

Chinese prickly ash

Chinese prickly ash was recorded in *The Book of Songs* compiled some 3,000 years ago. Although this plant can grow in most parts of the country, the Sichuan people are known for their love of Chinese prickly ash. A lot of Sichuan dishes are named with “ma” – numb, a physical effect created by Chinese prickly ash on the tongue. At Sichuan restaurants flourishing across the country, one can always delight in a simple dish called *mapo doufu* – a tender bean curd fried with Chinese prickly ash and hot pepper. Besides being an important

seasoning for Sichuan cuisine, Chinese prickly ash has also been used in many other ways. Li Shizhen, a renowned doctor of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), once cured an old woman of diarrhea with this plant. The strong smell of the dark brown seeds can drive away ants, flies and other insects. In the past, imperial ladies lived in rooms where the walls were paved with Chinese prickly ash. Besides driving away insects, the multi-seeded plant was also seen as auspicious for families anticipating many children.



Candied haws on a stick

A few years ago, most TV channels played the same old song: “Everyone says the candied haws on a stick are sour, but they taste sweet ... One such stick can cure you of illness and make you 20 years younger.” It’s an exaggeration but the sweet-sour taste is unique, and there is a story about how candied haws cured a patient. It is said that Concubine Huang, a favorite of Emperor Guangzong of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), once fell ill and didn’t want to eat anything. The emperor sought after cures throughout the country. A doctor entered the imperial palace, took the lady’s pulse and said she should be fine in half a month, if she ate a few haws simmered with crystal sugar

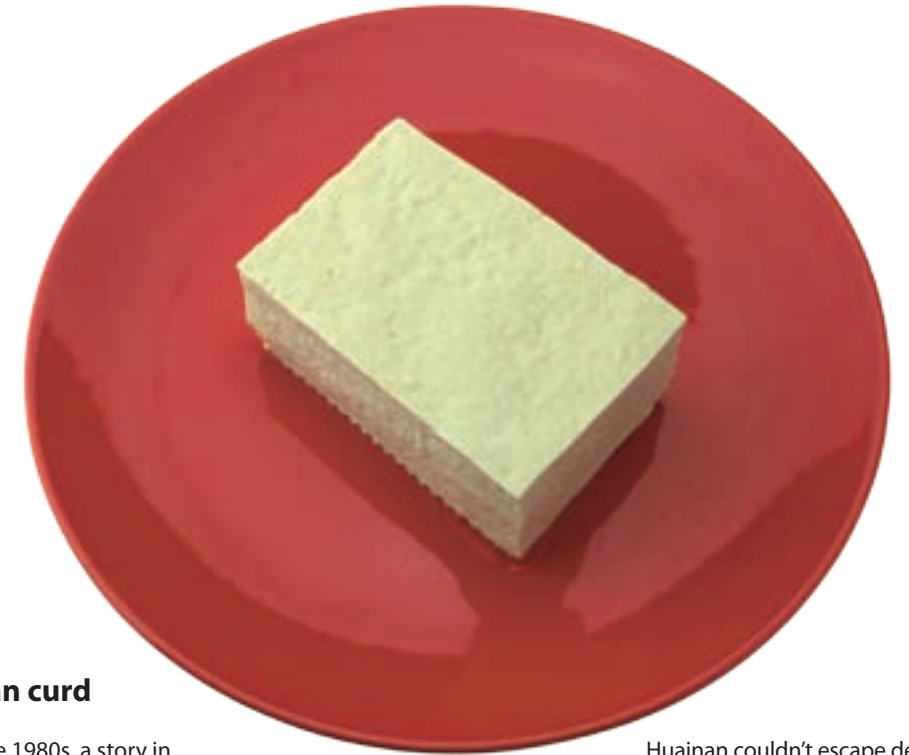


before each meal. He was right, the lady did recover. She probably ate too much greasy food and the candied haws helped her digest. When simmering haws with crystal sugar, it is crucial to regulate the fire. If the fire is too weak, the haws taste sticky; if the fire is too strong, the haws would look dark and taste bitter. Some peddlers put candied haws on a stick and stacked the sticks on a pile of wheat straw. In the old days, peddlers would carry the sticks and call out in a melodious tone to attract customers. In difficult years, eating a stick of candied haws was like celebrating the new year for children. Today, such peddlers are rare and children are often enticed by other attractions.

Preserved egg

Preserved egg, known as *songhua dan* or *pi dan* in Chinese, is a product of chemical experiment. When the duck or goose egg is preserved in a mixture of bitter and the water used in grinding green beans, the protein in the egg subsides and the egg white becomes transparent and greenish. Irregular snowflake patterns dot the egg white, while the yolk becomes juicy and bluish green. The light

blue shell makes the egg appear like a fossil just excavated, thus some foreigners call it "thousand-year-old egg". In any restaurant, you can order the cold dish named preserved egg with bean curd. More flavors can be added with ginger juice or green pepper. Southern Chinese often prepare rice porridge with preserved egg and lean meat. Preserved egg in fish chip soup also tastes excellent.



Bean curd

In the 1980s, a story in International Economic Preview published in the United States predicted that in the coming 10 years, it's not the automobiles, televisions or electronic products that will have the greatest market potential, the biggest success belongs to bean curd from China. Obviously, the author is a big fan of bean curd. Although bean curd has not attained such huge success as predicted, it does enjoy equal fame as tea and porcelain from China. It is said that a French artist is fascinated by bean curd. Whenever he feels ill, he would get some bean curd from the China Town in Paris and it never fails him. For most Chinese, the love of bean curd comes from its special taste. Like many inventions that came out of total accidents, bean curd was not invented intentionally. Liu An, a grandson of Liu Bang, founder of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), hired many alchemists to make pills of immortality. The Prince of

Huainan couldn't escape death, but his experiments brought an unexpected result – bean curd. Liu's hometown, Shouxian county of East China's Anhui province, is known as the Hometown of Bean Curd. Today, any common family in Shouxian can easily cover a table with dishes that all contain bean curd. Bean curd has an amazing adaptability. Each family can easily make the cold dish named bean curd mixed with Chinese onion. The most famous Sichuan dish *mapo doufu* is hot, tender and salty with pepper and Chinese prickly ash. There are hundreds of notable dishes featuring bean curd as the main material. Among Chinese chefs, bean curd is listed as one of four top vegetarian materials. However, many temples have invented bean curd dishes that look and taste just like meat to cater to pilgrims. Such a rich variety makes everyone marvel at the great potentials of bean curd.

Future Cola

As Coca Cola and Pepsi occupy prominent shelves in department stores across China, most people in rural China only associate cola with a Chinese product named Future Cola. Its Chinese name Feichang Kele means "very enjoyable". In 1998, the Wahaha Group introduced its Future Cola as "real Chinese cola". This won some applause but linking a drink with patriotism has not been a very effective marketing strategy. Soon the advertisements changed into "when happiness arrives, it's



Very Enjoyable". It is said that the head of the Wahaha Group once visited the United States and presented guests with two glasses of cola, unnamed. Nobody could tell which was made in China or America. This is only a story, as devoted cola fans can easily distinguish Cola Cola and Pepsi. Although it is hard to find Future Cola in big Chinese cities, Wahaha Group has been promoting another product named Future Coffee Cola. For consumers going after fresh tastes, this has proven rather successful.



Eight Treasures Porridge

In department stores of China, a common item is Eight Treasures Porridge (*Babao Zhou*). This is actually a simplified version of the *Laba* porridge made on the 8th day of the 12th lunar month. Legends say that Sakyamuni, founder of Buddhism, was enlightened and became Lord Buddha after he was saved by a herdsman on this day with porridge made of various grains. Many temples would prepare the porridge on this day for pilgrims. Eating porridge at dawn has been seen as an effective way of strengthening one's health. It is not

an easy thing to prepare the Eight Treasures Porridge, whose eight chief ingredients vary in different areas. It is true that a bowl of porridge meticulously prepared carries more love than an extravagant banquet. When the canned Eight Treasure Porridge was first introduced, people regarded it as an important present. Thanks to its good taste, the product has held a market share for many years. It would be very appropriate to send a few cans to a patient who can't digest oily food.

Zongzi

Zongzi is a symbolic food for the Duanwu Festival, just like the moon cake for the Mid-Autumn Festival and the *jiaozi* dumpling for the Spring Festival. The pyramid-shaped glutinous rice dumpling wrapped in bamboo or reed leaves is embodied with the nation's cultural tradition. Every Chinese knows about the origin of *zongzi*. In the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), statesman and poet Qu Yuan was deeply disappointed that his homeland, the Chu Dukedom, would soon be conquered by other powers because the decadent rulers wouldn't listen to anyone's suggestions. On the 5th day of the 5th lunar month, he held a boulder and threw himself into the Miluo River. The people loved him and didn't want fish to eat his flesh. So they made *zongzi* and threw them into the river for the fish. Few people can read Qu Yuan's great poem *Li Sao* fluently, but everyone seems to enjoy *zongzi*. There are other ways to commemorate Qu Yuan on the Duanwu

Festival. The most famous is the Dragon Boat Race, which originated as people raced to save Qu Yuan from the river. The festival takes place in early summer, when people change into lighter and brighter clothes. To fend off increasing insects, many families light Chinese mugwort, a herb that has a strong smell. Some people also drink the realgar wine that is believed to drive away snakes and evil spirits. Today, one can easily find dozens of varieties in the piles of *zongzi* in department stores. But the mass-produced fast food cannot compare with traditional homemade delicacies. There are roughly two types of *zongzi*: the salty ones filled with ham, meat, beef, shrimp, mushroom and others; the sweet ones with jujube, red or green beans and sweetened bean paste. Recently, a businessman in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region produced a pillow-sized *zongzi* that can feed several men. It is a pity that such a delicacy is not found in other seasons.



Steamed twisted roll

Huajuan (steamed twisted roll) is favored in northern China. It can be seen as an artistic version of steamed bun (*mantou*). The twisted roll blossoms like a flower and invites one to take one more bite. Made of flour just like steamed bun, steamed twisted roll is spongier. Wheat is grown throughout the world and people of different countries have invented colorful pasta. Similar to hot dog, people in Shaanxi province of Northwest China put pork or beef inside pancakes to make *roujiamo*. While Italians enjoy spaghetti, people in

Shanxi, a neighbor province of Shaanxi, enjoy a special noodle named knife-sliced noodles (*daoxiao mian*) made by slicing dough into the boiling pot. There are some specific requirements in making the steamed twisted roll. From making the dough to twisting the roll and steaming it, a single error could result in very dissatisfactory taste. One or two twisted rolls with rice porridge and pickles would furnish a typical delicious breakfast in China.

Fermented bean curd

Just as the idea of fruit wine was inspired by rotten fruits, fermented bean curd (*doufu ru*) probably comes from mouldy bean curd. Since its birth, many people have fallen in love with it. Although most people treat it as a seasoning, some insist that it is good for one's health in prolonging youth, lowering blood fat and preventing Alzheimer's disease. Many places in China are known for the special fermented bean curd they produce. In Guilin of Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, the fermented bean curd is a good present for friends. In Lankao of Henan province, the fermented bean curd became known throughout the country partly due to Jiao Yulu, a devoted official who

died working for the people in the 1960s. The common food seems to contain rich aroma that leaves a deep impression. Zhang Yihe, a writer who talked about her family's life in the 1930s and 40s in Beijing, has a long story about fermented bean curd. From one eatery, she bought five kinds of fermented bean curd made from all across the country. The variety turned the simple breakfast with porridge and steamed bun into a journey of surprising discoveries. An old monk in Zhejiang also eats the same breakfast, but without such variety. Fermented bean curd has become part of his religious life.



Peking chicken roll

Peking chicken roll has enjoyed great popularity among Chinese customers since Kentucky Fried Chicken invented this delicacy a few years ago. Based on the lotus-leaf pancake eaten with Peking roast duck, it is made by wrapping a thin pancake around fried chicken chips, cucumber, Chinese onion, sweet soy sauce and burger paste. To promote this product, Kentucky Fried Chicken invited Peking

Opera actors and actresses to perform in their eateries and required their waitresses to dress like Qing Dynasty maidens. As the world influences China, the Middle Kingdom is also influencing the rest of the world. People want to know more about China. The Great Wall and the Forbidden City are not enough. Details in Chinese people's daily life are getting more attention these days.