

warrior fuel

The Muslim Quarter in Xi'an is where good local food is to be found. Get away from the crowds to try the authentic fare

"You will never see this dish in any travel book or on any website, but this is real local food," says Hu Ruixi, who founded Lost Plate tours in Xi'an in

China's Shaanxi Province. Confronted with a bowl of grey, steamed, spiced meat (beef, apparently) and fat, this somehow doesn't surprise me. Making a sandwich overstuffed with this, and alternating bites with raw garlic, it embodies some of the key elements of Xi'an food – and is more appetising than it looks.

Xi'an's food has been shaped by both its climate and its position as the trailhead of the fabled Silk Road. In this arid land, which gets bitterly cold in winter, rice cultivation is near impossible yet you can just throw wheat on the ground and it grows. For this reason, bread – usually a flatbread known ▶



SUGAR & SPICE AND ALL THINGS NICE

Above: A vendor takes an egg from "old soup" and places it in a "high oven bread" pocket before moving on to add other choices; (left) candy is twisted after being stretched in the Muslim Quarter



MASS APPEAL

Top to bottom: Hammered candy is stretched first; tourist favourite biangbiang noodles; bread for roujiamo cooked the traditional way – on a hot plate over charcoal

“Only tourists eat biangbiang noodles – you don’t see them outside the city wall”



as *mo* – and noodles are the mainstays. With spices flowing in from the trade routes, the cuisine makes heavy use of seasonings.

“Shaanxi food is the original food of China; it has a long history dating to the Zhou and Qin dynasties,” says Larry Liu, Chinese executive chef at the Golden Flower by Shangri-La. He says that a sour and spicy taste is preferred by locals, and recommends that visitors try *roujiamo* (Chinese hamburger), *liang pi* (cold noodles) and *pao mo* (a soup into which torn bread is placed).

Most visitors make a beeline for Beiyuanmen Street in the Muslim Quarter. A hive of frenetic activity, it is a lot of fun but Hu cautions that it has neither the best nor most authentic food. “Only tourists eat *biangbiang* noodles – you don’t see them outside the city wall,” she says of the thick, belt-like dish, for which Xi’an is renowned, as we tuck into the slender green spinach noodles which are far more agreeable to the locals. ▶



LOCAL HITS

Top to bottom: A seller takes a mo bread to prepare halal roujiamo; skilled hands make quick work of barbecuing kebabs; preparing skewered quail eggs, one of many foods on a stick available in the Muslim Quarter



Roujiamo could well be the world's first sandwich and dates back to at least the Tang dynasty

Barbecues are important in Xi'an but locals eschew the thick chunks of meat on sticks seen in the touristy area, opting instead for tiny beef kebabs eaten in large quantities. A skilled cook can control the temperature to ensure they are really tender. Seasoned mainly with cumin and chilli powder, they can be found in the less touristy streets of the Muslim Quarter.

Roujiamo could well be the world's first sandwich and has a history dating back to at least the Tang Dynasty. The usual version consists of coarsely chopped pork with chillies stuffed into a mo pocket. The pork version can be found mainly in shops whereas the halal version (beef) is more common in the area's little street stalls.

Much like the streets, with names such as Golden Bridge, many of the dishes have legends behind their origin. In the case of our steamed meat, the story goes that the caravans of the Silk Road were restricted in the kinds of foods they could carry to eat. One day, a large wind mixed all the ingredients together and the cook was forced to steam them mixed together, creating a dish enjoyed until this day. This is not the only food myth; there are others waiting to be told. 🍴

TIGERAIR FLIES

To Xi'an 4 times weekly
tigerair.com