

Liu Junru

# Chinese Foods

• Cultural China Series

Translated by William W. Wang



CHINA  
INTERCONTINENTAL  
PRESS



© Cultural China Series

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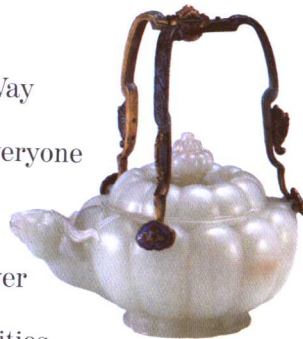
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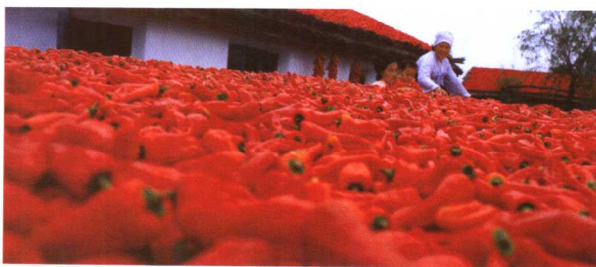
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## Introduction



When it comes to food, the Chinese have a common saying, “The masses regard food as their heaven,” which means that food is people’s primal want. It should clearly justify the importance that “eating” holds in Chinese people’s lives. Eating is not just meant to fill the stomach; having food at one’s disposal, being able to consume a good amount of food, and knowing what and how to eat are all viewed as a good “fortune.” Those who promote food culture often use the words of Chinese philosopher Confucius, “diet and love-making, all primal needs of every human being,” finding an aspiring and positive thought basis for such an epicurean lifestyle. There’s probably not another place in this world that has as great a variety of delicious fare as China. If judging by the art and techniques of cooking, aside from France and Italy, perhaps the skills of chefs of no other country can gain recognition from the Chinese.

Extremely developed culinary techniques can make seemingly inedible ingredients, to foreign eyes, into dish after dish of delicious treats by the hands of Chinese chefs. The Chinese cookbook also contains quite an extensive list of foods,



*Rice fields by the Fuchun River. (Photo by Wang Miao, provided by image library of Hong Kong China Tourism)*

including just about anything edible with very few taboos. The Chinese, who see eating as a fortune and life as an art, not only created various kinds of regional food styles in its own vast lands, but have also spread Chinese food culture to far across the seas. Today, in this world where even the farthest corners can seem as close as one's backyard, Chinese food can be enjoyed in each and every metropolitan throughout the world.

Like many other countries with a vast territory, Chinese cuisines are differentiated largely by its northern and southern regional tastes. Although the best quality rice in China is grown in its northeastern regions, people in those regions, however, just as other northerners, prefer to eat pasta or pastry instead. In the north, classic dishes include Beijing's lamb hotpot (fondue) and roast duck, and Shandong province's *Lu* style cuisines. In the south, the principal foods (foods that are the main source of carbohydrates and dietary fibers, e.g. bread and cereal in the west) are rice-based. A relatively greater variety of dishes are found in the south. There you can find the hot and heavily spiced *Sichuan* food, *Xiang* (Hunan) food, sweet and delicate *Huaiyang* food and the *Yue* (Cantonese) style which are mostly seafood and soups. Thus foreigners who have been to China are often pleasantly surprised by the great differences in taste and food types by region.

Having Chinese food not only indulges people's sense of taste, the sense of sight is also entertained. The Chinese culinary arts rely on the canon of "color (aesthetic beauty), aroma, and taste," missing any one element would not make a good dish. To make the food pleasing to the eye, usually the appropriate meat and non-meat ingredients are selected; it would include a single main ingredient and two or three secondary ingredients of different colors. Blue, green, red, yellow, white, black and brown sauce colors are to be mixed in

the right combination. Through proper cooking techniques, aestheticism in food is achieved. "Aroma" is achieved by using the right spices, such as scallion, ginger, garlic, cooking wine, aniseed, cassia bark, black pepper, sesame oil, shiitake mushrooms and so on, to stimulate the appetite with the aroma from the cooked food. When preparing food, techniques such as fry, stir-fry, roast, steam, deep-fry, quick-fry, simmer and others are put to use, with the goal of preserving the natural taste and juices of the food. One can also add the right amounts of soy sauce, sugar, vinegar, spices, spicy pepper and other seasoning, making the dishes taste salty, sweet, sour, hot and much more. With tomatoes, turnip, cucumber and other sculptural vegetables to create elegant and intricate decorations to the plate, and the use of exquisite fine china for dining ware, Chinese cuisines really become a true art form complete with aesthetic beauty, wonderful aroma, and great taste.

Americans rely on calculating calories and cholesterol content from food to maintain good health and a shapely figure.



Top: This is the most commonly seen teacup with lid. (Photo by Zhang Hongjiang)

Bottom: Tea-picking women in Yunnan Province. (Photo by Chen Anding, provided by image library of Hong Kong China Tourism)







*Dining environments with antique flavors and imitation imperial dishes of royal heritage closely bind culture and cuisine together. (Photo by Shen Yu, provided by Imaginechina)*

*Vegetable sections in supermarkets that supply all kinds of fresh seasonal vegetable. (Photo by Shi Huiming, provided by Imaginechina)*



The Japanese are into trying various health foods to preserve an everlasting youth. Different from both, the Chinese way of looking at health lies in its philosophy of “food and medicine sharing the same roots.” The firm belief that food has healing powers and therapeutic effects has led to the introduction of many edible plants and herbs. And with the benefits of disease prevention and health preservation, they have become regular dishes in Chinese homes. At the same time, there is the pursuit of refinement in cooking. The amount of food and mixing of ingredients is very essential, and it is recommended that meats and non-meats be used in combination. Whether making dishes or soups, foods with suited nutritional contents are put in combination so as to achieve the goal of balanced nutritional intake. And it is recommended to dine until the stomach is about 70% to 80% full, as this practice is passed down the generations as a secret to long life.

At the dinner table, the Chinese has their own set of manners and customs. When dining, the eater must be seated. When people of all ages and both sexes sit at the same table, the elderly must be seated with priority. One must eat food held with chopsticks; when having soup, a soup spoon must be used. There's also to be no noise when eating and so on. These etiquettes have continued to this day, but the biggest change is none other than the fact that more and more Chinese have proactively given up the rule of “No talking when eating.” Indeed, when dining with the Chinese, one would frequently





*This is a piece of New Year's painting named Abundance & Harvests in Successive Years, which shows people's best wishes at the beginning of the New Year. (Collected by Wang Shucun)*

encounter a dining environment full of chatting and noises. Many people who have their mouths full still intend to chat away. This phenomenon may be due to the reason that contemporary Chinese have come to consider dining as an important social opportunity. People need, at this time, to relax and talk about certain soothing and joyous topics to increase understanding between those sitting at the table.

In recent years, due to the accelerated development of industries and commerce, aside from traditional menu-ordered food services, Chinese fast foods have dawned onto the scene. And not only this, cuisines from every corner of the world have, one after another, made their grand appearances in all major cities in China; Italian pizza, French gourmet, Japanese sushi, American burgers, German beers, Brazilian barbeque, Indian curry, Swiss cheese and more. Anything one can think of can be found, a true all-inclusive list of dining choices. It justifies the saying "Eat in China" even more so.



# Traditional Foods



**T**here is a saying, the reason that great differences exist between eating habits of various regions of the world is the result of a multitude of factors, including limitations in ecological environment, the population volume, level of productivity and others. Most meat dishes are from areas where population density is relatively low and the soil is either not needed or unable to sustain agriculture. Reliance on meat has possibly stimulated economic activities of sharing and trade. In comparison, a dietary habit of mainly grain, and plants' roots, stems, leaves and less meat is usually associated with an environment where supply cannot meet demand. The food supply in these places is more dependent on self-growing. However, dietary habits are not status quo, and with no classification as good or bad. But with migration of people on a global scale, dietary traditions that are once fixed to a region might be accepted and adopted by more and more people; and the original regional dietary habit evolves to contain more new elements. People could possibly see from the long-standing



2,500 years ago, mountain residents in southern China invented the technique to reclaim rough mountain lands into fertile lands. They drew mountain spring water to irrigate and grew rice in terraces. The picture shows the terraces reclaimed by people of the Zhuang nationality in Guilin. (Photo by Guanghui Xie, provided by image library of Hong Kong China Tourism)



Chinese food culture the footprints of the common development of humankind.

China is one originating source of the world's agriculture. The Chinese have invented ways of irrigation at a very early time; building canals and using sloped land to develop agriculture by irrigation, as well as other means of farming. As early as 5,400 B.C., the Yellow River region already saw growth of foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*, also called foxtail bristlegass, meaning the seed of broomcorn millet), and has already adopted the method of crop storage in underground caves. By 4,800 B.C., areas along the Yangtze River have been planted with rice (with the distinction of sticky or non-sticky rice, the earliest "rice" refers to the glutinous types of rice only). Since entering the agricultural age, the Chinese have formed a dietary composition with grains as the principal food and meats as supplement, and such tradition has continued to this day.

There exists an old piece of writing in China by the title of *Huangdi Neijing*. It describes the food composition of the Chinese as "The Five Grains as life support, the Five Fruits as complimentary aide, the Five Meats as added benefits, and the Five Vegetables as substantial fill." The grains, fruits, and vegetables are all plant foods. Grain crops in ancient times were referred to as "The Five Grains" or "The Six Grains," and usually consist of *shu* (broomcorn millet, sometimes referred to as "yellow rice," a small glutinous yellow grain), *ji* (what we call millet today, has the title of "Head of the Five Grains," *shu* and *ji* were the principal cereals of Northern China at the time), *mai* (including barley and wheat), *dou* (the general term for all pod-bearing crops, grows in wet lowland areas, and is the main source of protein for the Chinese), *ma* (refers to the edible type of hemp, was the principal food for farmers in ancient times), and *dao* (rice). *Shu* and *ji* are both indigenous to China, and were introduced to Europe in prehistoric times. On the other hand, both the *mai* and *dao* are not indigenous to China. It is usually believed that *dao* (rice) came from India and Southeast Asia. From archeological sites uncovered from early Neolithic Age, earliest rice cultivation in history was found. *Mai* (wheat) originated from Central and West Asia, and were introduced to China in the Neolithic Age. Also, the sorghum is an indigenous Chinese crop as well, and was introduced to India and Persia (present day Iran) during the first century A.D.. During every Chinese New Year celebration, the Chinese use the idiom "Good Harvest of the Five Grains," which really means to bless the New Year with good harvest of all crops, so as to bring prosperity. This is enough to show that in a large country



*Drying crops in the sun on rooftops is a more common tradition in the countryside of southern China. (Photo by Feng Xiaoming, provided by image library of Hong Kong China Tourism)*



where “The masses regard food as their heaven,” the production of crops has held enormous importance since olden days.

Experiences from cultivating land gave way for the Chinese to learn about many edible plants that are unknown to the West. And they have discovered that many of the human body’s essential nutrients can be obtained from plants. The beans, rice, broomcorn millet, millet and other foods that the Chinese often eat are all rich in proteins, fatty acids and carbohydrates.

Foods made from grain come in many varieties and take on many forms. The northern Chinese’s principal food was wheat. Therefore, most dishes on the dinner table are various types of pastry or pasta. Wheat flour is made into buns, pancakes, noodles, stuffed buns, dumplings, wonton and so on. On the other hand, in the southern part of China, the principal food is rice-based. Besides plain rice, there

would be thin rice noodle, thick rice noodles, rice cakes, stuffed glutinous rice balls in soup and other types of rice-based foods to be found everywhere. Rice spread from south to north, and with barley and wheat passing from west to east contributes significantly to the shaping of Chinese dietary habits.

*Bing*, or Chinese pancakes, was one of the earliest forms of pastry. The earliest method of making *bing*, is to ground the grain to a powder, make into dough by adding water, then boil in water until cooked. In time, there has come to be steamed, baked, toasted, fried and other kinds of pancakes. *Bing* also has the most varieties among all dough-made foods. It comes in all sizes and thickness, some with stuffing. Even the stuffing comes in no less than several dozen varieties. The non-stuffed pancakes are single or multi-layered. Those with good skills can make around a dozen layers in a pancake, each layer being as thin as paper. The sesame seed cake is the most popular baked pastry, and can be found in both the north and the south.

Noodles are also a type of traditional food made from flour. The earliest way of making noodles was nothing but to cook in boiling water or soup. It was only after the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), did there come to be meat or vegetarian pasta sauce. Noodles have a close correlation with Chinese festivities. In the north, there is the belief that "on the second day of the second month (lunar calendar), the dragon raises its head." So people have the custom of eating Dragon Whisker Noodles, to pray for good weather and harvest during the year. In the southern regions, on the first day of the lunar year, "New Year's Noodles" are to be had. In addition, Longevity Noodles are for celebrating birthdays. When a child reaches one month in age, together the family shall have "Soup Noodle Banquet." Though the art of noodle-making may look simple, it is actually a complex task that requires many different skills, such as rolling, rubbing, stretching, kneading, curling, pressing, and slicing.

The Chinese at around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., have mastered flour fermentation



*Noodles after being air-dried can be stored for longer periods of time. (Photo by Michael Cherney, provided by Imaginechina)*





*Special racks to air-dry grain crops in the sun used in the villages of Guizhou Province. (Photo by Chen Yinian, provided by image library of Hong Kong China Tourism)*

techniques by using the easily fermented rice soup as a catalyst. Later, bases were experienced to neutralize the fermentation process when making dough. The advent of the steam basket, the Chinese griddle and other cooking utensils, together with fermentation techniques, have helped to provide the endless possibilities of pasta dishes and pastry. The most common food made from flour, since the development of fermentation techniques, would be the *mantou*, or plain steamed bun.

Plain steamed rice is the most commonly encountered type of rice-food, and is the principal food of the southern Chinese. But more characteristic of traditional Chinese rice-foods is still *zhou*, or Chinese porridge (congee). Porridge has had thousands of years of history in China, and the way people eat porridge varies from region to region. There are also countless varieties of Chinese porridge, where just the basic ingredients are divided into six main groups, namely the grains, vegetables, fruits, flowers, herbs and meats. And the way of eating rice dressed with porridge has existed for quite some time.

Thirty years ago, rice and white flour were considered "fine foods," which most common folks are not able to have at every meal. Its counterpart, the "rough foods," were the real main dietary components of the Chinese, including corn, millet, sorghum, buckwheat, oats, yams, beans and so on.

Among all the "rough foods," soybeans gave the greatest contribution. The earliest record of soybean planting was in the West Zhou Dynasty. Soybeans at the time were the food of farmers. It was not until the West