

food

the chinese & food

The Chinese live to eat – not just to eat, but to eat well, to eat indulgently and to eat flavoursome, interesting, well-cooked food at every meal.

Chinese cuisine can be divided into four main schools, summed up in the Mandarin saying *dōng suān, xī là, nán tián, běi xián* (meaning 'the east is sour, the west is spicy, the south is sweet and the north is salty'). Cantonese (southern) cuisine (*Yuècài*) is the nation's most varied and elaborate; we can also thank it for *yíncha* (yum cha). Shànghǎi's *Zhècài* (eastern) cuisine is generally richer, sweeter and oilier, relying on preserved vegetables, pickles and salted meats. *Lǔcài* (northern) food from Shāndōng uses wheat pancakes, spring onions and fermented bean paste, while *Chuāncài* (western or Sīchuān) style is renowned for red chillies and peppercorns firing up pork, poultry, legumes and soybeans. Finally, *Huáiyáng cài* (east coast cuisine) is relatively vegetarian-friendly and is home to meat simmered in dark soy sauce, sugar and spices. And there are many other influences, like Macau's Portuguese touches, Hong Kong's gift at importing the best and Tibet's *momos* (steamed dumplings) and *chang* (fermented barley beer).

eat by number

A Chinese saying talks of seven basic daily necessities: fuel, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar and tea. Another 'seven' is the seven tastes incorporated in dishes: sweet, salty, sour, bitter, hot, *guō qì* (wok essence) and *xiān wèi* (a kind of savoury, more-ish element sometimes created with MSG). Then there are five elements that must be attended to in cooking: colour, aroma, flavour, shape and texture. In addition, food is considered medicine for the *qì* (life energy). Accordingly, a meal must balance *yīn* (cool and moist) and *yáng* (warm and solid), the five elements (wood, earth, fire, water, metal) and the four states (moist, warm, cool, dry).

staples

If it walks, crawls, slithers, swims or flies, someone in China will probably eat it. In Guǎngdōng you can sample possum, elsewhere pangolin (anteater), steamed scorpions, cicadas, land and water beetles, snakes (the bile and blood is meant to help impotence) and turtle. The term for meat is *ròu*, which will generally mean 'pork' unless otherwise stated, and lard is laced in breads and sweets alike. From the water, sample *sānwén yú* (salmon) from Hēilóngjiāng, *niān yú* (catfish) in Sīchuān, and live

xiāzi (prawns) at Xiàmén. The best ocean fare comes from Qīngdǎo, where every self-respecting restaurant has live shellfish and fish on the front step. Eat all *hǎixiān* (seafood) hot from cooking, even the medicinally 'cold' *pángxiè* (crab), best steamed with ginger and spring onions and eaten with yellow rice wine.

Vegetables and fruit are diverse and readily available, but vegetarians will face *niúròu tāng* (beef stock) and *háoyóu* (oyster sauce) in nearly everything – don't be suckered by the term *shūcai* (vegetable dish), which is not usually vegetarian but rather features a particular vegetable. Meantime, try out the chillies of Húnán, the soft flavour of cabbage and the yammy taste of taro. In addition to *qīngcài* (green leafy vegetables), the Chinese make use of delicate, crisp turnips in salads, and fennel tops in dumplings across the north. Don't miss out on Yúnnán's coal-cooked sweet potato. Other delicacies are Běijīng's *biǎn táo* (flat peaches), the *záo* (jujube, also called Chinese date) and *lóngyǎn* ('dragon eyes', also called longan).

Although grains other than *fàn* (rice) play their part in Chinese cuisine – wheat, millet, sorghum, corn – rice is so important that *fàn* is a symbol for all meals. It is prepared as flour, noodles, porridge and more, and even the aroma from rice cooking is revered. Black rice is glutinous and used in sweets, jasmine rice dominates towards the southeast border, and red rice is used for alcohol and vinegar. In the northwest, noodles are more likely to be made from wheat, while in Inner Mongolia and Tibet millet is probably used. *Jiǎozi* (dumplings) are a must-eat, from Běijīng's pork-filled, fried or steamed wheat dough, to Guǎngdōng's yum cha. In the north, eat the big, soft dumpling called *mántou*. Breads include the famous *dà mianbāo* ('big' bread) of Hǎ'ěrbīn, as well as Shànghǎi's *yóutiáo* (deep-fried bread). And finally there's the versatile *huángdòu* (soy bean), which the Chinese have been fermenting, smoking, maturing and eating for over 3000 years – best known in *dòufu* (tofu) and *dòujiāng* (soy milk drink).

fishy business

An ingredient, its form and the manner of eating it may hold symbolic meaning in China. For example, serving a whole fish means prosperity, as it has a logical beginning and end. Yet you'd never turn it over once you've eaten the top side, as this is reminiscent of a boat capsizing at sea and therefore means death.

mystery ingredients

So what are China's secret herbs and spices? *Dàsuàn* (garlic) in Shāndōng and *chùng* (spring onion) in Guǎngdōng are easy to identify, while *bājiǎo* (star anise) is used continent-wide in marinades and braised dishes. Look out for *huājiāo* (Sìchuān pepper, a prickly ash bud that sends your tongue numb), as well as the ubiquitous *sui* (coriander), *zhīma* (sesame seeds) and *wǔxiāngfěn* (five spices mix, using cassia bark, star anise, fennel seeds, black pepper and cloves).