

EATING

top picks

- Beijing Dadong Roast Duck Restaurant (p164)
- Crescent Moon Muslim Restaurant (p167)
- Dali Courtyard (p164)
- Dìng Dìng Xiāng (p164)
- Hàn Cāng (p172)
- Pure Lotus Vegetarian (p173)
- Three Guizhou Men (p175)

‘Two pointed sticks of ivory or ebony, do the office of knife and fork; their meats are cut into small square pieces, and served up in bowls; their soups are excellent, but they use no spoons; so that after sipping the thin, the grosser parts of it are directed to mouth by their chopsticks.’

Sir George Staunton, An Historical Account of the Embassy to the Emperor of China (1797)

No other city in China can match the sheer range of eating options on offer in Běijīng. From food stalls and hole-in-the-wall establishments, to fancy fusion places and five-star gourmet palaces, Běijīng’s restaurants compete to serve up not just the best of the local specialities, but cuisines from every corner of China and the rest of the world. If you think that eating out in Běijīng just means the obligatory visit to a Peking duck restaurant, then you’re in for a very pleasant surprise.

The dazzling array of dishes available reflects the sheer joy the Chinese take in eating, and the way food is an absolute obsession. Famines have been an unpleasant reality throughout much of China’s history and, as late as the 1980s, food shortages were common. Now, the Chinese are making up for all those meagre meals of the past. Dining out is the main social activity in China and it’s in restaurants that the Chinese hang out with friends, romance each other, hold family reunions and do business.

People are at their most relaxed and convivial around a restaurant table, which makes meals out unrestrained, raucous affairs, where voices are raised along with glasses and no one stands on ceremony. Diners sit around circular tables, the communal dishes arrive in waves and everyone digs in straightaway. At times, Běijīng’s restaurants can seem like organised chaos, as the waiters (服务员; *fúwùyuán*) weave around packed tables, the decibel level goes through the roof and stray debris from the meal ends up on the floor.

Běijīng’s native cuisine (京菜; *jīngcài*) is one of the four major styles of cooking in China (opposite). Apart from Peking duck (p158), which originated in the kitchens of the Forbidden City, many popular dishes, such as hotpot (火锅; *huǒguō*), have their origins in Mongol cuisine and arrived in the wake of Genghis Khan. Běijīng’s bitter winters mean that warm, filling dishes are essential, with noodles, buns and dumplings preferred over rice. There’s also a wide range of street snacks (p160) unique to the capital.

But there is far more to Běijīng’s dining scene than just the local food. Rising incomes and increased curiosity about the outside world, along with an influx of foreigners, have transformed the city into a haven of fine dining. The top Chinese chefs gravitate to Běijīng, making the capital the best place in the country to sample the huge variety of China’s cuisines. In recent years, their foreign counterparts – Michelin-starred legends and the young and ambitious alike – have descended on the city in droves, too. Whether you’re pining for burritos or bouillabaisse, it’s being served somewhere in Běijīng.

Běijīng is a magnificent place for culinary adventures and even the most picky or jaded diner will find something to satisfy them here. So do as the locals do – pick up those chopsticks and dive in. Some of your most memorable Běijīng experiences will happen when you’re sitting around a dining table.

ETIQUETTE

Strict rules of etiquette don’t really apply to Chinese dining, with the notable exception of formal banquets. Table manners are relaxed and get more so as the meal unfolds and the drinks flow. Meals can commence in Confucian fashion – with good intentions, a harmonic arrangement of chopsticks and a clean tablecloth – before spiralling into Taoist mayhem, fuelled by never-ending glasses of

píjiǔ (啤酒; beer) or *báijiǔ* (白酒; white spirits) and a procession of dishes. At the end of a meal, the table can resemble a battlefield, with empty bottles, stray bones and other debris strewn across it.

A typical dining scenario sees a group seated at a round table. Often, one person will order for everyone and the dishes will be shared; group diners never order dishes just for themselves. Many foreigners get asked if they mind dishes that are *là* (辣; spicy); if you