rou is a pork dish of northern Chinese origin. In the northern provinces meat and vegetable dishes are commonly served with steamed bread or pancakes instead of rice. Mu xu rou is also typically served rolled in mandarin pancakes (almost like a taco) with a smattering of hoisin sauce.

The recipe varies. Usually the dish is made with sliced or shredded pork and scrambled eggs, thinly sliced wood ear mushrooms (black fungus), Chinese cabbage and sliced bamboo shoot. The ingredients are stir-fried in soy sauce, sugar, cooking wine and sesame oil.

Why is it famous?

It is believed that the name mu xu rou (木须肉) used to be called mu xi rou (木樨肉), which means “sweet osmanthus pork”. Sweet osmanthus is a small ornamental tree that produces bunches of small and fragrant yellow and white blossoms. It is believed that the blossoms of the tree resemble the scrambled eggs in the dish, which explains the name.

Expats in China may recognise mu xu rou as “wood moustache meat,” which is the literal translation that has often appeared on Chinese menus in the past.

In fact, wood moustache meat is one of a number of dishes now getting a makeover. *The English Translation of Chinese Gourmet Dishes* was published several years ago to provide updated English names for more than 2,000 Chinese dishes. Off the menu went ‘chicken without sex’ (now called spring chicken), while ‘four glad meat balls’ became braised pork balls in gravy.

Where to eat it?

Dongsiminfang Restaurant is a famous eatery that serves mu xu pork and other Beijing cuisine favourites. Address: No. 79-2 Chaoyangmennei Avenue, Dongcheng, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6406-8858.

This dish used to have the English name ‘wood moustache meat’ – a literal translation of mu xu rou – but it was one of 2,000 new translations the government ordered to avoid dishes sounding ridiculous to foreigners



Yangrou Chuan

Mutton Skewer 羊肉串

What is it?

Arguably China's most popular street food, **yangrou chuan** (lamb skewer) is the quintessential Beijing favourite. The snack, originated from Xinjiang (an autonomous region in the northwest of China), sees bite-sized pieces of meat (nestled between pieces of fat) coated with salt, plenty of cumin seeds and pepper powder, before being placed on a charcoal grill to cook. In recent years, chicken, fish and beef kebabs have also become popular. Vegetables, too, are prepared in similar cooking method.

Why is it famous?

Archaeologists unearthed a stone carving of kebabs in a tomb dated from the late Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 AD) in Wulibao, a village around what is Shandong province today. Studies have found that the characters in the two carvings are Han Chinese while the grilled skewers are believed to be beef and lamb, which suggests this simple cooking process has a long history in China.

Uighurs, a Turkic ethnic group in Xinjiang – where goats are abundant – are experts at cooking mutton. Since most Uighurs are Muslim, pork, by far China's favourite protein, is naturally off the menu. Meanwhile, cumin (ziran in Chinese) is an integral part of Uighur cooking, giving

**It is arguably
China's most
popular street
food**

dishes a nutty, musty and peppery flavour.

In addition to lamb skewers, the lamb pilaf is also hugely popular. Similar to Spanish paella, vendors in Xinjiang sell lamb pilaf cooked outdoors in a large pan. It's always made in large portions, with handfuls of mutton, chopped carrots and diced onion (with lots of cumin, of course). The key is to use fat chunks of mutton. The more fat there is, the more flavourful the dish.

Where to eat it?

Don't be fooled by the name: Guanshi Roasted Chicken Wings Bar is famous not just for the chicken wings. The restaurant offers all types of skewers, including mutton and even beef tendon balls. Address: 1 Wanghua Road, intersecting with Guangshun South Street (near Wanghua Road Primary School), Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6470-1064.

Yangji Barbeque is another popular skewer joint. Address: 202 Drum Tower East Street, across from Baochao Hutong, Beijing; Tel: 86-137-0120-5855.



Jiaohua Ji

Beggar's Chicken 叫化鸡

What is it?

Don't be fooled by the name, **Jiaohua ji** meaning beggar's chicken is anything but poor – in fact some Chinese restaurants list it under the more auspicious name 'emperor's chicken'.

The recipe varies, but starts with a whole chicken, which is stuffed with onion, ginger, Chinese black mushrooms, pickled cabbage, and other preserved vegetables.

The chicken is then wrapped in huge lotus leaves, and packed in mud that's mixed with cooking wine and salt water. The classic recipe calls for six pounds of mud.

After baking in a steady heat for three to four hours, the chef usually presents the mud pile and cracks it open before the guests, unveiling the succulent meat and wonderful aroma.

After hours of stewing inside the lotus leaves, the meat is tender and juicy; it falls easily off the bone.

Why is it famous?

Although food historians are split on its origins, most seem to think that it hails either from Hangzhou or Changshu, two cities along the Yangtze River near Shanghai.

According to popular folklore, a beggar stole a chicken

from a farm. As he began to build a fire he heard the sound of horses approaching. Fearing capture, he buried the bird in the mud near the fire.

When he finally unearthed it hours later, he was delighted to discover he had cooked up a delicious dish.

Where to eat it?

Louwailou in Hangzhou, 30 Gushan Road, Solitary Island; Tel:86-571-8796-9682; or if you happen to travel to Hong Kong, Tien Heung Lau offers some of the finest Hangzhou cuisine, 18C Austin Avenue, Kowloon; Tel: 852-2662-2414); Lung King Heen in Hong Kong's Four Seasons also serves it up, but calls it "Fortune Chicken" (Tel:852-3196-8888). Due to the lengthy cooking process, restaurants will require that you pre-order it. In most circumstances you need to give at least a day's notice.

This dish is anything but poor – in fact some Chinese restaurants list it under the more auspicious name 'Emperor's Chicken'



Beijing Kaoya

Peking Duck 北京烤鸭

What is it?

Beijing kaoya (Peking duck), may be the most famous dish from northern China, but it actually originated in Nanjing, the first capital of the Ming Dynasty. It's believed that the Ming emperors loved eating duck, a local delicacy, which prompted their chefs to develop various techniques for cooking the bird. When Ming emperor Zhu Di moved the capital to Peking (modern day Beijing) in 1421, he brought along his culinary team and various recipes, including the roast duck ones. The Peking duck dish we know today was mostly developed after that, hence its name. During the Qing Dynasty, it was introduced to the upper classes. In 1864 the most famous Peking duck restaurant Quanjude (全聚德) was set up to cater to the growing demand, impressing diners with its innovative "hung oven" (挂炉) roasting technique.

Why is famous?

In hung ovens, the ducks are cooked slowly over woodfire, and occasionally singed in the flames using poles. This method produces the dish's crispy, shiny and reddish brown hue.

Cooked duck can be sliced in three ways: skin only, meat only and meat with skin together. The meat and skin is

This iconic dish was praised by Richard Nixon, Fidel Castro and Helmut Kohl alike during their visits to the Chinese capital

then served with scallions, cucumber sticks, sweet bean sauce, smashed garlic and white sugar, before being wrapped in a thin flour pancake. People eat it with their hands, like a burrito.

Since the founding of the People's Republic, the dish has become one of China's national icons, favoured by tourists and diplomats alike and praised by Richard Nixon, Fidel Castro and Helmut Kohl on trips to Beijing.

Where to eat it?

Try Jing Yaa Tang (京雅堂), the Chinese restaurant inside the Opposite House hotel in Beijing's Sanlitun Village. To ensure quality Jing Yaa Tang's chef de cuisine hand-picks each duck from their supplier. To ensure a perfectly crispy skin air is blown into the duck to separate the skin from the meat. It is then filled with water to keep the interior moist, seasoned with aged vinegar, molasses and spices and later roasted in a brick oven over traditional aromatic date wood. During the 70 minutes the duck hangs in the oven, the chefs use a long pole to liao, or singe, the duck over the fire. Address: Taikoo Li, Sanlitun North, No. 11 Sanlitun Road, Chaoyang District, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6417-6688.



Koushui Ji

Saliva Chicken 口水鸡

What is it?

Even though ‘saliva chicken’, the literal translation of the dish, doesn’t sound particularly appetising, **Koushui ji** is one of the most famous dishes in Sichuan cuisine. The chicken is first steamed before being dunked in iced water to firm up the skin. The chicken is then bathed in a numbingly spicy chilli sauce with toasted peanuts and sesame seeds and a garnish of green onion. The dish is usually eaten cold as an appetiser.

Why is it famous?

While its exact origin is unknown, it is believed that the name came about when famous Sichuan writer and poet Guo Moruo (1892-1978) described a chicken dish so visually stunning that just looking at it “makes the mouth water”. Another reason for the name is because of the generous use of Sichuan peppercorn in the chilli oil, which numbs the lips and makes the mouth drool.

The sauce is made up of mostly chilli oil, but also includes soy sauce, vinegar, cooking wine, garlic and ginger.

To say people in Sichuan are obsessed with their food is an understatement. They dissect and analyse their meals with intense seriousness and engagement. While there have been debates about finding the balance between

preserving tradition and embracing new ways of cooking and innovation, Koushui ji is a staple that is not going away.

Where to eat?

In Beijing, Yuxin Sichuan Dish is a popular Sichuan restaurant chain. Its Ko Shui Ji is ranked the city’s best on restaurant app Dianping. One of the Beijing locations: 111 Xi Dan North Street, 7/F Xidan International Mansion, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6618-3918.

San Xi Lou in Hong Kong is a good spot for authentic Sichuan food. Address: 7/F, Coda Plaza, 51 Garden Road, Central, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-2838-8811.

The name is believed to derive from a description by the famous Sichuan writer Guo Morou of a dish so visually stunning it “makes the mouth water”



Gongbao Jiding

Kung Pao Chicken 宫保鸡丁

What is it?

A staple offering in Chinatown restaurants around the world, **gongbao jiding** (known internationally as kung pao chicken) is made with stir-fried chicken breast (cut into cubes), crunchy peanuts and dried chili peppers. Then it is cooked in sweet bean paste, soy sauce and sugar. These days, kung pao shrimps and kung pao beef are also very popular.

Why is it famous?

Ding Baozhen, a native of Guizhou Province, was a government official in the Qing Dynasty. After he was promoted to the rank of Gongbao (a prestigious title) Ding visited the family of a man in Sichuan who had saved his life when he was young. While he was there Ding was served a dish featuring diced chicken, peanuts and Sichuan peppercorns. He enjoyed it so much that he began eating it on a regular basis and serving it to his guests. It came to be known as gongbao jiding in honour of the official (*jiding* loses a bit of glamour in translation, meaning 'chicken bits').

The kung pao spelling derives from the nineteenth century Wade-Giles system for romanising Mandarin (Gongbao is the modern pinyin equivalent, although most

The chicken dish was a favourite of a Qing Dynasty official who rose to the prestigious rank of 'Gongbao' – hence the name

eateries in the US and UK have stuck with kung pao as their customers are familiar with it).

During a state visit to China back in 2014, German Chancellor Angela Merkel watched a local chef prepare it in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province. Then she tucked in. "We thought she would just have a mouthful but she finished about two-thirds of it," the restaurant owner announced proudly. "She asked us to bring more chopsticks so that other members of her entourage could also taste it."

Where to eat it?

Sample it in Chengdu if you want an authentic experience like Merkel's. Chen Mapo is a very popular restaurant in the city. The address is 197 West Yulong Street (near Bank of Communications) in Qingyang District, Chengdu. Tel: 86-28-8675-4512.

In Beijing, Meizhou Dongpo is a Sichuan restaurant that is known for its kung pao chicken. Address: 9 You Yong Chang North Road (near Jiacheng Mall) in Fengtai District, Beijing. Tel: 86-10-5739-3266.



Mao Xue Wang

Duck Blood Curd 毛血旺

What is it?

Mao xue wang is made of duck blood curd, tripe, chicken gizzard and other organ parts simmered in a broth that is made of peppercorn and chillis. It is popular because of the different textures featured in the dish – from silky (via the blood curd) to chewy (gizzard and heart) and even crunchy (tripe).

Why is it famous?

Legend has it that in the 1940s – a period where nutrition was scarce in China owing to continuous armed conflict – a butcher surnamed Wang in Ciqikou, Chongqing, sold his shop's innards and scraps at very low prices. One day, Wang's wife (who had the surname Zhang) came up with the idea of instead putting all the cheap odds and ends into a soup. The outcome was a delicious broth. By accident, Zhang put duck blood curd into the broth, and found that the curd tasted even silkier and made the soup more flavourful. The dish soon became known as Mao Xue Wang.

Mao, in Chongqing dialect means rough, and also implies that the ingredients in the dish are somewhat sloppy. In recent years, the dish has included variants where other equally unhealthy ingredients like luncheon

The dish is popular in China because of its different textures and is also known as 'blood tofu'

meat are added.

Duck blood curd is also known as 'blood tofu'. Fresh duck blood is left sitting in a container while the blood coagulates. The solidified blood is then cut into smaller pieces before cooking in a pot of heated water. But more often than not, pork blood curd is used instead of duck blood curd in mao xue wang because pork blood is more accessible and is cheaper. In Shanghainese cuisine, there is also a soup-based blood dish called Chicken and Duck Blood Soup, using not one but two types of blood curds – chicken and duck – as the main ingredients.

Where to eat it?

In Chongqing, the birthplace of the dish, Shengtian MaoXueWang is a good place to sample the dish. The restaurant is located near Jiefangbei in Chongqing, 7 Qingnian Road, Shidai Haoyuan Block D, Room 16-6; Tel: 86-23-6381-6677.

Sichuan Paradise in Hong Kong offers a modern version of the dish, replacing the cheap cuts with fresh seafood. Address: 3/F, One Capital Place, 18 Luard Road, Wan Chai, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-2205-0020.



Jin Qian Ji

Gold Coin Chicken 金钱鸡

What is it?

This auspicious-sounding dish from China's south is savoured by some and dreaded by others. Some have called it an artery clogger or a cholesterol sandwich, for its deceptively dainty appearance belies the fatty, meaty filling within. Gold Coin Chicken, or **Jin qian ji** in Mandarin, is made with alternating layers of tender barbecued pork, charred pork fat and pork or chicken liver slices heavily slathered with a glaze of rose wine and maltose. It gets its name from the morsels' round coin-like shape, and their glistening appearance. They are sometimes served on or sandwiched between pieces of thin steamed Chinese buns.

Why is it famous?

Despite its lavish name, Gold coin chicken was in fact born of poverty. It is said to have been created by impoverished people from the town of Shunde in China's southern Guangdong Province. Reluctant to let any food scraps go to waste, they would save any excess trimmings of roast pork, chicken livers and pork fat from Cantonese roast meat shops, skewer them onto long metal barbecue stick and then baste them with the same marinade used in Cantonese barbecue pork. To save on the use of utensils,

Despite its lavish name, gold coin chicken was in fact born of poverty

the resulting, cholesterol-rich melange was traditionally eaten with steamed buns.

As society became more prosperous in recent decades roast meats were no longer a rarity at the dinner table. The population also became more health conscious and fat-averse, so the dish gradually lost its popularity and is sometimes still viewed as a poor man's meal and served with a sense of shame or embarrassment.

Where to find it?

The dish is all but forgotten in its hometown, but variations live on in neighbouring Hong Kong and Macau.

In Hong Kong a good place to try is Manor Restaurant, though it will need to be ordered ahead of time; Address: Shop F-G, 440 Jaffe Road, Causeway Bay; Tel: 852-2836-9999).

If you want an 'upgraded' version served in pristine Michelin-lauded surrounds, try the three-starred The Eight in Macau's Grand Lisboa (2/F, Grand Lisboa, 2-4 Avenida de Lisboa; Tel: 853-8803-7788). Their version gets a deluxe upgrade, with French foie gras taking the place of chicken liver.

PHOTO: PETER CHANG



Zui Ji

Drunken Chicken 醉鸡

What is it?

Zui ji (drunken chicken) is a famous cold dish originating from Zhejiang Province. The most famous version, originated from the city of Shaoxing, sees the chicken boiled with ginger and green onion before being dunked in cold water to firm up the skin. It is then soaked in a marinade partly made of chicken broth and a lot of Shaoxing wine – a type of alcoholic beverage made from grains like rice and sorghum – to create the distinct aroma and slightly sweet flavour tinged with alcohol. It is believed that Shaoxing wine is used not only because it adds a complex flavour but it also cuts grease and helps digestion, which renders the dish a popular appetiser.

Why is it so famous?

One of the most popular stories about the origin of drunken chicken goes like this: once upon a time three brothers – living in the same family courtyard complex – wanted one of their wives to manage the household (which would mean she would have more power over the other two wives). To decide who was most fitted for the position, they asked each of them to make a chicken dish.

The first wife made a double boiled chicken soup. The second made a poached chicken. The third wife brought

out a chicken soaked in the wine marinade. As soon as she opened the lid, the beautiful fragrance from the wine filled the whole room. Needless to say, the wife of the third brother was named the head of the household.

Today, there is everything from drunken crab to drunken shrimp and even drunken snails, all using a similar cooking method involving Shaoxing wine.

Where to eat it?

Lao Zheng Xing is one of the oldest establishments serving drunken chicken in Shanghai. 556 Fuzhou Road (near Central Zhejiang Road); 86-21-6322 2624. Liu Pavilion in Hong Kong is also an authentic option for *su cai* cuisine. While you are there, why not try drunken duck too: 3/F The Broadway, 54-62 Lockhart Road, Wan Chai; Tel: 852-2804-2000.

The chicken is soaked in a marinade made of chicken broth and a lot of cooking wine



Da Pan Ji

Big Plate Chicken 大盘鸡

What is it?

Da pan ji translates as “big plate chicken” and is a popular dish from Xinjiang (an autonomous region in the northwest of China).

The chicken is first cut into bite size pieces, sautéed with spices (plenty of chilli and peppercorn) and coarsely chopped vegetables, and then slowly cooked in beer. As the name implies, the dish is a large one and usually serves more than eight people. Da pan ji is often served with latiaozi, Xinjiang’s famous hand stretched noodle. The plain noodle balances the spiciness of the sauce and soaks up the juice of the chicken. And don’t forget to wash it all down with some Xinjiang black beer.

Why is it famous?

According to folklore, the dish was invented by cooks along the highway as a quick fix for hungry travellers. In the 1980s a restaurant in Shawan County in Xinjiang devised the chicken dish, somewhat by accident. One day a construction worker ordered a plate of chicken and enjoyed it so much he wanted to bring it back to other workers on the nearby site. So he asked the chef to make him a dish that used the entire chicken. The chef obliged, using every part of the chicken including the bones and

skin, but he didn’t have a plate large enough to carry the dish. As he looked around the kitchen, he saw a platter he used to carry noodles. So he put the chicken on the large plate (da pan) and gave it to the worker. The dish became such a hit with the other workers that it soon became known as ‘big plate chicken’.

Where to eat it?

Who does Xinjiang food better than the people from the province? Check out the Xinjiang Islamic Restaurant in the Xinjiang provincial government office in Beijing, 7 Sanlihe Lu (inside the courtyard of the Xinjiang Provincial Government Office; Tel: 86-10-6833-2266). An alternative is Crescent Moon Restaurant near Wangfujing, 16 Dongsi Liutiao, west of Chaonei Beixiaojie, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6400-5281).

As the name implies, the dish is a large one and usually serves more than eight people



Lushui Epian

What is it?

Lushui epian is one of most famous dishes from Chiu Chow (Chaozhou in Mandarin), a city in Guangdong Province that is also famous for being billionaires Li Ka-shing and Tencent boss Pony Ma's hometown. To make the famous dish, the geese are braised for about an hour and a half in a special marinade before being hung up to dry.

Why is it famous?

The secret to a good braised goose lies in the marinade. The ingredients usually include star anise, cinnamon, peppers, herbs and spices. While most restaurants use similar ingredients in the marinade, the proportion in which each is used is what makes the dish different. It is believed that some restaurants guard their unique marinade recipe much as Coca-Cola does the Coke formula. They also never throw away the old marinade. They simply add a new sachet to the marinade every day to add to the flavour. In addition to geese, you can also put tofu and boiled eggs in the marinade to soak up the flavour.

Meanwhile, chilled crab is another of the region's must-try dishes. It epitomises how Chiu Chow people prepare their seafood and showcase its freshness and natural sweetness. They are steamed without any seasoning for 30

The secret to good braised goose lies in the marinade. The ingredients usually include star anise, cinnamon, peppers, herbs and spices

Chiu Chow Sliced Goose 卤水鹅片

minutes before being left to cool at room temperature. While they take three hours to cool down, top chefs insist the process cannot be accelerated by instead refrigerating them. It is also the way Chiu Chow people serve chilled fish (i.e. steamed fish that is eaten cold).

Chilled crab is served with a dipping sauce of vinegar and minced ginger to balance the crabs' 'cooling' property (based on traditional Chinese medicine and the concept of *yin* and *yang*, such a dish should be served to those with too much 'heat' in their bodies). The sour note of the vinegar brings out the natural sweetness of the crabmeat, meaning any additional seasoning is unnecessary.

Where to eat it?

Chiu Tang in Hong Kong offers authentic Chaozhou cuisine in a luxurious setting. Be sure to also try the oyster omelette and fried noodle with sugar and vinegar, both popular local favourites. Address: 2/F The Galleria Plaza, 9 Queen's Road, Central; Tel: 852-2526-8798.

Chaoxiang Sihai is a more down-to-earth Chaozhou joint in Shenzhen so beware of a long wait. Its oyster porridge is a must-order. Address: 49 Sanfang, Xiasha, Futian District, Tel: 86-755 8321-1229.

PHOTO: MICHAEL LEE



Qi Guo Ji

Steam Pot Chicken 汽锅鸡

What is it?

Qi guo ji, which means steam-pot chicken, is from Yunnan Province. What's so special is that the soup is served in a *qi guo*, a ceramic container with a tapered cone (shaped like a chimney) in the middle. The pot is then set on top of a large saucepan over boiling water. After the ingredients – Chicken, dried dates, ginger, spring onion and a bit of rice wine but no water – are put in the pot, steam will travel through the chimney into the pot and condense under the lid, then fall into the pot. The cooking process results in a very clear broth while the meat is fall-off-the-bone tender. It's reckoned that locals came up with the idea of cooking the food in a *qi guo* because much of the province is on a plateau about 2,000 metres above sea level, and the altitude affects the boiling point of water. Steam, however, is not affected.

Why is it famous?

The dish became popular in Southern Yunnan during the Qing Dynasty. According to local folklore, in Jiانشui, a city famous for pottery production, a craftsman named Yang Li invented a unique steaming pot with a small chimney in the middle. The chimney helps circulate the steam inside the pot, cooking the chicken while sealing the flavours

The cooking process results in a very clear broth while the meat is fall-off-the-bone tender

inside. Many reckon it is the design of the pot that gives the intense flavour of the broth. Interestingly, Chinese don't recommend drinking chicken soup during a cold, because the chicken is said to trap the illness inside the body.

Yunnan is also famous for pu'er tea. The wild leaves, preferably from ancient trees in the jungle, are first dried in the sun before they are allowed to ferment over weeks, months, years or even decades. It is believed that the rich variety of landscapes in Yunnan, from jungle-covered hillside to snow-capped mountains is what gives pu'er tea its unique taste. It is believed that pu'er tea can lower cholesterol, cure hangovers and trim away body fat.

Where to eat it?

There is no better place in Beijing for authentic Yunnan food than the Yunteng restaurant, housed in Yunnan province's "capital representative office", Building 7, Donghuashi Beili, Dongqu, Chongwen District in Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6711-3322.

Middle 8th Restaurant also serves some of the most traditional Yunnan cuisine: 1 Sanlitun Zhongjie, Chaoyang District in Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6413-0629.



San Bei Ji

Three Cup Chicken 三杯鸡

What is it?

San bei ji, which means three cup chicken, is a popular dish in Jiangxi Province. The dish is traditionally made with one cup each of three liquids: white wine, soy sauce and sesame oil. The chicken, together with the sauce, is cooked in a claypot for an hour. When served, the chicken should be on the cusp of burning because this gives it a crisp texture. The modern version also calls for seasoning with ginger and plenty of basil.

Why is it famous?

The dish originated in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). Wen Tianxiang was a prominent writer, scholar and general famous for his loyalty and heroism. During a battle against the Mongols, Wen was captured by the enemy. Despite being tortured, Wen refused to yield. So before his execution, a sympathetic prison warden cooked the chicken dish for him using the only three ingredients he had to hand – pork fat, wine and soy sauce. After the execution the warden went back to his hometown in Jiangxi and told the story of the honourable General Wen.

Where to eat it?

Curiously enough, san bei ji has become a very popular

dish in Taiwan and is widely available in many restaurants on the island.

If you are in Taipei, make sure you visit Shin Yeh Restaurant on Taipei 101, the island's tallest building. The restaurant offers authentic Taiwanese food and unparalleled views of the city. Be sure to make reservations well in advance.

Address: 85/F-1, Taipei 101, No. 45 Shihfu Road, Hsinyi District; Tel: 88-62-810-10185.

The dish originated in the Southern Song Dynasty and was made by a sympathetic prison warden as a last meal for a Chinese general who had been captured by the invading Mongols – aside from chicken it contain only three ingredients: pork fat, wine and soy sauce



Shui Zhu Yu

Water Boiled Fish 水煮鱼

What is it?

Shui zhu yu is a Sichuan dish, with a name with the literal meaning of “water-cooked fish”. It’s actually cooked mostly in boiling chilli oil. Fish slices (usually grass carp), a large amount of chilli pepper and special Sichuan bean sauce, vegetables (bean sprouts and napa cabbage) and a lot of chilli oil is required.

Why is it famous?

It is believed that the origin of the dish came from Chongqing around the 1980s. A chef in the municipality won a prestigious culinary competition with a dish that featured the aforementioned cooking method but only to cook other meats like pork and beef. Soon, he became so famous for the dish he was frequently asked by family and friends to make it. One day, a friend brought over a few river grass carp. Without other protein on hand, the chef decided to filet the carp before poaching it in boiling broth for flavour. To his surprise, the tender flaky meat of the fish complemented perfectly the spicy and numbing sauce.

Traditionally, it is served during the Lunar New Year. That’s because the Chinese pinyin for “fish” is “yu”, which sounds a lot like the character for “plenty left over”. The

phrase “*Nian Nian You Yu*,” which is usually said around Lunar New Year, means you will have plenty of fortune and money left over for the whole year.

Where to eat it?

Hidden in an alleyway just north of the Bright Chang’an Building, Chuan Ban is always packed. The restaurant, next door to Sichuan’s provincial office in Beijing, is deemed to serve the best Sichuanese food in the city. Gongyuan Tou Tiao 5, Jianguomennei Dajie, Dongcheng district, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6512-2277 ext. 6101). Another good choice is Yi Restaurant, Shuiduizi Dong Li, 22 Chaoyang Bei Road, Chaoyang district, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-8596-8995).

Traditionally this Sichuan dish is served during the Lunar New Year and is said to bring good fortune for the year ahead



Songshu Guiyu

Squirrel Fish 松鼠桂鱼

What is it?

The most famous Huaiyang dish is arguably **songshu guiyu** (squirrel fish), a deep-fried delicacy that has gained widespread popularity across China and abroad for its dramatic appearance, eye-catching orange hue, and for being conveniently bone-free. The dish's name is, thankfully, a misnomer: it contains no actual squirrel meat. Instead, freshwater fish such as yellow croaker, carp or mandarin fish – chosen for their firm white flesh and clean taste – are commonly used to prepare this dish.

The fish is first deboned then scored using a cross-hatch technique, flipped inside out (as one would when eating a mango), battered, and then deep fried. The process of deep-frying makes the fish's body curl up in a shape akin to a squirrel mid-joint.

The fish is later doused in a tangy sweet and sour sauce made by thickening a combination of tomatoes, dark soy sauce, red rice vinegar, garlic, sugar and salt. The auspiciously reddish tones of the sauce makes the dish a favoured addition to dinner tables around Chinese Lunar New Year.

Why is it famous?

The dish's history can be traced back to the Qing Dynasty,

In spite of its name it contains no squirrel

during the rule of Emperor Qianlong. According to popular retelling, the emperor once came upon an energetic carp on his extensive tour around Jiangsu and ordered it to be cooked at once. Instead of serving it flat on a plate, the chef used a little ingenuity – and a lot of hot oil – to give the fish its animated, squirrel-like shape in order to reflect the liveliness that so bemused the emperor. Others, however, say its name draws from more literal origins, namely, the squirrel-like squeaks that the fish meat emits when bathed in hot oil. (Some suggest it got the name simply because the dish is usually served with fresh pine nuts)

Where to eat it?

Squirrel fish is the specialty of Songhe Lou (72 Taijian Lane, Pingjiang District, Suzhou; Tel: 86-512-6770-0688), a two century-old restaurant in Suzhou said to have been where Emperor Qianlong was first served the dish – and where he regularly returned after that. Their crispy, moreish, but slightly pricey, version served amid opulent interiors is known to attract queues outside the door.



Xihu Cuyu

West Lake Vinegar Fish 西湖醋鱼

What is it?

Xihu cuyu (West Lake vinegar fish) is a popular dish from Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province. Preparation is simple: fresh carp is first poached and then simmered in a mixture of Shaoxing wine, vinegar, sugar, soy sauce, ginger and onion. The light seasoning accentuates the sweetness of the fish.

Why is it famous?

According to folklore, two fisherman brothers were living near West Lake in Hangzhou. A despotic official, surnamed Zhao, coveted the older brother's wife and plotted his death. Zhao then framed the younger brother for the murder.

On learning the truth, the wife of the dead brother urged the younger sibling to flee. Before he left, she cooked him a fish caught from the lake, seasoning it with sugar and vinegar to symbolise the sweetness and bitterness (or rather, sourness) of life. Years passed and the young man became an official. He had the opportunity for a fitting revenge on Zhao. But he still couldn't find his sister-in-law. Then one day, he was served West Lake Fish at dinner and it tasted exactly like the dish his sister-in-law had once prepared for him. He asked to meet the chef and it turned

out to be her. The two quickly reunited.

Where to eat it?

Hangzhou is famous for its local waters, which are a source of not just its famous hairy crabs, but also for eel and different types of fish.

For West Lake fish dining: try Louwailou in Hangzhou, 30 Gushan Road, Solitary Island; Tel: 86-571-8796-9682); or Hong Zhou Restaurant in Hong Kong, 1/F, Chinachem Johnston Plaza, 178-188 Johnston Road, Wan Chai; Tel 852-2591-1898.

This popular dish from Hangzhou has an elaborate history involving a despotic official, a wrongly framed brother and the reuniting of his younger sibling with the brother's widow many years later after tasting this fish course at a banquet given in his honour

PHOTO: HANAMI SAKAI



Sai Pangxie

Imitated Crab 赛螃蟹

What is it?

Sai pangxie, which means ‘better than crab,’ is an imperial dish from the Qing Dynasty made largely of eggs and a few slices of ginger. Fancier versions might include dried scallop and fish meat. Others add salted duck egg yolk to imitate the crab roe.

Why is it famous?

Legend has it that the Empress Dowager Cixi was craving crab one day but being in Beijing there was a lack of fresh crab, which was an exotic delicacy available only two months of the year. As a result, an imperial chef came up with a clever recipe that he believed could rival real crab but using only very simple day-to-day ingredients like eggs and ginger. The egg white is supposed to be the crabmeat while the yolk is to mimic the crab roe. Simpler recipes call for seasonings such as salt, sugar and cooking wine while those who are not vegetarian can add a bit of stock for more flavour. To make the dish taste even more “crab-like,” a dash of cooking vinegar helps fool the taste buds.

Where to eat it?

A lot of Chinese restaurants – even those that don’t serve imperial Chinese cuisine – have the dish on the menu. One

of the places to enjoy the dish in Hong Kong is Peking Garden. Address: Shop B1 Basement 1 Alexandra House, 16-20 Chater Road, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-2526-6456.

Meanwhile, Feng Ze Yuan in Beijing is well known for serving traditional imperial cuisine, including sai pangxie. Address: 83 Zhushikou West Street, Xicheng District, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6318-6688.

Legend has it that the Empress Dowager Cixi was craving crab one day but living in Beijing there was a lack of seasonal supply. So the imperial chef came up with a clever recipe that he believed would ‘imitate’ crab but which was made from eggs and ginger as well as a dash of cooking vinegar to help fool the taste buds



Xia Zao

Shrimp Ball 虾枣

What is it?

Xia zao is a type of deep-fried shrimp ball from Chiu Chow (or Chaozhou in Mandarin) in Guangdong Province. Made from fresh shrimp that's been mashed, diced water chestnut, minced pork, (an unhealthy amount) lard, eggs, salt and pepper, the mixture is then rolled into a ball – sometimes rolled in a beancurd sheet – before it is deep-fried to a golden brown. The shrimp balls are traditionally served with a tangy tangerine sauce to balance the greasiness.

Why is it famous?

In the past, the rugged, sheltered bays and islands of Chiu Chow made its economy heavily reliant on the sea. Its cuisine became famed for its chefs' dexterity (in the popular TV show about food *A Bite of China* it featured prominently).

Being surrounded by water, seafood is a main staple in Chiu Chow. Xia zao, however, was a dish reserved for special occasions like the Lunar New Year because fresh shrimps were hard to come by. The old idea behind mincing meat and rolling them into balls was also to make the most of those scarce shrimps. Even though the dish requires few ingredients (five, if you don't count salt and

This dish from Chiu Chow was typically served during banquets over the Lunar New Year

pepper), it requires a lot of preparation and technique to transform those ingredients into something spectacular.

In Chiu Chow, it's not only shrimp balls that are famous. The region is also famous for beef balls. Like xia zao, beef balls also require a lot of technique (and strength): using two iron rods – each weighing about two kilograms – the chef hammers the meat repeatedly and forcefully until it reaches the right texture. The mixture is seasoned with salt and pepper and cornstarch before being rolled into balls. Chiu Chow people like to boil the beef balls in beef broth to enhance the flavour.

Where to eat it?

In Hong Kong, Carianna is one of the oldest and most authentic Chiu Chow establishments. While you are there, be sure to try the simmered yellow croaker that is braised in fish broth and celery. Address: 1/F, 151 Gloucester Road, Wan Chai, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-2511-1282.

In Guangzhou, Hai Men Yu Zi Dian is a popular restaurant that serves authentic Chiu Chow cuisine. Egg omelette with Diced Oyster is a must-order here too. Address: 4/F Huihua Commerce and Trade Building, 80 Xianlie Middle Road, Guangzhou; Tel: 86-20-8776-6618.



Yu Fu

Fish Cakes 鱼腐

What is it?

Yu fu is a specialty that originates from Shunde in Guangdong Province. First, fresh fish is pounded until it reaches a starchy consistency. Then it is mixed with salt, pepper and cornstarch before being combined with egg white that has been beaten into a meringue-like texture. The fish paste is moulded into an oval shape before being deep-fried in oil.

The source of the name yu fu (*yu* meaning fish) is that the Shunde delicacy is soft like tofu but the taste is unlike more traditional fish balls.

Why is it famous?

While Guangdong cuisine is often minimalist in terms of flavouring and preparation, food from Shunde is known for its more liberal use of ingredients including sun dried tangerine peel as well as dates, resulting in simple but powerful flavours.

Shunde – one of UNESCO's gourmet capitals (it was the second city to get the title in China after Chengdu in Sichuan province) – was part of the seabed before tectonic forces first moved it up and then allowed it to subside into wetlands. Those who eventually moved to Shunde later started digging ponds for fish, piling the excavated soil to

create a little causeway on which they started planting mulberry trees for silkworms. Over the years, Shunde, where developer Country Garden is headquartered, became the capital for the silk farming industry. Its cuisine has also evolved. Thanks to its affluence, its cuisine features ample local fresh ingredients like seafood, meat and dairy (from native water buffalos).

Where to eat it?

Check out the most famous seafood restaurant in Shunde, which serves a fish soup made of yu fu and Chinese luffa: Feng Chu Shunde Kitchen, 88 Jinlong Road, Daliang District, Shunde, Foshan; Tel: 86-757-2221-9595.

The source of the name yu fu (*yu* meaning fish) is that the Shunde delicacy is soft like tofu but the taste is unlike more traditional fish balls



Longjing Xiaren

Longjing Shrimps 龙井虾仁

What is it?

Longjing xiaren, which is shrimp stir-fried with longjing tea, a famed type of green tea, is arguably the best known dish from Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province. The shrimp is first coated in egg white and cornstarch before being tossed over a very high heat to cook briefly. Tea is then brewed in boiling water and added to the shrimp, along with some few teaspoons of tea leaf, cooking wine and salt.

Why is it famous?

The history of teamaking in Hangzhou's West Lake area dates back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907). But it wasn't until the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) that longjing, which means 'Dragon's Well' in English, became a status symbol. It was believed that Emperor Qianlong was such a fan of longjing tea he visited the West Lake six times during his reign and wrote countless poems about tea making and tea drinking. Mao Zedong also famously offered the tea to foreign leaders as a diplomatic gift.

According to local folklore, longjing shrimp was created by accident. One day, Emperor Qianlong stopped by a local eatery in Hangzhou and asked for his favourite longjing tea and some river shrimp. But instead of serving up the crustacean with a beverage on the side, the confused chef

This dish has an unusual cooking method: it is stir-fried with green teas

instead added tea leaves to the prawns. Qianlong, however, was a fan of the dish and it soon became a local staple.

While Westerners generally think of tea as a beverage, chefs in China have used it as a seasoning for centuries. One of the most traditional uses of tea in Chinese cooking is for tea-leaf eggs. After eggs are hard-boiled, their shells are gently cracked all over but not removed, whereon they are put in a pot with a mixture of water, soy sauce, star anise and tea leaves to simmer for about an hour.

Where to eat it?

Some might call it a tourist trap, but Louwailou, Hangzhou's oldest restaurant, has been around for over 170 years. It also offers a great view of the West Lake. Address: No. 30, Gushan Road, Xihu District, Hangzhou; Tel: 86-571-8796-9682

Hong Kong's Tien Heung Lau Restaurant, one of the oldest Hangzhou restaurants in the city, offers some of the most exquisite and authentic Hangzhou cuisine. In addition to longjing shrimp, be sure to try the Dongbo Rou and Fried Eel. Address: 18C Austin Avenue, Tsim Sha Tsui; Tel: 852-2366-2414.



Qianlong Baicai

Qianlong Cabbage 乾隆白菜

What is it?

A traditional Beijing dish, **Qianlong baicai** is a plate of fresh, crispy Chinese cabbage blended with thick sesame paste, a bit of vinegar and some sugar and honey. The recipe has just the right amount of acidity to balance the thickness of the sesame paste, while highlighting the sweetness of the cabbage.

Why is it famous?

Qianlong baicai was reportedly the Emperor Qianlong's favourite vegetable dish (hence the name). Legend has it that Qianlong (1711-1799) arrived at a restaurant in the capital city after a long day of travelling (he often travelled incognito to observe the conditions of ordinary people). By then, it was late and the emperor was hungry. Without having much to serve, the cook chopped up some cabbage, mixing it with sesame paste and a bit of honey. To his surprise, Qianlong enjoyed the dish tremendously so the chef simply named it Qianlong Baicai (cabbage).

Similarly, another famous cabbage dish in China is called simply kaishui baicai, which translates as "water cabbage". But don't be fooled, the cabbage is considered one of the toughest dishes to cook in Chinese cuisine. First, a richly flavoured broth that is made of old rooster

Qianlong baicai was reportedly the Emperor Qianlong's favourite vegetable dish

(sometimes duck), lean pork and Jinhua ham acts as the base of the dish. The broth is then strained until all the fat is rendered, leaving behind only a beautiful stock full of *umami*. The cabbage, with the rougher leaves all trimmed away, and using only the most tender part of the core, is gently blanched before being added to the broth. Its sweetness and delicacy add another layer of flavour and texture to the dish.

The dish was considered elaborate enough that during the Cultural Revolution an article published by the Red Guards cited the kaishui cabbage as an example of the excess and corrupt lifestyle of the capitalists: "When the masses haven't even seen a duck or a chicken for years, capitalists now eat a dish that only uses their juice?"

Where to eat it?

In Beijing, Sishi Tongtang is famous for its Qianlong baicai. Address: 1/F, Huantai Building, No.12, South Street, Zhongguancun, Haidian District, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6218-9093. Similarly, Juqi, which has 13 locations around the capital city, is another very popular joint for Beijing cuisine. Address: B1 Fuyoujie Hotel, near Taipusi Jie, Xidan District, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6808-5088.



Tian Shui Mian

Sweet Water Noodles 甜水面

What is it?

There's more to Sichuan cuisine than its spicy tofu and spicy sesame noodle. A lesser-known member of the noodle brethren is **tian shui mian**, literally translated as "sweet water noodles", a street snack that can be eaten at any time of the day.

A quick stop to slurp down some tian shui mian is a popular activity for young Chengdu couples on early dates. The homemade wheat noodles are hand-cut till they have thick, angular edges and a dense, chewy texture akin to Japanese udon. Locals like to toss the noodles with a sweet and spicy sauce topped with crispy chilli flakes, minced garlic, a sprinkle of numbing Sichuan peppercorn powder and coarse sugar granules, which give the dish the sweetness that makes it stand out from the other fiery options on Sichuanese menus.

Why is it famous?

Tian shui mian is a simple dish best served cold and plain, without additional meat or vegetable toppings. Ideally the thickness of the noodles should be equal to the thick end of a chopstick. To retain the firmness in every bite, the noodles are heated until only a pin-sized thread of dough remains uncooked, similar to the al dente standard for

They have a dense, chewy texture akin to Japanese udon noodles

preparing Italian pasta.

Ribbons of noodles are first coiled in a small bowl and then drizzled with a succession of condiments including soy sauce, red chilli oil, sesame paste and condensed soy sauce that is reduced till it acquires a sweet, sticky texture.

The noodles are often served in this way so diners can enjoy tossing them themselves, and watch as the jagged edges catch on every smudge of the sauce and seasoning. The strong wheat taste and slippery, slightly dry texture of the noodles makes a perfect contrast to the heat and flavour of its dressing.

Where to eat it?

A popular eatery that specialises in tian shui mian in Chengdu is Dong Zi Kou Zhang Lao Er Liang Fen (39 Wen Shu Yuan Jie; Tel: 86 28 8191 0576), a no-frills noodle shack that has been around since 1944. The queues for food are perpetual but a large window onto the kitchen lets you watch the chefs splash on the sauces while you wait on the pavement outside. Large numbers of locals are known to slurp their feast at the eatery's front door, especially during peak seasons such as Chinese New Year.

PHOTO: DANIEL AHN



Yi Mian

Braised Noodles 伊面

What is it?

Yi mian is a type of egg noodle that originates from Guangdong Province. Shaped like spaghetti, it is made from eggs and flour. But the egg noodle is first cooked in boiling water and deep fried twice (not unlike instant noodles). The delicacy, definitely not for those who are counting their calories, is perfect with dishes that feature thick gravy or sauce.

Why is it famous?

Legend has it that the dish was created accidentally when the chef of the Qing Dynasty calligrapher Yi Bingshou (1754-1815) mistakenly put egg noodles that had already been cooked into a wok filled with boiling oil. The chef improvised and decided to serve the noodles together with a stock. Unexpectedly, the dinner guests loved the dish and sang its praises. Over time, the noodles became known yi mian (*yi* is named after the calligrapher while *mian* means noodles). Some say yi mian is what later inspired instant noodles, which uses a similar method of first deep-frying the noodles before cooking it in hot water again to soften.

Where to eat it?

One of the most popular variations of the noodle meal is

one that's cooked with lobster. In Hong Kong, many restaurants serve yi mian with braised lobster too, sometimes topped with grilled cheese. Another classic version of the noodle is the braised yi mian with straw mushroom. The dish, which can be made entirely vegetarian, cooks the noodle with mushroom, chives before it is braised in a sauce that is concoction of soy sauce, oyster sauce, sugar and stock.

For a unique dining experience try Loaf On Seafood in Sai Kung, Hong Kong. The restaurant, which was awarded one Michelin star in 2012, is famous for its fresh seafood. Loaf On Seafood, 49 Market Street, Sai Kung, Hong Kong (Tel: 852-2792-9966).

The dish was created by accident when the chef of the Qing Dynasty calligrapher Yi Bingshou mistakenly put egg noodles that had already been cooked into a wok filled with boiling oil



Guoqiao Mixian

Cross-Bridge Noodles 过桥米线

What is it?

Guoqiao mixian (cross-bridge noodles) is a Yunnan specialty comprising a bowl of hot soup with rice noodles and accompanying ingredients such as thinly sliced meats, eggs, offal, mushrooms, tofu and seasonal vegetables, each served in separate bowls. Diners dunk the ingredients into the soup in a prescribed order – meats, vegetables and noodles, followed by a splash of condiments such as vinegar, spring onions or chilli. The heat of the soup will slowly cook them at the table.

The dish is so popular that you can find it everywhere in Yunnan and across China, from streetside food stalls to grandiose restaurants. There are even restaurant chains that specialise exclusively in Cross Bridge Noodles.

Why is it famous?

The curious, if rather literal, name stems from a story of love and loyalty. According to popular retelling, Cross Bridge Noodles originated 200 years ago in the city of Mengzi, just south of Kunming in Yunnan. The area was home to a beautiful lake with a small island connected to the shore by a wooden bridge. The island was a popular destination for local scholars preparing to sit for the imperial examinations, as they found its remote and quiet

This soup noodle dish originated in Yunnan around 200 years ago

location conducive to studying.

Among the students was a particularly diligent scholar, whose wife would cross the bridge to the island each day to bring him a bowl of soup noodles. But the engrossed scholar often forgot to eat his lunch until the food had turned cold and the noodles soggy. When his wife noticed that the scholar was getting weaker by the day, she decided to pack the ingredients in separate bowls so that he could spoon them into the dish whenever he was ready to eat. Insulated by a layer of glistening oil, the chicken broth would stay hot enough to cook the noodles and other ingredients. The scholar eventually passed the famously challenging exams and credited his wife with his success.

The dish is now widely recognised as symbol of diligence, ingenuity and hospitality.

Where to eat it?

It has been said that the best litmus test for identifying people from Yunnan is to check if they've had a taste of Jian Xin Garden's Cross Bridge Noodles. The century-old shop on 195 Baoshan Road (Tel: 86-87-1361-1885) in Kunming's main commercial district serves a version with spicy pig blood and a flavoursome broth made by keeping chicken bones on the boil for more than six hours.



Re Gan Mian

Hot Dry Noodles 热干面

What is it?

Hot dry noodles, also called **re gan mian**, are a traditional dish from Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province. Typically eaten for breakfast, re gan mian have become so popular that most restaurants now serve the meal around the clock.

Fresh noodles are cooked in boiling water. Sesame oil is mixed in and the noodles are boiled again, before toppings including soy sauce, sesame paste, pickles, chilli oil and a lot of cilantro and spring onions are added.

Why is it famous?

The recipe has been around for some time. One suggestion is that it originated in the 1930s when a noodle seller had leftovers, and accidentally covered them in sesame oil, and then found that he could reboil the noodles a second time.

But recently, re gan mian has captured headlines in Italy, thanks to a couple from Wenzhou who opened a restaurant in Florence serving the dish. Huang Airon told Wuhan Evening News that she first opened the eatery to cater to the growing population of Chinese students in the city.

Another city in Hubei named Xiangyang, also has its own famous noodle dish called Xiangyang Beef Noodle.

Also known as Butter Noodle, the dish uses an excessive amount of beef fat and chillis to develop the flavourful beef broth. The noodles are usually served with different cuts of meat and beef organs.

Where to try it?

You can find re gan mian at Cailinji, a Wuhan restaurant chain, for as little as Rmb4 (60 American cents). Address: 139 Luo Yu Road, Hongshan District, Wuhan; Tel: 86-159-0270-5437)

Hot Uncle (Re Dashu) Re Gan Mian is a restaurant in Beijing that serves a variety of authentic Hubei dishes. Address: Building 7, Number 1-5, 23 Guangchu Road, Chaoyang District, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6778-9855.

Hot dry noodles are a traditional dish from the central city of Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province and are served at all hours of the day



Lanzhou La Mian

Lanzhou Stretched Noodles 兰州拉面

What is it?

Lanzhou la mian originates from Lanzhou, Gansu, where an Islamic ethnic minority called the Hui live. Their religious belief means no pork (setting it apart from other Chinese cuisine where that meat is a staple ingredient). The emphasis instead is on beef and mutton. La mian, meanwhile, means hand-pulled noodle. So Lanzhou-style la mian usually implies a bowl of freshly made noodles served with beef or mutton in a clear beef broth (most restaurants will also add radish, a spoonful of chili oil, and a handful of coriander).

Why is it famous?

To make Lanzhou-styled noodles, the dough is worked very aggressively. Usually a young man is hired for the job, to pull the dough in straight, rapid tugs with little twisting. Some of the noodle-pullers slam the dough against their prep boards to ensure even stretching and a uniform thickness. Flour is added to dust down the strands and prevent them from sticking.

Lanzhou is also famous for *niang pi*, which is a type of thick and springy noodles that's made (tediously) by separating the gluten from the wheat flour. The noodles is mixed with shredded cucumber and carrots in a sauce

that is mainly made from sesame paste, soy sauce and a lot of chilli.

Where to eat it?

If you are in Lanzhou, be sure to check out the city's most popular la mian joint, Mazilu. The restaurant is famous for its beef noodles (in fact, it's also the only item on the menu that can be ordered there). Address: 86, Dazhong Alley, Lanzhou, Gansu; Tel: 86-93-1845-0505. The restaurant is open from early: noodles are also eaten for breakfast. Dongfang Palace is a chain in Beijing that specialises in Lanzhou cuisine. One of the locations in the capital city: 2/F West Wing within Longfor Paradise Walk (a shopping mall) on Chaoyang North Road, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-5367-0605.

These noodles originate from Gansu Province and because the recipe was devised by the Hui, an Islamic ethnic minority, they are served with mutton or beef rather than pork



Lei Cha Fan

Thunder Tea Rice 擂茶饭

What is it?

Lei cha fan, or thunder tea rice, is a traditional dish among the Hakka people, an ethnic sub-group of the Han Chinese known for their nomadic existence. Despite its striking name, the dish is essentially a bowl of rice filled with a medley of chopped greens and served with a fragrant side of soup made from ground tea leaves and fresh herbs. Some suggest thunder tea rice dates back to the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC); others to the Three Kingdoms period (220-280) when a general miraculously helped his troops recover from a plague by making them drink the herbal concoction prescribed by an old doctor.

Though the dish declined in popularity for a long period – many are put off by its labour-intensive preparation process, its lack of meat and its slightly bitter taste – thunder tea rice has made a comeback in recent years as modern trends veer towards fresh, vegetable-focused dining and a renewed interest in heritage dishes. Thunder tea rice is said to offer health benefits such as lowering cholesterol, detoxifying the body, improving digestion and helping weight loss.

Why is it famous?

Tea leaves are first hand-pounded in a ceramic bowl with

Some say the dish's English name is a misnomer as its Chinese character actually refers to the act of pounding the tea leaves rather than thunder

a pestle fashioned from a guava tree, which is said to add a special aroma to the dish. Roast peanuts, sesame seeds, water and up to 25 herbs are then added. The mixture is then ground for a further 15 minutes.

Some say the dish's English name is a misnomer as its Chinese character (擂) actually refers to the act of pounding the tea leaves rather than thunder (雷). Others claim the dish was named for the thunderous racket when the ingredients are being ground.

The herbs are typically Thai basil, mugwort, mint and coriander, although different chefs have various combinations based on family recipes.

Inexpensive luk bou tea leaves (六宝茶) are usually preferred over more expensive teas such as pu'er or tieguanyin as the former has a milder taste that will not make the dish too bitter when ground.

Where to eat it?

If you can't make the trek to Jiexi in Guangdong, where the dish originated, Lei Cha Yang Sheng Zhu Shi restaurant in Guangzhou (Shop 3032, Wanda Plaza, 368 Xingnan Avenue, Panyu District, Guangzhou, China; Tel: 86-20-3475-3877) serves it in a modern setting, along with other tea-based drinks, snacks and desserts.

PHOTO: EMMA LAI



Dongbei La Pi

Cold Potato Noodle 东北拉皮

What is it?

Dongbei la pi – a popular appetiser dish in the northeast (Dongbei) region – is cold potato noodle (known as *la pi* in Mandarin) served with a range of vegetables like carrots and cucumber mixed with shredded pork in a peanut sauce. Sometimes, mung bean grass noodle is used in the dish. But traditionally, potato is the main ingredient in the famous appetiser.

Why is it famous?

The region of Dongbei – known historically, and somewhat more evocatively, as Manchuria – produces the largest crop of potatoes in the country. One of the most famous Dongbei cuisines is *di san xian* – loosely translated as “three delights from the earth” – which is made of potatoes, peppers and eggplants stir-fried together with garlic and doused in a vinegary, sweet brown sauce. The dish is especially filling – which was considered key to helping Manchurians endure the long harsh winter in the region.

Thanks to the popularity of potatoes, noodles made with potato starch are used frequently in the region. Potato noodles, which turn translucent after they are cooked, readily absorb the flavours from the cooking

liquid while retaining a lovely chewy texture. Another famous Dongbei dish is braised pork with noodles, which sees fatty pork simmered in soy sauce and rock sugar for a long time before it is served with potato noodles to soak up the robust flavours of the sauce.

Where to eat it?

For those who want to get a taste of Dongbei, Culiang Home is a restaurant in Beijing that specialises in this regional cuisine. Address: Majiapu East Road, Fengtai District, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-8726-1660

Another popular Dongbei restaurant is Dongbei Tiger Homecooking. Address: Wai Guan Xie Street, An Ding Men, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6421-1679.

Dongbei produces the largest crop of potatoes in China and this dish incorporates them as noodles



Dao Xiao Mian

Knife Sliced Noodles 刀削面

What is it?

Dao xiao mian, which means knife-shaven noodles, is a specialty of Shanxi Province. The most authentic technique for making dao xiao mian is to hold a large block of dough downwards with one hand at about a 30-degree angle. The other hand, clutching a sharp knife (that's specifically made for this purpose) shaves the noodles directly into a large pot of boiling water. It takes years of practice to cut the noodles quickly – it is believed that a top chef can shave 200 noodle strands a minute.

Why is it famous?

It is believed that knife cut noodles were first made at the beginning of the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), when the government confiscated all personal weapons – even knives used for cooking. Instead ten households were allowed to share just one knife.

One day, while preparing lunch, an old woman asked her husband to borrow the knife from their neighbour but found it was being used. On his way home the old man picked up a thin piece of iron. The two pondered how to use it and the husband came up with the idea of shaving the noodles instead of cutting it. In fact, the technique resulted in noodles thick around the centre but soft

A top chef can shave 200 noodle strands a minute

around the edges. Since then the tradition of making shaved noodles has been carried on in Shanxi.

One way to enjoy dao xiao mian is to coat the noodles with just enough sauce (usually a rich meat sauce). The noodles can also be eaten in a broth or in a stir-fry to highlight its starchy and bouncy texture.

Where to eat it?

In Beijing, Fengling is one of the most popular restaurants for dao xiao mian. The noodle shop is also known for Datong Yangza, another famous Shanxi snack. Yangza, which means organs of a sheep, are first cleaned thoroughly before going into a stew with shallots, ginger, chilli and a generous amount of salt, pepper and cilantro. The soup and stew are served with noodles. Address: 5/F, Wanda Plaza, Wuquan Road, Fengtai District; Tel: 86-10-8368-3506

Another popular dao xiao mian joint is Jinfeng Manor. While you slurp away the noodles, be sure to try its kao baozi (which means 'baked bun' in Chinese). The bun contains minced lamb meat and egg, seasoned with salt, cumin and peppercorn before it's baked in the oven. Address: Shuanglin East Road, Xiaotuncun, Fengtai District, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-8369-5829.



Mayi Shangshu

Ants Climbing A Tree 蚂蚁上树

What is it?

Mayi shangshu (ants climbing a tree) is made of ground pork that is cooked in a spicy sauce before being poured over a bed of vermicelli. The sauce is usually made of chilli and Sichuan spicy bean paste, with some soy sauce added.

Despite the less-than-appetising name, ants climbing a tree is one of the most popular dishes in Sichuan cuisine. It got its name because the bits of ground meat clinging to the vermicelli evoke an image of ants walking on twigs. The green onion, which is used for decoration, is reckoned to represent the green leaves of the tree.

Why is it famous?

Legend has it that the dish was invented by a woman called Dou E during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). After her husband died of illness, Dou had to take care of the family as well as her mother-in-law, who was so grief-stricken that she became very sick. Dou cooked all sorts of tasty food to cheer her up but money was tight so she couldn't afford to spend much. Thinking of what to do with just a little meat, Dou chopped up the pork into very tiny pieces before frying it with ginger and green onion. To add bulk to the dish she also incorporated soaked vermicelli. Her mother-in-law liked it. Dou's neighbours

loved it too. The recipe spread and evolved into the classic Sichuan dish of today.

Where to eat it?

The Chuanban restaurant, which means “operated by Sichuan”, has been a long-time favourite for Beijingers. As it is run by Sichuan's local government, all of its ingredients are flown in direct from the province. Be forewarned: the waiting time for a table is long. Address: 5 Gongyuan Toutiao, Jianguomennei Dajie Dongcheng District, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6512-2277 ext 6101).

In Hong Kong, Sijie is a popular private kitchen that serves authentic Sichuanese cuisine. Address: 10/F, Bartlock Centre, 3 Yiu Wa Street, Causeway Bay, Hong Kong (Tel: 852-2802-2250). The restaurant also offers free corkage.

Despite the less-than-appetising name, 'ants climbing a tree' is one of the most popular dishes in Sichuan cuisine



Dan Dan Mian

Dan Dan Noodles 担担面

What is it?

The classic noodle dish is a Sichuan favourite. Sichuan food, one of the four great traditions of Chinese cuisine, is famous for its tongue-numbing dishes. **Dan dan mian** is a classic example; a spicy sauce served over plain white noodles.

The recipe for the spicy sauce can vary but traditionally contains pickled vegetables, chilli oil (lots of it), Sichuan peppercorns, peanuts, minced pork and scallions.

The resulting dish balances the five flavours essential to Sichuan cooking – salty, sour, sweet, spicy, and numbing.

Why is it famous?

Dan dan mian used to be a street food but is now ubiquitous to Sichuan restaurants across the country.

It was believed that during the Qing Dynasty, a man named Chen Baobao from Zigong, Sichuan Province sold noodles on the street. To travel easily between twisting alleys and ramshackle houses, he put a carrying pole (a *dan zi*) on his shoulder, with two baskets on each side, one holding the stove, the other noodles and pots. Over time, his savoury and fiery noodles gained such notoriety people started calling it ‘dan dan mian’ which if translated literally means ‘peddler’s noodles’. To this

day, dan dian mian is served more like a snack than as a main dish.

Where to eat it?

Sichuan cuisine is very popular in Beijing. If you don’t mind an earthier ambiance, you will find locals slurping away at Chuan Zai Dan Dan Mien, Chongwen district, No. 3 Chong Wen Men Wai Road, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-6713-1191).

Translated literally its name means ‘peddler’s noodles’ and they were originally sold by a ‘mobile’ chef named Chen Baobao who carried his cooking wares around on a pole (a *dan zi*) and became famed for his savoury and fiery fare



Yuntun Mian

Wonton Noodle 云吞面

What is it?

In Guangdong Province – and most famously in neighbouring Hong Kong – **yuntun mian** comes with piping hot soup, wontons and egg noodles, all garnished with a few chopped garlic chives. Guangdong wontons are largely made of prawn, with small amounts of minced pork (sometimes no pork at all). The noodles are thin egg noodles cooked al dente. The soup base, prepared from dried flounder and dried shrimp roe, adds a depth of flavour and umami.

Why is it famous?

The history of the wonton could date back to the Han Dynasty, when famous poet Yang Xiong wrote about a type of cake called *tun* (*ton* is a Cantonese pronunciation). At the time, wonton was called ‘soup cake’. It wasn’t until the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) that wonton noodle became widely popular in Guangdong Province. Even though wonton noodle looks simple, it is hard to achieve perfection. Each of the three elements – the broth, wontons and noodles – need to be equally well prepared. In Hong Kong, where wonton noodle is a quintessential dish, a few restaurants still make their noodles from scratch, using bamboo poles to knead the dough.

Where to eat it?

Mak’s Noodle in Hong Kong is a local institution. The Michelin-starred restaurant is one of the oldest wonton noodle establishments in Hong Kong. While you are there, make sure you save room for its *lo mein*, which perfectly highlights the noodle’s chewy texture (they usually give you a bowl of broth on the side if you think it is too dry). Even though there are many locations around the city, be sure to visit its original shop at G/F, 77 Wellington Street, Central, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-2854-3810

Rival Tsim Chai Kee Noodle is another solid option but waiting times to be seated could be long, 98 Wellington Street, Central, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-2850-6471

The history of the wonton may date back to the Han Dynasty when a famous poet of the period wrote about a cake called *tun*



Congyou Bing

Scallion Pancakes 葱油饼

What is it?

Congyou bing (scallion pancakes) are a staple of Shanghai street food, found everywhere from roadside stalls to *dim sum* houses.

Pancakes are sprinkled with green onions and lightly fried on cast iron cookers. They offer one of the easiest grab-and-go bites, especially for breakfast and lunch. Some restaurants also cut their scallions into wedges and serve them as accompaniments to a meal.

The recipe varies but the basic ingredients are chopped scallion, flour, oil and egg. Shanghainese, however, largely stuck with green onions and lard. In northern parts of China, it is not uncommon to replace green onions with leeks and the cake is baked (in the old days using a bitumen barrel) instead of pan-fried.

Why is it famous?

Many Chinese say pizza is an evolution of the scallion pancake, with the technique brought back to Italy by Marco Polo.

Legend has it that Marco Polo missed the pancakes so much that he persuaded a chef from Naples to recreate the dish. After several unsuccessful trials, Polo suggested the filling be put on top of the dough base, rather than

inside it. The change, by chance, became the cooking style for the modern pizza so widely consumed around the world today.

Where to eat it?

As street food, the best place is usually on the street. Ask for a vendor called Mr Wang (not the most unusual name, admittedly), who has his own pancake stall on Fengyang Road, near Xinchang Lu by People's Square in Shanghai (sadly, Mr Wang doesn't have a phone number).

If you are in Taipei, you can try a restaurant instead. Visit Tianjin Zhua Bing, 1 Yong Kang Jie; Tel: 886-02-2321-1336.

Many Chinese say pizza is an evolution of the scallion pancake, with the technique brought back to Italy by Marco Polo



Basi Digua

Golden Thread Sweet Potato 拔丝地瓜

What is it?

Even though **basi digua** uses only a handful of pantry ingredients – white sugar, water, oil and sweet potato – it is incredibly difficult to master. First, sweet potatoes are cut into cubes before they are deep-fried to a golden crispness. Sugar is added to the oil on a low heat before it completely dissolves. A bit of water is then added to the syrup to further caramalise it. Sweet potatoes are added with every piece coated thoroughly. The reason for the name is because when the dish is hot, taking a piece from the plate will drag out strings of amber thread that will harden in the air.

Why is it famous?

It should hardly come as a surprise that Dongbei's most popular dessert is made from sweet potato. The Manchurian region in the northeast is known for its potato dishes because it is the biggest potato grower in the country. Sweet potato, too, is very popular.

But as simple as the dish appears, it really tests how well a chef can master the heat in a pan. In fact, it is believed that the dish is one of the challenges every Chinese professional chef must master to be certified. That's because if the sauce is too runny, it is impossible to

This dish really tests how well a chef can master the heat in a pan

create the beautiful gold threads. But if the syrup is caramelised for too long, the dish becomes too sticky and bitter. Timing is also critical. As soon as the sweet potatoes are out of the deep fryer the sauce needs to be ready otherwise the sweet potato goes soggy. The most experienced chefs can make threads that stretch even two to three metres long.

Where to eat it?

In Beijing, Lujia Xiaoguan is a very popular restaurant for Dongbei cuisine. While you are there, make sure to try the pork and sour cabbage stew. Pickled cabbage (also known as *suan cai* in Mandarin) is hugely popular in Dongbei because harsh winters and relatively short growing seasons have made pickling a common way to preserve food in Dongbei. Address: No 2 Block C, Fuliyouyicheng, Beijing; Tel: 86-10-5964- 1138. In Shenyang, capital city of Liaoning province, the best place to eat the dessert is Fengtian Xiaoguan. The restaurant is also known for its steamed Shandong flower roll. Shaped like a delicate flower, these buns are steamed and then served alongside the heavier flavoured Dongbei dishes. Address: Tuanjie Road, 5/F Huafu Tiandi, Shenyang; 86 24 3180 4565.

PHOTO: ALLEN WANG



Jianbing

Pancakes 煎饼

What is it?

Jianbing is a traditional snack often eaten for breakfast. A crepe made from a batter of wheat and grain flour, it is fried on a griddle with an egg and can be topped with scallions, crispy fried dough, cilantro, soy sauce and chilli paste. The crepe is folded several times before serving. The result? A savoury pancake that is chewy and crispy at the same time. In Tianjin people like to stuff their jianbing with *youtiao*, which is fried bread stick. Tianjin people name it jianbing *guozi*.

Why is it famous?

According to legend, jianbing was invented two thousand years ago during the Three Kingdoms period (220-280) when Zhuge Liang was faced with feeding an army of soldiers who'd lost their woks. Zhuge ordered his cooks to spread dough onto a copper-made griddle suspended over an open fire. The method worked and the resulting dish lifted his soldiers' morale and they fought their way out of an ambush. Since then, jianbing has been passed down through generations of families living in Shandong.

Where to eat it?

Jianbing is found on nearly every street corner in China,

According to legend the military strategist Zhuge Liang devised these pancakes to feed an army that had lost its woks

especially outside subway stations where white-collar workers are often seen hovering around a jianbing stand waiting for a quick snack.

But a young entrepreneur now wants to build a culinary empire based on serving up jianbing (which means 'fried pancake').

The businessman – who is named He Chang – had the idea of giving the traditional snack a makeover, with new sweet and savoury varieties. So he opened a jianbing store named Huangtaiji in the middle of Beijing's central business district. He used weibo, China's Twitter-equivalent, to market it by word-of-mouth and told Economic Information Daily that the store was expecting to make more than Rmb5 million (\$813,000) in revenue in its first year. He plans to open five more outlets in the next few years with a goal of creating a "Starbucks-like" jianbing chain in China.

At Huangtaiji you can find jianbing *guozi* (including unique creations like chocolate jianbing). Address: B1, SOHO, 2 Chaoyangmennei Avenue, Beijing.



Xin Tai Ruan

Red Dates with Fillings 心太软

What is it?

Arguably the next most iconic Shanghainese dish after steamed buns and hairy crabs, **xin tai ruan**, or filled red dates, is a snack favoured by many for its sticky sweet taste and its whimsical name.

Literally “heart too soft”, its name – which is also the title of a Chinese pop song about a soft-hearted woman – refers to the dates’ chewy glutinous rice paste centres. Despite their sweet flavour, the Shanghainese prefer to enjoy them as appetisers rather than desserts.

Why is it famous?

Xin tai ruan is basically dried and pitted jujubes, or red dates, stuffed with chewy glutinous rice paste. The dates are first fried to soften their pulp and to caramelize before being lightly glazed with a fragrant osmanthus syrup and then steamed.

The quality of the dried dates can make or break the dish. The dates should be mildly sweet and not too bitter, and smaller to medium-sized dates are preferred over larger ones. They are best served within an hour or two of being steamed, when the dates and their filling remain nice and soft, but they can also be steamed again for later consumption.

Where to eat it?

Shanghai’s Old Jesse (41 Tianping Road, Tel: 86-21-6282-9260) is a stalwart for local dishes. The red dates are a must-order, alongside other cold starters such as lotus roots with glutinous rice and salted chicken – an excellent prelude to other Shanghainese staples such as braised pork belly and poached river shrimp.

Literally “heart too soft”, its name – which is also the title of a Chinese pop song – refers to the chewy glutinous rice paste at the heart of the dates



Tang Yuan

Sweet Rice Balls 汤圆

What is it?

Tang yuan are mochi-like balls made of glutinous rice flour. While they fall into two categories, those with and without filling, the filling varies. The most popular are black sesame, red bean and peanut paste. There are also various ways to serve tang yuan. Sometimes they are presented in a bowl of sugary soup, with a fancier version featuring a broth made of fermented rice and osmanthus flowers. Other times they are eaten dry, mixed with crushed peanuts, shredded coconut and sesame seeds (called tong bat lat in Cantonese).

Why is it famous?

Originally called Yuan Xiao – and designed to be eaten during the Spring Lantern Festival, the fifteenth night of the New Year, when the moon is always full – the sweet dumpling is now a fixture at dinner tables during the Lunar New Year. These dinners see families getting together from across the country and that also make the dish appropriate: that's because tang yuan sounds a lot like *tuan yuan*, which means 'reunion'.

Legend has it that one day during the Qing Dynasty, Emperor Qianlong went south of the Yangtze River and lost his way in a village. Starving and freezing, he knocked on a

The name of this dessert literally means 'round balls in soup'

house and an old woman answered the door. Her family was very poor, with just a little glutinous rice flour and black sesame seeds. However, she ground the latter into a paste and wrapped them into a ball to be stuffed in the glutinous flour and cooked in a soup for the Emperor. The Emperor devoured it and asked about the name of the dish, the old woman looked at the rounded ball-shaped dumplings floating in hot water and called it tang yuan, which means literally means 'round balls in soup'.

Where to eat it?

In Hong Kong, Gai Gai Dessert's comprehensive list of Chinese desserts should satisfy any sweet tooth. Be sure to try the tang yuan in ginger soup, which uses fiery fresh ginger in the broth to balance the sweet dumpling. Its black sesame soup and almond soup are also big hits. Address: G/F, 121-123 Parkes Street, Jordan, Hong Kong; 852 2384-3862

Nanjing Dapai Dang is a popular chain around the country that is known for street food and snacks. Its fermented rice red bean tang yuan sweet soup is one of the most highly rated in the country. One of its locations is in Nanjing: 7/F, 18 Zhong Shan Road, Deji Plaza, Nanjing; Tel: 86-25-8472-2777.

PHOTO: MICHELLE YU



Doufu Hua

Bean Curd Jelly 豆腐花

What is it?

Doufu, which means tofu, is believed to have originated in ancient China during the Han Dynasty. Even though most people consider tofu very bland and lacking personality, when it is done well – which demands good soymilk – it has an earthy flavour and strong taste of the bean.

Doufu also forms the basis of one of China's most popular desserts. **Doufu hua**, silken tofu with the creaminess of custard, is eaten with sugar syrup. In some parts of the country, like Sichuan, doufu hua can also be savoury and is sometimes eaten with soy sauce, chopped scallion, Sichuan pepper and a dash of chilli oil.

Why is it famous?

It is believed that as early as the Han Dynasty, Liu An, an advisor to Emperor Wu (the monarch also happened to be his nephew), stumbled upon the making of bean curd while he was trying to make the drug for eternal life. Other legend has it that Liu developed soymilk for his ailing mother because she wanted to taste the soybeans but was too sick to chew. So Liu grounded the soybeans into milk and created tofu.

Tofu is made up of three ingredients: soybeans, water and a coagulant – usually magnesium chloride or

gypsum (calcium sulfate). The difference between firm tofu and the tofu in doufu hua is that the latter simply contains more water.

Where to eat it?

Tak Hing Lung in Hong Kong is a great place to try doufu hua. The shop sells a variety of tofu products – from firm tofu used for cooking to tofu skins and tofu puffs – the one-stop tofu shop. Address: 1 Marble Road, North Point, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-2563-8815

Sichuan restaurant San Xi Lou makes doufu hua right in front of its patrons. Address: 7/F, Coda Plaza, 51 Garden Road, Mid-Levels; Tel: 852-2838-8811

Liu An, an advisor to Emperor Wu, is said to have stumbled upon how to make bean curd while he was trying to discover a drug for eternal life



Dan Ta

Egg Tarts 蛋挞

What is it?

Originally introduced to accompany afternoon tea, dan ta, or egg tarts, are now eaten throughout the day in Hong Kong. Similar to the Portuguese *pastel de nata*, egg tart is made up of a flaky buttery crust and a deep yellow egg custard filling. Fancier versions can add bird's nest to give the dessert a twist.

Why is it famous?

Like many famous Hong Kong desserts — almond cookies, egg tarts and mango pudding — it is actually a combination of East and West, developed over generations of colonial rule.

It's believed that the first egg tart was made in Guangzhou in the 1920s. Taking reference from the recipes of Western fruit tarts, the chefs in Guangzhou turned it into egg tarts by filling the tarts with egg custard instead, which is similar to another famous Chinese dessert of steamed egg custard. Traditionally, egg tarts were made with lard because butter was hard to come by at the time. Over time, though, chefs have shifted to a combination of both lard and butter.

Chris Patten famously used egg tarts as part of his charm offensive during his tenure as the last British

governor of the territory. He was photographed tucking into the dessert at a local bakery (see below for its address) in Hong Kong, earning him the endearing monicker “Fat Pang”.

Where to eat it?

Tai Cheong Bakery, opened in 1954, on Lyndhurst Terrace in Hong Kong claims to sell at least 3,000 egg tarts a day. The bakery, also Patten's personal favourite, specialises in short crust tart shells (instead of flaky puff pastry crust). Address: G/F, 35 Lyndhurst Terrace, Central, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-8300-8301; Cheung Hing Coffee Shop, the famous cha chaan teng (a Hong Kong style tea café) where local celebrities are frequently spotted, is famous for egg tarts. Address: G/F, 9-11 Yik Yam Street, Happy Valley, Hong Kong; Tel: 852-2572 5097.

Traditionally egg tarts were made with lard because butter was hard to come by – over time chefs have shifted to a combination of both



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Week in China

For over five millennia food has been central to Chinese culture and if you want to understand China its cuisine is a good starting point. In this book we feature 50 of the more storied dishes, and describe not only their historical origins, but also their preparation techniques and the best restaurants to eat them. From the more exotic sounding squirrel fish to the more widely known kung pao chicken – from noodles to *dim sum* to desserts – a flick through these pages will take you on a culinary journey of China's varied regions...



Week in China