

Food For Good Luck

What people eat around the world at Lunar New Year for good fortune may not have originated from China.

Words Mark Andrews | Photography 123rf

Bar the fireworks at midnight that herald its arrival, celebrations for the Lunar New Year in China are surprisingly muted. In the mainland, where it is more commonly known as Spring Festival, festivities are very much in the home and revolve around families coming together and sharing food.

Despite this, the world has embraced the festival, and come 5 February, millions will flock to Chinatowns around the world to join exuberant celebrations marking the start of the Year of the Boar. One unifying aspect is the importance of food. However, for most mainland Chinese, where *jiaozi* (steamed or boiled dumplings stuffed with meat and vegetables) usually take centre stage, much of the food enjoyed in these Chinatowns would seem like exotic foreign food.

Some dishes such as *yee sang* (*yusheng*) are special for the celebrations. Popular in Malaysia and Singapore, the name literally means raw fish, but the Chinese characters are also a homophone for "abundance". Topped with raw fish, it largely consists of a salad with a unique sweet and slightly sour taste. "It is tossed together as high as possible while saying auspicious phrases that will bring good luck, good life, health and prosperity for the new year," says Justin Hor, Executive Chef of Oriental Group of Restaurants.

Chinese make up the second largest ethnic community in Malaysia, and *yee sang* is loosely based on a dish from Guangdong Province, China. "Due to the weather in the country and the abundance of food during Lunar New Year, *yee sang* is believed to have been created by the early immigrant generations to increase one's appetite before the other dishes, which will usually consist of meat and seafood," explains Hor.

In American Chinatowns, General Tso's chicken is a firm favourite. It is not necessarily associated with Lunar New Year but will be one of the likeliest dishes for locals to order. The dish, though, is unheard of in China and is based on a dish invented in Taiwan by Peng Chang-kuei (Peng Zhangguil) before arriving in the U.S. in the 1970s. "It is sweet. It is fried. And it is chicken. All things Americans love," explains Jennifer Lee, producer of the documentary *The Search for General Tso*.

Named after Zuo Zongtang, a 19th-century military leader and statesman from Hunan with a supposed love of eating chicken, the dish was popularised in the U.S. by restaurateur T.T. Wang

and modified for American tastes. "The Taiwan version is not as sweet, not as fried and has skin and bone. Also, there is no broccoli!" says Lee.

In London, another bird takes centre stage. Aromatic crispy duck pancakes are probably the most-ordered dish in a Chinese takeaway or restaurant nationwide. The dish combines elements of both Peking duck and *xiang su ya*, a duck dish popular in Sichuan, Hunan and Jiangsu provinces. The meat has less fat and is drier and crispier than that of Peking duck. It is shredded rather than carved, and its popularity has a lot to do with the pancake element, as well as with the cucumber and spring onions. For restaurants, this version speeds up and simplifies the labour-intensive preparation of Peking duck, with the use of steaming followed by deep-frying rather than oven-roasting. Holes poked in the skin allow the marinade to reach the meat.

While Mauritian *gato arouille* may sound like a French dish, it is very much a product of the multi-ethnic Indian Ocean island nation, where the Chinese started arriving in the late 19th century from the south of China. Although eaten all year round and no longer just served by the Chinese diaspora, it features very much as part of the celebrations. Made from grated taro root and deep-fried into ball-shaped fritters, it is very

different from typical Chinese ways of preparing taro; the closest Chinese equivalent is a street snack of deep-fried daikon radish (*luobosi youdunzi*). Royal Street in Port Louis plays host to Chinatown and is the epicentre for Mauritians celebrating Lunar New Year.

Yokohama in Japan has often served as a conduit for new foods entering through its busy port. Home to Asia's largest Chinatown, it hosts large-scale celebrations for Lunar New Year, with visitors flocking to the many restaurants. "These days, relatives gather at Chinese restaurants rather than giving parties at home, so it's very crowded," says Dan Takamune, a member of the Yokohama Chinatown Development Association and General Manager of local restaurant Kin Gen Rou. They eat dishes like *gomoku ankake soba* (*chop suey* noodles), a very popular dish in Japan consisting of meat and seafood with vegetables in a thick sauce over noodles, or fried noodles in the case of the *yakisoba* version. "Japanese people are fond of noodles with a muddled topping (*chop suey*)," says Takamune, adding that they are quite different from any noodle dishes in China.

In South Korea, Incheon as a port had a similar role to Yokohama. From 1883, when the port opened to foreign trade, Incheon rapidly grew





1. General Tso's chicken, a firm favourite in America's Chinatowns, is based on a dish invented in Taiwan
2. Korean-style *jjajangmyeon* is topped with a sweet bean sauce with meat and vegetables
3. Aromatic crispy duck pancakes are a popular dish to order from a Chinese restaurant in London
4. Fortune cookies are probably the most famous Chinese sweet in the world
5. *Gomoku ankake soba* is eaten during Lunar New Year in Japan
6. The tossing of *yee sang*, basically a salad paired with seafood and a unique sweet and sour sauce, is hugely popular in Malaysia and Singapore

from a fishing village to an international city. Chinese vessels carried not only sailors but merchants and workers, particularly from Shandong Province. Today, as any Korean will tell you, *jjajangmyeon* is one of the most popular orders at any Chinese restaurant in the country. Incheon is home to the Jjajangmyeon Museum and the city's Chinatown has various restaurants famous for the dish. However, the Shandong Province natives who first brought *zha jiang mian* to Incheon would be hard pushed to recognise today's dish of spaghetti-like noodles topped with a thick black sauce containing meat and vegetables and crowned with julienned cucumber. According to Kim Younghee, manager of the Jjajangmyeon Museum, the key is the sauce. "Korean-style *jjajangmyeon* is made with *chunjang* (a sweet bean sauce infused with black caramel sauce), which is really addictive and suits the Koreans' taste," she says.

Any Lunar New Year feast should be rounded out with dessert; yet the fortune cookie, probably the most famous "Chinese sweet" in the world, is unheard of in China. "Fortune cookies are an

American thing, proudly Made in the USA, and founded in San Francisco," says Kevin Chan, manager of Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Factory, which still makes the cookies by hand in the heart of San Francisco's Chinatown. Both San Francisco and Los Angeles vie for being first with the cookies, but the originator may well have been a Japanese rather than Chinese immigrant. According to a popular San Francisco version, the inventor was Makoto Hagiwara. "We can all agree Chinese-Americans took a flat cookie, creatively folded and stuffed it with a fortune printed on a paper, and branded it as a fortune cookie to bring good fortunes to those who would consume it at Chinese restaurants – it's a brilliant example of how innovation works in San Francisco," says Chan. ■

About the writer

Shanghai-based freelance writer Mark Andrews always loves to try the local food on his extensive travels through Asia and beyond. When not munching, he likes to hike the calories off while toting his camera.