

## CHAPTER 24 : AN INTRODUCTION TO CHINESE CUISINE

### INTRODUCTION

As one travels around the world today, one cannot help being impressed by the extent to which Chinese food and cooking has been established in almost every corner of the earth. But this popularization of the Chinese cuisine seems to have gathered a sudden and overwhelming momentum only in the last couple of decades. So, what is it that has caused this sudden success of Chinese cuisine? The answer lies in the unique traditions and techniques of Chinese cooking, and in the inherent appeal of Chinese food and flavors to the palate. Also Chinese food can be extremely economical as well as being highly nutritious, because, most ingredients are cut into small pieces, and then quickly cooked so as to retain their natural goodness.

Trade and cultural change between China and the outside world took place as early as the time of the Roman Empire and over the past centuries, foreign influence and modern technology has affected nearly all walks of everyday life in China, except one, namely, the Culinary Art of China. In fact, foreign foodstuffs have been introduced in China since the dawn of history, but they all became integral parts of Chinese food.

Obviously, Chinese culinary art has gone through thousands of years of refinement and development, but the Chinese unique way of cooking and preparing food, remains basically unchanged. Archaeological finds of the bronze age (around 1850 BC) indicate that the Chinese had utensils such as bronze CLEAVER for cutting up foods into small pieces and cooking them in animal fat, using a bronze pot not dissimilar to the modern wok. There is data to prove that as long as the ZHOU dynasty (12<sup>th</sup> C BC) the Chinese used soya sauce, vinegar, rice wine, fruit jam and spices as seasonings in the cooking and that elaborate and complicated cooking methods were already being employed.

By the time of China's greatest sage CONFUCIUS (551 - 479 BC) who was an acknowledged gourmet besides, it was recorded that the importance of heat application and blending of different flavors were emphasized in Chinese cooking; and the uses of high, moderate or low heat, the blending of sour, piquant, salty, bitter or sweet flavors were all given their correct application

in order to achieve a harmonious whole. This theory of harmony is one of the main characteristics of Chinese cuisine of this day.

## **THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE CUISINE**

There exists a certain 'uniqueness' that distinguishes Chinese cooking from other food cultures. To start with, there is the Chinese division when preparing and serving food, between 'FAN' (grain & other starch food) and 'CAI' (meat and vegetable dishes). Grains in various forms of rice or wheat flours (bread, pancakes, noodles or dumplings) make up the FAN half of the meal. Vegetables and meat (including poultry, meat and fish) cut up and mixed in various combinations into individual dishes constitute the CAI half. A balanced meal must have an appropriate amount of both FAN & CAI. It is in combining various ingredients and the lending of different flavors for the preparation of CAI, that lies the fine art and skill of Chinese cuisine.

The other distinctive feature of Chinese cuisine is the harmonious blending of colors, aromas, flavors, shapes and texture in one single CAI dish. The principle of blending complimentary or contrasting colors and flavors is a fundamental one - the different ingredients must not be mixed indiscriminately. The matching of flavors should follow a set pattern and is controlled and not casual. The cutting of ingredients is another important element of Chinese cooking in order to achieve the proper effect. Slices are matched with slices, shreds with shreds, cubes with cubes, chunks with chunks and so on.

This is not only for the sake of appearance but also because ingredients of the same size and shape require about the same amount of time in cooking. This complexity of interrelated element of colors, flavors and shapes in Chinese cooking is reinforced by yet another feature: TEXTURE. A dish may have just one, or several textures, such as tenderness, crispiness, crunchiness, smoothness and softness. The textures to be avoided are: sogginess, stringiness and hardness. The selection of different textures in one single dish is an integral part of blending of flavors and colors. The desired texture or textures in any dish can only be achieved by using the right cooking methods. In all different methods of cooking, the correct degree of heat and duration of cooking time are of vital importance.

## REGIONAL COOKING STYLES

Looking at the map of China, it is not difficult to understand why there should be such a rich variety of different styles throughout the land. There is no official classification of various regional cuisines in China, but it is generally agreed that SICHUAN in west, SHANDONG in North, CANTON in the south and JIANGSU in the east represents the four major regional cooking styles of China. In addition, four more provinces ZHEJIANG, FUKIEN, ANHUI in the east and HUNAN in the west are usually included in the roll of honour while one talks of the "Big Eight" distinguished schools of cuisine in China.

Now Peking cuisine is quite a different matter - it is not a separate regional school, but rather the combination of all China's regional style of cooking. Being the capital of China for many centuries Peking (or Beijing as it is now called) occupies a unique position in the development of Chinese culinary art. Peking cuisine has been defined by the eminent Chinese gourmet Kenneth Lo as **"The crystallization of many inventions and performance of the generations of important chefs of different dynasties which have ruled in Peking for nearly a millennium, and the grass root dishes of the locality which people of Shandong and Hubei have been in the habit of preparing together with all the culinary contributions which have flowed from the far flung regions and provinces of China and which over the years have established their reputation in the old capital"**. Peking cooking is in short, the top table of Chinese culinary art. Finally, the central province HUBEI in the middle reaches Yangtze River has a distinct style of cooking, known as "The Province of Thousand Lakes" as well as "Land of Fish and Rice". One of Hubei's specialties is its fish cookery.

### The Northern School:

Archaeological evidence shows that in about 5000 BC, the inhabitants of North China had begun to farm, settle down and make painted pottery, eating and cooking vessels. Some of the most conspicuous traces of early Chinese culture have been found at sites that lie along the valley of the Yellow River, which is why this area is sometimes described as the "Cradle of Chinese Civilization".

Two ancient capitals of LUOYANG and KEIFENG are both situated just south of the Yellow River in HUNAN province ("HU" is the Chinese word for "river" and "NAN" means "south"). The noblemen and the imperial families live in such luxury that their chefs invented and perfected many of the Chinese classic dishes. These recipes were passed down through the centuries, and were moved to the capital, Peking and beyond. The same recipes are still in use all over China even to this day - with very little changes.

Besides the cooking of TIANZING is Hubei, in which province Peking is also situated, the Northern School embraces the distinguished cooking style of SHANDONG and SHANXI, as well as Chinese Moslem cooking of inner Mongolia and XINJIANG (details of Chinese Moslem food will be discussed under separate heading).

### **The Western School:**

The red basin of SICHUAN or SZECHWAN is one of the richest lands of China. Owing to its geographical position it was practically inaccessible from the rest of China until recently therefore it developed a very distinct style of cooking. Its richly flavored and piquant food has influenced its neighboring province of HUNAN and GUIZHOU, although they both have a style of their own.

The province of Sichuan is the most popular in China, with an estimated 1 billion inhabitants or about 10% of the nation's total population. High mountains, fending off the cold air from the world, encircle the basin, so Sichuan has hot summers and mild winters. It is virtually frost free with abundant rainfall in winters and spring. Plant growth continues the whole year round. One of China's important rice bowls, the Sichuan Basin also yields a wealth of subtropical products, including silk, fruit and tea, all which have earned Sichuan the name "Land of Abundance". The cuisine of Sichuan has a wide fan following both at home and abroad. Its richly flavored and hot food is particularly popular in the Indian Subcontinent. But not all the dishes from here are hot and spicy; many people outside China believe that all you need to cook Sichuan food is to use a lot of ginger, garlic, pepper and chillie. This is entirely untrue. The Sichuan prides itself into distinct creating 100 distinct flavors for 100 individual dishes.

Hot chilies are used not to paralyze the tongue but to stimulate the palate. One of the characteristics of Sichuan cuisine is that each dish usually contains a number of different flavors such as sweet, sour, bitter and hot, salty, aromatic and fragrant. When the palate is stimulated by mildly hot chilies, it becomes more sensitive and capable of taking in several different flavors simultaneously.

### **The Eastern School:**

The Yangtze, China's longest river (about 500km in length), which traverses the width of China from west to east flows through China's leading agricultural regions - Sichuan and Hunan (on the upper reaches), Hubei and Jiangzi (on the middle reaches), Jiangsu and Zhejiang (on the lower), which contains some of the most fertile land in China.

Both wheat and rice are grown here, as well as other crops, which include - barley, corn, sweet potatoes, peanuts and soya beans. Fisheries abound in the multitude of lakes and other tributaries and deep-sea fishing has long been established in the coastal province and Jiangsu and Zhejiang. The areas that cover the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze are traditionally referred to as 'Land of Fish and Rice', and is collectively known as Jiangnan ("JIANG" means "great river" referring to the Yangtze and "NAN" referring to the south), and it boasts a number of distinctive cooking styles.

The Yangtze River delta has its own cooking style known as HUAIYANG with the culinary center in Shanghai, that is China's largest city, which lies on the Yangtze estuary. South East China has always been regarded as the most culturally developed and economically prosperous region. Both Nanjing in Jiangsu and Hangzhou in Zhejiang have been China's capital of several dynasties; other culinary centers are to be located in YANGZHOU (Yangchow), SUZHOU and ZHENJIANG. Yangchow fried rice; chow mein (open fried noodles), wantons, spring rolls, dumplings and many other Cantonese dimsum dishes have all originated from here.

South of Zhejiang is the province FUJIAN (FUKIEN) which is sometimes grouped in the Eastern School, but its cooking style is more influenced by its

southern neighbor Canton, so very often Fukien cuisine is included with Cantonese in the Southern School.

### **The Southern School:**

The Pearl River delta, with Canton as a provincial capital of GUANGDONG (KWANGTUNG), is undoubtedly the home of the most famous of all Chinese cooking styles. Unfortunately the reputation of Cantonese cuisine has been badly damaged by a so-called 'chop suey' food outside China. Authentic Cantonese food has no rival, and has greater variety of food than any other school, because Canton was the first Chinese port open for trade, therefore foreign influence are particularly stronger in its cooking.

Fisheries play a major role in the economy, Guangdong contributes about one fourth of China's fish catch (over 20% of the fish caught here are fresh water fish). Rice is dominant food grain; the other crops are tea, tobacco, peanut, sugarcane, and sub tropical fruits such as bananas, pineapples, oranges, tangerines and lychees.

HAINAN Island is the only truly tropical area of China and produces coconuts, coffee, natural rubber and figs. The Southern School consists of three distinct styles of cooking: CANTON, CHAOCHOW (Swatow), and DONGJIANG (also known as HAKKA), which means 'family of guest', which refers to the immigrants from North China who settled in the South during the Song Dynasty after the invasion of Mongols in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. So it was the Hakka's who introduced noodles, wantons and dumplings etc. into the Cantonese diet.

There was a mass immigration overseas after the 17<sup>th</sup>. century, both by the Cantonese and the Hakka. When Swatow was opened to foreign trade in 1858, it became a major port for Chinese immigration to South East Asia, America and Europe. That is why, the first Chinese restaurant to open abroad introduced only Cantonese cooking to the outside world. There are two other schools, though not regional in character, nevertheless should be included here among China's various styles of Schools of Cooking, namely the Moslem and Vegetarian School.

### **The Moslem School:**

The Chinese Moslem known as "HUI", though Chinese speaking are distinguished from the Chinese by their affiliation with the Sunni branch of Islam. One theory is that they are descendants of the Moslems who settled in China in the 13<sup>th</sup>. century and adopted the Chinese language and culture.

There are nearly 5 million Hui widely distributed throughout almost every province in China, but their traditional areas of settlement is in the North-West with heavy concentration in Hunan, Shanki, Hubei and Shangdong. They form the Chinese Moslem School, together with two other national minorities: the UYGOR group in XINJIANG (4 million, virtually all Moslems); and about 1.5 million MONGOLS who are traditionally nomadic, and therefore, like the Moslem do not eat pork. Their daily diet consists of beef, mutton, milk and butter, items an average Chinese has no taste for.

### **The Vegetarian School:**

Chinese vegetarians are not allowed anything remotely associated with animals; apart from egg and milk. They obtain their proteins mainly from soya beans and its byproducts such as bean curd (tofu) and nuts and fungi.

Chinese vegetarian has a long history; its origin can be traced to as far back as around 500 BC, when the TAOIST SCHOOL of THOUGHT developed the hygienic and nutritional science of fruit and vegetables. Some centuries later, when Buddhism, which abhors the killing of any living creature and the eating of flesh in any form, was introduced into China from India, this philosophy was readily grafted into TAOIST school of Cooking and a new form of vegetarianism was born.

Apart from the extensive use of fresh and dehydrated vegetables, the vegetarian chefs have developed a new art by creating food that has become known as imitation meats. These imitation pork, chicken, fish and prawn and so on bare an amazing resemblance to their fleshy counterpart in form and texture, though not quite in flavor.

## EQUIPMENT

### UTENSILS:

The Chinese *batterie de cuisine* consists of very few basic implements. To start with, only four of the most rudimentary implements are essential to cook Chinese food, i.e. cleaver, chopping block, wok and stirrer.

In western kitchen, equivalent equipments are always valuable. Cutting knives and board, pots and frying pans, fish slicer and cooking spoons, so on and so forth. But the Chinese cooking utensils are ancient designs, they are made of basic and inexpensive material, and they have been in continuous use for several thousand years, therefore they do serve a special function that they are more sophisticated and much more expensive western counterparts prove to be rather inadequate.

As for the rest of cooking utensils such sieves, spatula, strainer, casserole and steamer etc., again you will find the western version to be less effective.

### CLEAVER:

Let me state straight away that I disagree with calling the Chinese kitchen knife a Cleaver. As you know the term "cleaver" applies to 'heavy duty chopper' that serves only one function, and in my mind not all that efficient unless you buy one that weighs a ton and probably will cost you an arm and a leg - sorry about the pun!!!. While as the Chinese cleaver (I will call it by that name for the time being), since it is the generally accepted term in English, is an all purpose cook's knife that is used for slicing, shredding, peeling, pounding, crushing, chopping and even for transporting cut food from the chopping board or to a plate directly to the wok.

At the first sight, a Chinese cleaver may appear to be hefty, gleaming ominously sharp. But in reality it is quite light, steady and not at all dangerous to use, provided you handle it correctly and with care. Once you have learned to regard it as a kitchen tool mainly used for cutting and not just a chopper, then you will be surprised how easy and simple it is to use compared to an ordinary kitchen knife. Cleavers are available in a variety of materials and weight. They all have a blade of about 8 - 9 inches (20 - 23 cms) long and 3 - 4 inches (8 - 10 cms) wide. The heaviest, weighing almost 2

lb. (1 kg) called CHOPPER, is really meant for the professionals and is excellent for chopping bones such as drumsticks, pork spare ribs. The smaller and much lighter SLICER with a thinner and sharper blade is convenient for slicing meat and vegetables. But most Chinese cooks prefer a medium weight, dual purpose cleaver known as THE CIVIL AND MILITARY KNIFE (wen-wu dao in Chinese). You use the lighter, front half of the blade for slicing, shredding and scoring etc, and the heavier, rear half of the blade for chopping and so on.

The Chinese cook uses the back of the blade as a pounder and tenderizer and the flat side of the blade for crushing and transporting; the end of the handle acts as a pestle for grinding spices etc. The blades of a cleaver should be made of tempered carbon steel with wooden handle. Stainless steel cleavers with metal handle may look good, but require more frequent sharpening also the handle gets slippery; therefore they are less satisfactory for both safety and steadiness.

Always keep your cleaver blade sharp and clean. To prevent it rusting and getting it stained, wipe it dry with cloth or kitchen paper after use. Sharpen it frequently on a fine fine-grained whet stone. Try getting a whet stone (also known as oilstone, which is man made composition of silicon carbide) that has two different grades of surface. Use a rough grain surface only if the blade has become blunt and the finer grained surface for a sharp finish to the edge. Lubricate the stone with vegetables oil or water and then put a damp cloth beneath it for stability. Hone the cleaver evenly on both sides to keep the blade straight and sharp. After cleaning the blade and wiping it dry, hang the cleaver by the handle to keep the blade becoming dulled on other metals in the drawer.

### **CHOPPING BLOCK:**

The traditional Chinese chopping block is a cross section tree trunk. Made of hardwood, they range from about 12 inches (30 cm.) in diameter and 2 inches (5 cm.) thick, to giant ones up to 20 inches (50 cm.) by 6 - 8 inches (15 - 20 cm.). The ideal size should be about 16 inches (40 cm.) in diameter and at least 3 - 4 in (7 - 10 cms.) thick to be of real use.

To prevent it from splitting, season a new block with a liberal dose of vegetable oil on both sides. Let the wood absorb as much oil as it will take,

and sponge the block with salt and water and dry it thoroughly. Never soak the block in water nor wash it with any detergent - after each use, just scrape it clean with the blade of your cleaver, then wipe the surface with a sponge or cloth wrung out in plain hot water. Always stand the block on its side when not in use.

In a professional kitchen, the health regulations specify that you must never cut your raw ingredients and cooked food on the same surface. In other words, you should use a different block or board for the two types of food for hygienic reasons. One answer to this is to get plastic chopping board made of white acrylic which will not split, smell or warp, and is easy to clean but it has no aesthetic appeal whatever, personally I would recommend a large board of hard wood, at least 2" thick (5 cms.) that will take a heaviest blow with a cleaver. If you use one side for chopping only, then the other side should remain smooth for pastry making.

### **WOK:**

The Chinese cooking utensils known as 'WOK' is the 'POT' or 'PAN' the correct translation should be *GOU*. But wok it is and wok it shall remain. The wok was designed with a rounded bottom to fit snugly over a traditional Chinese braizer or oven, which burned wood, charcoal or coal. It conducts and retains heat evenly and because of its shape, the food always returns to the center of the wok where the heat is most intense that is why it is ideally suited for quick stir-frying.

Of course the wok is far more versatile than just a frying pan, it is also ideal for deep frying; its conical shape requires far less oil than a flat-bottomed deep-fryer, and has more depth (which means more heat) and more frying surface (which means that more food can be cooked more quickly at one go). Furthermore, since the wok has a large capacity on the upper end and as the oil level rises when the raw ingredients are added to it, there is little chance for the oil to overflow and cause the pan to catch fire as often is the case with the conventional deep fryer.

Besides being a frying pan (deep or shallow), a wok is also used for braising, steaming, boiling, and even smoking - in other words the whole spectrum of Chinese cooking method can be executed in one single use utensil. Basically there are only two different types of wok - the **DOUBLE HANDLED WOK**

with two handles on two opposite sides, and the frying pan type SINGLE HANDLED WOK. Both types are usually made of light weight iron or carbonized steel, and the diameter ranges from about 12 - 18 inches (32 - 46cms.).

The single handled wok may appear to be unsteady and slightly tipped to one side, but in fact it is quite safe and much easier to handle particularly for quick stir-frying, since it offers you plenty of leverage of tilting and tossing. The disadvantages of using a double handled wok is that you need strong wrist and oven gloves to lift it, as the metal handles get very hot even if they are reinforced with heat resistant plastic or wood.

A dome shaped lid would be another useful item for certain braising and steaming dishes. Wok lids are usually made of light metal such as aluminum, with a wooden or plastic knob on top as a handle. The dome shape allows the cooking of a whole chicken or duck in a wok and the natural curve will guide the condensation inside the lid, sliding down along the edge, rather than dropping down directly onto the food that is being cooked.

### **STIRRER:**

Some wok sets often consist of a pair of stirrers in the shape of a ladle and a spatula, made of iron and stainless steel, both have a long handle with wooden tip. Of the two, the ladle or scooper is more versatile. It is an indispensable utensil in the professional kitchen, since it is used for adding ingredients and seasonings to the wok, besides being a stirrer and scooper during cooking as well as transferring food from the wok to serving dish or bowl. It is also a measure for the cook, as the standard ladle will hold 6 fl oz. (180 ml or 2/3 cup) liquid, slightly smaller than the rice bowl.

The spatula or shovel has a rounded end to match the contours of the wok, therefore it can be very useful for scraping and lifting fried food from the bottom of the wok such as when cooking a whole fish etc. Sometimes it is used in conjunction with the ladle for stir-frying, rather like when you are mixing and tossing a salad with a pair of spoon and fork.

One common factor regarding the wooden tip attached to the end of the handles, it often becomes loose and falls off in your hand during cooking; so

make sure it is nailed or glued firmly in place. You may have to do this yourself, since very seldom will you find this to be done by a manufacturer.

## **HOW TO SEASON AND CLEAN AN IRON OR STEEL WOK :**

A new wok is either coated with machine oil or a film of wax to keep it from rusting. This coating has to be removed and a new coat of seasoning must be applied to the surface after the cleaning and be maintained throughout its life in order to keep the wok from rusting as well as preventing food being stuck to the bottom.

If the new wok is covered with only grease, then just wash in warm soapy water with a stiff brush until clean; but if the wok is coated with wax, you will have to remove it by burning it over hot stove first and then clean it in warm, soapy water with a stiff brush and rinse well.

After that, place the clean and smooth wok over a moderate heat to dry, wipe the surface with a pad of kitchen paper soaked in cooking oil until clean. The wok is now seasoned and ready for use.

After each use, wash the wok under hot or cold water, never use any detergents as that will remove seasoning and cause food to stick to the surface the next time you cook. Should any food get stuck in the wok, scrape it off with a stiff brush or nylon scourer without soap. Rinse and dry the wok thoroughly over low heat; rub some more oil over the surface if it is not to be used again soon, otherwise the wok might go rust.

After you have cooked with a new wok some 8 - 10 times, and if you never have to clean it with detergent or metal abrasives then your wok will acquire a beautiful, glossy finish like a well-seasoned omelet pan. This is the 'PATINA' much treasured by Chinese chefs as the wok flavor.

## INITIAL PREPARATION:

### Cutting Techniques -

The cutting of various ingredients into different sizes, thickness and shapes is an important element in Chinese cuisine. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese always cut their food into small neat pieces before cooking, partly because of fuel conservation; small pieces of food can be cooked quickly before the sticks of firewood burn out! And partly because, small pieces of food are easier to be served and eaten with chopsticks, since knives and carvers have never been used on Chinese tables. The fact that small pieces of food only require a short cooking time, thus retain much of the natural flavors and nutritious value is an added bonus in Chinese cooking, which must be regarded as an incidental discovery.

So the Chinese started cutting their food into small pieces before cooking for practical reasons, but as their cuisine developed into a fine art, naturally too the cutting too became more and more sophisticated. We must have found out the close relationship between cooking and cutting, so instead of cutting everything into small bits and pieces indiscriminately, we gradually worked out the following basic rules that govern cutting of food.

1. The size and shape of the cut ingredient must first of all be suitable for the particular method of cooking. For instance, the ingredients for quick stir-frying should be cut into small, thin slices or shreds, never large thick chunks.
2. Learn and understand the character of the ingredients, their textures and the color changes - an important factor that helps you to choose the appropriate cutting and cooking method. Tender ingredients can be cut thicker than tougher ones that require more cooking time and most meats change color when cooked (chicken and pork become paler, while beef and lamb tend to become darker after they are cooked)
3. The ingredients must be cut into pieces of uniform shape, size and thickness - this is not only to create aesthetic harmony but because each piece must be cooked evenly, larger pieces will be undercooked and smaller ones overcooked.

4. Whenever possible, different ingredients for the same dish should be cut into pieces of the same shape and size, slices are matched with slices, shreds with shreds, cubes with cubes, chunks with chunks and so on.

There are certain shapes, which are standard in Chinese cooking. Slice, Strip, Shred, Chunk, Piece, Dice, Cube, Grain and Mince. The actual shape is decided by the character of the ingredient and the cooking method required.

**SLICE:** Are thin, flat pieces of the ingredient. Cut them by first cutting the ingredient into sections as required by the dimension of the slice, and then slice the sections according to the desired thickness. The required size is often decided by the cooking method.

**STRIP, SHRED:** Strips and shreds are similar - one is thicker, other is thinner. First cut the ingredient into slices, then pile them one on top of each other like a pack of playing cards and cut them into strips or shreds as desired.

**CHUNK, PIECE:** There are many kinds of chunks and pieces: diamond, hexagonal, rectangular or wedge shaped. Cut them by first cutting the ingredient into broad strips or sections, and then into smaller pieces as required.

**DICE, CUBE:** Diced cubes and small cubes are pieces cut from strips.

**GRAIN, MINCE:** Grains are finely chopped ingredient, and are cut from shreds. Mince is even finer and is cut by much chopping and pressings with the flat of the blade.

In addition to these, there are FLOWER - CUTTING and SCORING for thick pieces such as kidney, squid and fish in order to allow more heat and sauce penetration.

## INITIAL PREPARATION AND COOKING TECHNIQUE

A Chinese dish is usually made up of more than one ingredient because when a single item is served on its own, it lacks contrast, therefore there is no harmony. Some cooks like to mix contrasting flavours and unrelated textures; others prefer the matching of similar tastes and colors. Some wish the flavor of each ingredient to be preserved, others believe in the infusion of flavors.

To start with, you first choose the 'main' ingredient, then decide which type or types of 'supplementary' ingredients will go best with it, bearing in mind the difference of color, flavor and texture and so on. For instance, if the main ingredient is chicken breast, which is white in color and tender in texture, then one would choose as a supplementary ingredient something crisp like celery, which is also pale in color, or one would perhaps choose something more colorful like green or red peppers, with crisp or something soft like mushrooms.

By combining different supplementary ingredients with the main one, and by the addition of various seasonings, it is possible to produce almost an endless variety of dishes without resort to unusual and exotic items. That is why a Chinese cook abroad can always produce a Chinese meal, even using only local ingredients. For the 'Chineseness' of the food depends entirely on how it is prepared and cooked, not what ingredient is used.

As mentioned earlier, the cutting of variety ingredients into different sizes, thickness and shapes is an important element in Chinese cuisine. The Chinese practice of cutting their food into small, neat pieces before cooking, partly because of fuel conservation and partly because small pieces of food are easier to be served and eaten with chopsticks, since knives and carvers have not been used on Chinese tables since ancient times. Of course small pieces of food require only a short cooking time, thus retain much of the natural flavors and nutritional value.

The size and shape of the cut ingredient must, first of all, be suitable for the particular method of cooking. For instance, ingredients for quick stir-frying should be cut into small, thin slices or shreds, never large, thick

chunks. Learn and understand the character of the ingredients, their texture and their color changes - an important factor that helps you to choose the appropriate cutting and cooking method. Tender ingredients can be cut thicker than tougher ones that require more cooking time, and most meats change color when cooked. Chicken and pork become paler while beef and lamb tend to go darker after being cooked.

After cooking, the next step in the preparation of food (usually applies to ingredients such as meats, poultry and fish, not to vegetables) before actual cooking is marinating. The basic method is to marinate the white meats and fish in salt, egg white and corn flour, in order to preserve the natural delicate texture of the food when cooked in hot oil. For red meats the basic marinade usually consists of salt, sugar, soya sauce, rice wine and corn flour, the purpose of this marinating is to tenderize and enhance the flavors of the meat.

When it comes to the actual cooking, the two most important factors are degree of heat and duration of cooking. These two factors are so closely related to each other that it is very difficult to give a precise cooking time in most recipes, since much depends on the size and condition of the ingredients, and above all, on the type of the stove and cooking utensils used.

All in all, there are well over 50 different distinct methods of cooking in Chinese Cooking. They fall roughly into the following categories:

**WATER COOKING** : Boiling, poaching and simmering.

**OIL COOKING** : Deep-frying, Shallow frying, stir-frying and braising.

**FIRE COOKING** : Roasting, baking and barbecuing.

**STEAM COOKING** : Steaming.

## COOKING METHODS

The Chinese divide the temperature of heat into 'Military' (high or fierce and medium) and 'civil' (low or gentle and weak). And proper control of temperature and cooking time is key to success or failure.

High or fierce heat is usually used for quick cooking for and tender foods. Different kinds of frying, steaming, instant boiling etc., call for a high heat.

Medium or moderate heat can be used for quick braising, steaming and boiling.

Low or gentle heat is used for slow cooking allowing the flavours to penetrate through all the ingredients such as in roasting and simmering.

Weak heat is used for long cooking, turning hard ingredients soft. It is used for simmering, braising and stewing.

Here are 25 commonly used methods in Chinese cooking. One dish may require one, two or three methods; each will produce a different effect.

- **CHAUN** Quick or rapid boiling. This simple cooking method is often used for making soups. Bring the water or stock, boil over high heat, add the ingredients and seasonings, and serve as soon as the soup re-boils. No thickening agent added and the vegetables will be crisp and fresh.
- **SHAU** Instant boiling or rinsing. Thinly sliced ingredients are dipped into boiling water for a second or two, occasionally draining it as if rinsing, then serve with a sauce. This cooking method keeps the ingredients fresh and tender.
- **AO** Stewing or braising. Flavour a little hot oil with spring onions and ginger-root, and then stir-fry the ingredients for a short time. Now add the stock or water and seasonings. Simmer over a low heat. The food should be soft and tender.

- **HUI** Braising or Assembling. A method of cooking a dish that consists of several different ingredients. Stir-fry the ingredients first, add stock or water and seasonings, boil over high heat for a short while, then thicken the gravy before serving. Alternately, prepare the gravy first then add the partly cooked ingredients (deep fried or steamed) cook over low heat, thicken the gravy and serve.
- **BAN** Mixing salads. This method does not actually involve cooking, but simply calls for cutting the raw or cooking ingredients and dressing it with seasonings.
- **QIAND** Hot salads. Here the raw ingredients are parboiled or blanched first, then dressed with seasonings.

The difference between cold salad and hot salad dressing is as follows -

Cold Salad Dressing - Soya sauce, vinegar and sesame seed oil.

Hot Salad Dressing - Ginger shreds, sichuan peppercorn, salt, sugar and sesame seed oil.

- **YAN** Pickling. Pickle the food with salt and sugar or with salt and wine. Dishes prepared this way have a subtle fragrance and are crisp.
- **JIAN** Shallow frying. A flat-bottomed pan is used, a little oil and medium or low heat. Seasonings are added when food is half done. The pan should be turned from time to time during cooking so that the heat is evenly distributed.
- **TA** Pan-frying. The ingredients are coated with batter, fried in a small amount of oil on both sides over a low heat until done. The ingredients may be deep-fried first, and then finished off by pan-frying. Seasonings and sauce are added towards the end of cooking.
- **TIE-PAN** Sticking frying. This is basically a form of shallow frying, but only one side is fried, the food is not turned over, so that one side is golden brown and the other side is soft and tender.

- **ZHA** Deep frying. Food is fried in a large quantity of oil over a high or medium heat. There are different variations of deep-frying.
  1. Neat deep-frying: The raw ingredients are not coated with batter or flour.
  2. Dry deep-frying: Raw ingredients are coated with dry flour or breadcrumbs.
  3. Soft deep-frying: Raw ingredients are coated with batter, first and then deep-fried for crispiness.
  
- **LIU** Sauté. This is a special technique, which involves two stages of cooking. First deep-fry, quick or rapid boil steam, or boil the ingredients until done, then mix with seasonings to make a sauce. Next either.
  1. Dark brown sauté: Pour the sauce over the cooked foods and serve.
  2. Slippery sauté: Stir-fry the raw ingredients and pour the sauce over half way through cooking, stirring constantly until done.
  3. Soft sauté: Steam or boil the ingredients and then, while they are still hot, add a thin and delicate sauce.
  
- **CHAO** Stir frying. Stir-fry the ingredients in a little hot oil over a very high heat. This method is widely used and has many variations:
  - a. Pure stir-frying: The raw ingredients are not marinated nor coated with a batter, they are just stir-fried in hot oil and seasonings are added towards the end of cooking. Most vegetables are cooked in this way.
  - b. Braising stir-frying: The main and supplementary ingredients are cooked in this way, separately at first and then brought together with the addition of seasoning and stock or a thickening agent (usually of cornflour mixed with water), and braised very quickly over high heat.
  - c. Twice cooked stir-frying: One ingredient has been previously cooked and is here cut into smaller pieces and stir fried with other ingredients and seasonings.
  
- **BAO** Rapid stir-frying. Another form of stir-frying, the ingredient or ingredients have been deep-fried or rapid boiled first, they are then quickly stir-fried over very high heat for a short

period of time. Variations in this method include rapid stir-frying in oil, rapid stir-frying in bean sauce and rapid stir-frying with spring onions.

➤ **PENG** Quick braising. This is one of the important cooking techniques and is always used with deep-frying. The ingredients are cut into small pieces and deep fried first, then taken out of the oil and a sauce is added. While the sauce is hot stir-fry over high heat and remove the wok from heat and combine stirring a few more time before serving.

➤ **DUN** Slow cooking. There are two kinds of slow cooking in water. Slow cooking in water is a form of stewing, slow cooking out of water involves a double boiling technique. When the pot that contains the food is immersed in a large pot of boiling water.

➤ **MEN** Slow braising. The food must be fried first (light browned) then all the ingredients (seasonings etc) are in a tightly covered pot and simmered over a very low heat slowly like a casserole.

➤ **LU** Soya stewing. A soya gravy is made first, the ingredients are stewed in this gravy over a low heat.

➤ **JIANG** A soya braising. The difference between soya stewing and soya braising is that the ingredients are marinated first in the sauce in which it is cooked, with additional stock and water. The sauce is reduced or thickened and is served with the dish.

➤ **SHAO** Red cooking. In this widely used method of cooking the meat is cut into small chunks, then fried, deep fried, par boiled or steamed until half done. Seasonings (Soya sauce, wine, ginger and sugar etc.) stock or water are then added to it, the whole thing is brought to a boil and simmered until done.

➤ **PA** Braising in sauce. In this method, a little oil is first flavored with spring onions and/or ginger-root, the ingredients are then placed in the wok / pot and simmered until done.

➤ **ZHU** Boiling. Boil the ingredients directly in water over low heat.

➤ **ZHENG** Steaming. Another widely used method in China not only for cooking but also for treating raw ingredients before cooking by other methods, or to keep food warm after they have been cooked.

➤ **KAO** Roasting. The ingredients are first marinated or treated then either cooked in an oven or over an open fire like barbecuing.

➤ **SHUN:** Smoking. Cooking with heat and smoke from burning materials such as sawdust, tea leaves, cypress branches, bamboo leaves or granulated sugar.

Learn these methods carefully and practice with different ingredients for each method, bear in mind that certain food may or may not be suitable for a particular cooking method.

Most important point to remember is cooking time. Even a slight variation in time or temperature will lead to different results. So you should use your own eyes, nose and ears while cooking. Once you have learnt to control the temperature and cooking time, you should be able to judge the precise moment when a dish is done.

## **BLENDING OF FLAVOURS AND SEASONINGS**

A dish is made up of one or more ingredients. The ingredients usually divided between the 'main' ingredient and the 'supplementary' ingredient or ingredients. The main ingredient is the major ingredient used for the dish, and the supplementary ingredients serve as contrast to it as well blend the flavours for the dish.

In selecting the ingredients for a dish or a course of dishes attention should be paid to -

1. **Quantity:** The main ingredients - color, aroma, flavor or shape should be maintained. If there is no marked distinction between the main and supplementary ingredients, then equal proportions should be used.
2. **Flavour:** The main ingredients flavor should dominate the dish; the supplementary ingredients should be lighter in flavor. If the main ingredient itself is light in flavor, then heavily seasoned supplementary ingredients will complement the main one.
3. **Texture:** The texture of the various ingredients can be similar, or in contrast, which offers a more interesting result. Attention should be paid to the temperature of heat and duration of cooking time for each individual item, so that the ingredient retains its proper texture.
4. **Shape:** Affects the appearance of the dish and the cooking itself. Usually the shape of the main ingredient is the most prominent. And in selecting dishes for a complete meal, there should be a variety of shapes - slices, cubes, shreds etc., in order to avoid monotony.
5. **Color:** Color will affect the presentation of the dish - and the flavor. One color may be chosen for the dish and all the ingredients will then match. Alternatively, different colors will often add to the variety in presentation value.

There are 5 basic flavors in Chinese Cuisine:

1. Salty - flavoring agents - salt, soy sauce, soyabean paste etc.
2. Sweet - sugar, honey, jam etc.
3. Sour - vinegar, plum sauce, tomato sauce etc.
4. Hot - chilli, chilli sauce, pepper, ginger, mustard etc
5. Bitter - almond, orange peel, herbs etc.

In addition, certain regional cuisines include 2 extra flavors.

6. **Aromatic** - flavoring agents - wine, garlic, spring onions, sichwan, pepper, sesame seeds, sesame seed oil, spices etc.
7. **Delicious** - This is a literary translation from the Chinese character XIAN, made up by joining a fish with a goat, produces the delicious flavor. Flavoring agents: Mono-sodium glutamate, oyster sauce, shrimp sauce, chicken and meat stock etc.

Out of these basic flavors. A Chinese cook can create several combination flavors:

- Sweet and sour: Salt, sugar, vinegar etc.
- Sweet and salty: Salt, sugar, soy sauce etc.
- Hot and sour: Chilli, chilli bean paste, vinegar etc.
- Salty and hot: Soy sauce, chilli sauce etc.
- Aromatic and hot: Chilli oil, curry powder, mustard etc.
- Aromatic and salty: Salt, sichwan pepper

The most famous and popular sweet and sour sauce has many regional variations, but there are only 2 basic styles:

## 1. CANTONESE SWEET AND SOUR SAUCE

The Cantonese usually make their sweet and sour sauce in large quantity, which is used for different dishes, be it pork, chicken, fish or prawn.

### INGREDIENTS

Vinegar	800	ml
Sugar	400	gms
Salt	3	tbsp
Tomato puree	200	gms
Water	1500	ml

### METHOD

Dissolve the sugar in vinegar over medium heat, then add the rest of the ingredients, blend until smooth.

## 2. PEKING SWEET AND SOUR SAUCE

The Peking style is used throughout the rest of China with only very slight variations according to regional taste - for instance, in Eastern China (Shanghai and Soudrow) more sugar would be used, while in Western China (Sichwan), more vinegar would be used. Also the sauce is always made just for an individual dish, therefore adjustments could be made to suit a particular ingredient.

### INGREDIENTS

Oil	2-3	tablespoons
Vinegar	2-3	"
Sugar	3-3.5	"
Dark Soy sauce	1-2	"
Cornflour mixed with water	1	"
Stock / Water	2-3	"

Finely chopped spring onions, ginger-root and garlic (1/2 tsp each)

### METHOD

First heat the oil, then flavor the oil with spring onions, ginger and garlic, and stir until aromatic. Add stock or water, soy sauce, sugar and vinegar, blend and bring to the boil. Finally thicken the sauce with cornflour and water paste.

### PRINCIPLES OF SEASONING

Marinate the raw ingredients with basic seasonings (salt, sugar, soy sauce, vinegar, wine, cornflour etc.) creates a basic flavor for, or defuses certain strong flavors in the ingredient.

Seasonings added to the ingredients during cooking enhance the flavor of food.

After cooking, supplementary seasoning added to the dish in the form of garnishes (sesame oil, spring onions, coriander etc.) further enhance the appearance and flavor of the dish. Also in certain cooking methods such as deep-frying, instant boiling, steaming or blanching etc., seasonings cannot be added during cooking, therefore seasonings in the form of dips or garnishes can make up for the flavor deficiency.

**Balance:** You should know what is the correct flavor of the dishes, if it calls for several different spices or seasonings, make the leading flavor stand out.

**The nature of the ingredients:** Fresh foods should not be seasoned too highly, or their original delicacy will be lost. Food that has a strong flavor should be highly seasoned in order to reduce or eliminate the strong flavor.

**The seasons:** People's tastes change with the seasons. Generally they like light food during the hot season and heavier food in the colder and milder seasons.

## **BATTERS AND THICKENING AGENTS**

Batters are used to coat ingredients before cooking. They help the food retain freshness, flavor and moisture. They will give the cooked food a crisp outside and a tender soft inside. Batters help retain the natural nutrients in food that would otherwise be lost in the cooking process. Finally, batters help the food retain shape where they might have been broken up or shrunken during cooking.

The primary ingredients in batters include egg, cornflour wheat flour, baking powder and breads crumbs.

1. Egg-white batter: made of egg white, cornflour and salt.
2. Egg and flour batter: made of whole egg, cornflour or wheat flour and salt.
3. Water and cornflour batter: made of conflour and water.
4. Baking powder batter: Made of baking powder, flour and water.
5. Egg batter and flour dredge: The food is first coated with a thin layer of dry cornflour, and then dipped in a batter before cooking.

6. Egg batter and breadcrumbs dredge: the food is first covered with batter and then rolled in breadcrumbs before deep-frying.

## **THICKENING AGENTS**

A thin paste made of corn flour and water, when added to food shortly before it is done, will thicken the gravy or sauce. It serves to:

1. Bring the seasonings and the ingredients together to heighten the flavours.
2. Make the surface of the cooked dish smooth and soft, and make the colors bright - in another word, it improves the appearance of the dish.
3. Create a transparent coating around the food, keeping the heat So that the dish doesn't get cold too quickly.
4. In some soup dishes, heavier ingredients tend to sink to the bottom, the thickening agents make the ingredients remain more evenly distributed in the soup.

There are two types of paste: thick and thin.

Thick paste is further divided into 2 types: a thick coating paste when sticks to the ingredients, leaving no liquid in the dish, and a fluid paste which thickens the gravy in a dish.

Thin paste also falls into two categories: glazing paste, which is added to the gravy left in the wok after the food is removed, this is then heated and poured over the food as a sauce and a creamy sauce, which thickens the gravy only slightly when poured into the dish.

## **THE CHINESE MENU**

Serving Chinese food often puzzles most people in the West, particularly because the order of different course served at Chinese meal bears no

resemblance to the western convention of soup-fish-poultry-meat-cheese-desert sequence.

The Chinese cooking tradition makes for a greater harmony of living, an aspect of Chinese cuisine which has often been overlooked: there is a great feeling of togetherness in the way the Chinese eat. They gather around a table and partake all the dishes, which are placed on the table in a communal style. Nobody is served just an individual portion in the western way. The chopsticks are used not only as eating implements but also to help others to a choice piece - especially from a particular dish this is usually an expression of respect and affection.

Due to the multi-course nature of the Chinese meal, eating and dining have always been very much a family or communal event and Chinese food is best eaten this way, for only then can you enjoy a variety of dishes. An informal Chinese dinner served at home is essentially a buffer-style affair, with more hot dishes than cold served on the table at the same time, to be shared by everyone. Only at formal dinner parties or banquets dishes are served singly, or in groups course by course, and the order in which different course or dishes are served depends more on the method of cooking, and the way the ingredients are prepared before cooking, rather than on the actual food itself.

A typical dinner menu for 10-12 people would consist of 8-10 dishes served in the following order:

**First course:** 3-4 cold starters or an assorted hors d'oeuvre dish.

**Second course:** 2-3 or 4 quick stir - fried dishes, or deep fried or quick braised dishes (which should always be 'dry' rather than full of gravy); the exact number and variety of dishes are flexible here, it all depends on the scale of the occasion, or what was served before and to follow.

**Main course:** 1,2,or 3 (or even 4) 'big' dishes; these can be steamed, long- braised (red cooked) or roasted, but usually consisted of a whole chicken, duck, fish and joint of meat. Again the number and variety of dishes are dependents on the occasion.

**Rice course:** Noodles and dumplings are often served instead of, or as well as rice at the end of a big meal.

**Dessert:** Only served at formal banquets in China, soup is often served for lesser grand occasions. As a compromise, fresh fruit and Chinese Tea can always be served at the end of a big Chinese meal instead of pudding.

When it comes to planning the menu , just remember that, as a rule, allow one dish per person, but 2 dishes should be enough for 3-4 people, 3 dishes for 6-8 and so on. But also remember the Chinese never serve an individual dish to each person, you all share the same dishes on the table . The only exception is for a light snack when a dish of chow mein or a bowl of noodles or soup is given his or her own portion.

A Chinese meal is served absolutely ready-to-eat there is no last minute carving on the table, nor dishing out separate items such as meat, vegetables, gravy or sauce and with all their attendant condiments; there is no long prelude when you wait for everybody to be served before you start. At a Chinese meal, as soon as the first dish or course of dishes is placed on the table, the host will raise his glass and say 'gan bei' (Cheers) or Bon Appetite.

## **CHINESE COOKERY FOR HEALTH**

Chinese people generally look younger than their age, and very few have a weight problem. This must be because Chinese food when done properly, often using simple and easy methods of preparation and cooking, retains its natural flavors as well as the nutritional value.

A nutritious substance is also known as nutrient, and all edible items consists of a number of nutrients, these include energy producing calories (proteins, fats and carbohydrates), dietary fiber, the essential fatty acids, the essential minerals including trace elements.

The human body needs food and drink as nourishment to sustain its growth and maintenance, but good health requires a well-balanced diet based on a

variety of different food and drink, since the nutritional value in different foods vary enormously. From the earliest days of their civilization, the Chinese have always been highly aware of, (one could even say, almost obsessed with the idea of) the close relationship between food and health.

The Chinese consider the human body and mind as a whole, they do not make so strong a distinction between the mental, the spiritual and the physical as do people of the western this school of thought clearly related to the ancient philosophy of yin-yang.

'A healthy mind within a healthy body'. Whereas the Confucianists were more concerned with the physical aspects of the food - appearance, flavor and texture, the Taoists, who were primarily responsible for the development of hygienic and nutritional science of food, were concerned the 'spiritual' or life-giving attributes of various food: nourishment of body and happiness of life.

The main distinctive features in Chinese Cuisine is the emphasis on the harmonious blending of colors, aromas, flavors and textures both in one single dish and a course of dishes for a meal. Consciously or unconsciously, a Chinese cook from a housewife to the professional chef all work to the yin-yang principles i.e. harmonious balance and contrast in conspicuous juxtapositions of different colors, aromas, flavors and texture by varying the ingredients, cutting-techniques, seasonings and cooking methods and so on.

Perhaps one of the best examples for the yin-yang principle in Chinese cuisine is in the way we blend different seasoning. Complimentary pairs: sugar (yin) and vinegar (yang), salt (yin) and sichwan pepper (yang), spring onion (yin) and root ginger (yang), soy sauce (yin) and rice wine (yang) and so on.

There is no set rules for the exciting yin-yang combinations, is all done by subtle intuition and the 'feel' of the process an experienced good knows by instinct that what does and does not go together just as a true gourmet will judge the success or failure of a dish purely on its visual appeal, if it doesn't **look** right, then it won't taste right.

The Chinese attitude to eating is further characterized by the ideas and beliefs that most foods are also medicines - the even riding idea is that the kind of food one eats is intimately relevant to one's health. Many foods are classified into those that possess the yin quality and those of the yang quality. When the yin-yang forces in the body are not balanced, illness results, therefore, proper amounts to foods of one kind or the other may then be administered (i.e. cooked and clean) to counterbalance the disorder.

With health food and cooking for health in mind, a Chinese cook concentrates on three points:

A. The selection of the raw materials: This requires a deep understanding of the various ingredients to be used - what is their nutritional value, and whether there is sufficient balance in variety, are they fresh and in their prime conditions? Above all they must be fresh in the case of seafood and vegetables.

B. The cooking methods employed: A significant quantity of vitamins is destroyed through prolonged cooking, therefore the various cooking methods can drastically alter the nutritional value in any given food. The Chinese quick stir-frying, braising, steaming and rapid-boiling etc. are all cooking methods particularly favorable for nutritional preservations.

C. How to make dishes delicious: A good Chinese cook prides him/herself on being able to make a dish highly palatable without resorting to too much flavoring agents or seasoning. At the back of the Chinese mind, there is a strong conviction that any food that is fresh should retain its natural flavor therefore is bound to be delicious to the palate and be nutritious as well.

To return to my earlier remarks about the Chinese regarding the human body and mind as a whole, I would like to quote a paragraph from the preface to 'The Correct Guide to Food and Drink' by Hu Sihui, the 14<sup>th</sup> century Imperial Dietitian (literally 'Food Doctor Official).

What determines human life is the mind which is the master body if the body is at ease and in harmony with the environment the mind will be able to deal with all changes in life. Thus it is important to keep the body in good

repair and maintenance, essence of which is to keep the golden mean, that is not too deficient in nutrition and not to indulge in excesses. Use of 5 flavors (salty, sweet, sour, bitter, and piquant) to the 5 vital organs. If these are at peace, the vital fluid to us will flow smoothly, then our mind will find its equilibrium and the whole person will find himself in a supreme state of well being.

**Vernon Coelho**

IHM Mumbai

2009-10