

Embracing Chinese Cuisine



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Chinese New Year, also known as the Lunar New Year or Spring Festival, stands as one of the most significant celebrations in Chinese culture, marking the beginning of a new lunar calendar year. This festive period symbolises fresh starts, the renewal of life, and the arrival of spring after the long winter months.

Celebrations typically span 15 days, culminating in the vibrant Lantern Festival. Steeped in rich tradition, Chinese New Year revolves around family reunions and shared meals, where food plays a central role in expressing wishes for good fortune, health, and prosperity in the year ahead.

Chinese cuisine, in turn, is one of the oldest, most diverse, and culturally significant culinary traditions in the world. Its origins stretch back over 4,000 years, evolving in tandem with China's rich history and expansive geography. Central to Chinese cooking is the philosophy of balance, not only in terms of flavour but also in the nutritional composition of dishes. This culinary tradition reflects a deep understanding of health and

wellness, combining ingredients in ways that harmonise hot and cold, sweet and salty, or sour and bitter components.

The roots of modern Chinese culinary traditions can be traced back to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), a period during which the foundational techniques of cooking, such as steaming, boiling, and stir-frying, were established. During this era, the cultivation of staple crops like rice and wheat became widespread, alongside the development of soy products such as tofu, which became essential to the Chinese diet. By the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE), Chinese cooking had reached new heights, with imperial feasts showcasing refined techniques and an expansive variety of dishes. This was also a period of cultural exchange via the Silk Road, bringing new spices and ingredients into Chinese kitchens, which further enriched the culinary landscape.

Food in Chinese culture has always held a place of deep significance, serving not just as sustenance but as a symbol of unity, respect, and celebration. In ancient times, imperial feasts were prepared with meticulous attention to detail, using rare ingredients and displaying culinary artistry as a reflection of the emperor's wealth and authority.

For ordinary families, food symbolised comfort, love, and togetherness, particularly during special occasions like Chinese New Year, where elaborate meals were prepared to honour traditions and bring blessings for the future.

Chinese cuisine is marked by its incredible regional diversity, with each area offering its own distinct flavours, ingredients, and cooking methods. Sichuan cuisine, for instance, is famous for its bold, spicy, and numbing flavours, achieved using Sichuan peppercorns, chillies, and garlic. On the other hand, Cantonese cuisine focuses on fresh, lightly seasoned dishes that highlight the natural flavours of ingredients, with iconic offerings like dim sum, roast meats, and delicate soups. In contrast, Shanghaiese cuisine is characterised by its sweet and savoury profiles, often using rich sauces and a variety of seafood. Northern cuisine, particularly from Beijing and Shandong, is known for hearty, wheat-based dishes such as noodles, dumplings, and steamed buns, often featuring robust flavours derived from vinegar, garlic, and rich broths.

The philosophy underpinning Chinese cuisine is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese medicine and reflects the principles of balance. Central to this is the concept of yin and yang, which extends to the choice of ingredients and their combinations in dishes. For instance, yin foods, which are cooling, such as cucumber and tofu, are balanced with yang foods, which are warming, like ginger and garlic, to promote harmony and well-being. Chinese chefs also strive for balance of the five basic tastes – sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and umami – in every meal, ensuring that no single flavour dominates the others.

Traditional Ingredients and Their Health Benefits

Chinese cuisine places a strong emphasis on fresh, seasonal ingredients that are minimally processed, allowing their natural flavours and nutritional properties to shine. This focus on fresh produce, herbs, and spices not only enhances taste but also aligns with traditional Chinese medicine's holistic approach to health. One of the most used ingredients in Chinese cooking is ginger, which is prized for its anti-inflammatory properties, ability to aid digestion, and capacity to improve circulation.

Ginger is often used in soups, stir-fries, and teas to provide a warming effect, particularly beneficial during colder months. Another staple ingredient is garlic, known for its rich antioxidant content. Garlic supports heart health by helping to reduce cholesterol levels and blood

pressure, while also boosting the immune system due to its natural antibacterial properties. It's a key flavour enhancer in countless Chinese dishes, from simple vegetable stir-fries to complex braised meats.

Tofu and other soy products are also integral to Chinese cuisine, offering excellent plant-based protein sources that are low in fat. Soy contains isoflavones, which have been shown to promote heart health. Tofu is incredibly versatile, absorbing the flavours of the ingredients it is cooked with, making it a popular choice in both vegetarian and meat-based dishes. The use of leafy greens, such as bok choy, spinach, and Chinese broccoli, is another hallmark of Chinese cooking. These vegetables are packed with essential nutrients, including vitamins A, C, and K, which support bone health, immune function, and skin health. Stir-frying or lightly steaming these greens preserves their nutrient content while ensuring they remain vibrant and flavourful.

A unique aspect of traditional Chinese cuisine is its extensive use of fermented foods like pickled vegetables, and miso. These ingredients are rich in probiotics, which promote a healthy gut microbiome. The fermentation process not only enhances the flavour profile of these foods but also boosts their nutritional content, making them a valuable addition to a diet focused on gut health. Fermented ingredients are often used to add depth to soups, marinades, and sauces, providing umami-rich undertones that elevate even the simplest dishes.



The Gut Health Connection

One of the lesser-known benefits of Chinese cuisine is its natural support for gut health. The traditional diet incorporates a variety of fermented foods, which enhance the gut flora and aid in digestion. Foods like pickled vegetables and fermented bean pastes introduce beneficial bacteria to the digestive system, helping to maintain a balanced gut microbiome.

Additionally, the high fibre content from vegetables, mushrooms, and whole grains such as brown rice, barley, and millet supports digestive regularity and overall gut health. Fibre acts as a pre biotic, feeding the beneficial bacteria in the gut and fostering a healthy intestinal environment.

Chinese cuisine also includes a range of pre biotic-rich ingredients such as garlic, spring onions, and leeks. These foods nourish beneficial gut bacteria, contributing to a healthy digestive system. The inclusion of diverse plant-based foods ensures that meals are not only flavourful but also nutrient-dense, promoting long-term health.

Another important aspect of traditional Chinese food philosophy is the concept of hot and cold foods, which are believed to influence digestive balance according to traditional Chinese medicine. By adjusting the types of foods consumed based on individual needs and seasonal changes, it is possible to optimise digestion and overall wellness.

Practical Tips for Incorporating Chinese-Inspired Meals into your Weekly Diet

There are simple and effective ways to bring the health benefits of Chinese cuisine into your everyday meals. One of the best tools to adopt is the wok, which allows for quick cooking at high heat, preserving the nutrients in vegetables and reducing the need for excess oil. Stir-frying, steaming, and poaching are common cooking methods that maintain the nutritional integrity of ingredients while infusing them with bold flavours. By using fresh herbs, spices, and natural seasoning's, it is possible to reduce the reliance on processed sauces that are often high in sugar and sodium. Making your own sauces with ingredients like soy sauce, ginger, garlic, and sesame oil can enhance the flavour of dishes while keeping them healthy.

To further embrace the principles of Chinese cuisine, consider swapping refined grains like white rice for whole grains such as brown rice, quinoa, or millet. These alternatives provide more fibre and nutrients, supporting better digestion and blood sugar control. Additionally, explore plant-based protein options like tofu, edamame, and tempeh, which not only align with the Chinese culinary tradition but also offer sustainable, nutrient-rich protein sources. Incorporating these foods into your diet can help you enjoy the health benefits associated with Chinese cuisine, promoting both gut health and overall well-being while adding diversity and depth to your meals.





Barry Liu

Chef Manager

Barry Liu is the Chef Manager at Diageo Baileys on Nangor Road, Dublin, working with Sodexo for nearly four years. With over 20 years of experience in the culinary industry, Barry is passionate about food and committed to delivering exceptional dining experiences for every guest. His expertise and knowledge consistently contribute to the success of the company and its clients.

Previously, Barry worked as a Head Chef in contract catering and also managed his own coffee restaurant before the pandemic forced its closure. He enjoys collaborating with colleagues and takes pride in managing his team on a daily basis. Always eager to grow, Barry looks forward to acquiring new skills and continually improving his craft.

PEKING PORK RIBS WITH SWEET AND SOUR SAUCE, SERVED WITH GARLIC SOY BOK CHOY

Ingredients

Pork Ribs:

- 500g pork ribs, pre-cut into small pieces (6-8cm) by your butcher
- 30g Chinese Shaoxing wine
- 20g Chinese five spice powder
- 50g brown sugar
- 15g salt
- 10g black pepper
- 10g ginger, finely grated
- 1 egg
- Cornflour, for coating
- Oil, for frying
- Toasted white sesame seeds, for garnish

Sweet and Sour Sauce:

- Prepare your favourite sweet and sour sauce, or use a store-bought version for convenience

Garlic Soy Bok Choy:

- 2-3 heads of bok choy, quartered
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 10g soy sauce
- 1-2 tablespoons hot oil (vegetable or sesame oil)

1. To prepare the Peking pork ribs, begin by marinating 500g of pre-cut pork ribs with Shaoxing wine, Chinese five spice, brown sugar, salt, black pepper, and grated ginger. Mix thoroughly to coat the ribs evenly and allow them to marinate for at least one hour.
2. Once marinated, crack an egg into the mixture, stirring to combine, and coat the ribs with a generous layer of cornflour. Heat oil in a deep pan or wok to approximately 180°C and fry the ribs in batches until they are golden brown and crispy. Transfer the fried ribs to a plate lined with kitchen paper to drain.
3. While the ribs are draining, prepare a sweet and sour sauce in a separate pan or wok. Once the sauce is ready and heated, toss the fried ribs into the sauce, ensuring they are evenly coated. Sprinkle with toasted sesame seeds for a final touch.
4. For the garlic soy bok choy, bring a pot of water to the boil and blanch the quartered bok choy for about one minute before draining. Arrange the bok choy on a serving plate and sprinkle finely chopped garlic over it. Heat a tablespoon or two of oil until hot, then pour the hot oil over the garlic to lightly cook it.
5. Finish by drizzling soy sauce over the bok choy. Serve the sweet and sour pork ribs alongside the garlic soy bok choy and enjoy.

BANG BANG CHICKEN STIR FRY WITH SEASONAL VEGETABLES AND TOASTED CASHEW NUTS

Ingredients

- 300g chicken fillets, diced
 - 150g milk
 - 15g Chinese five spice
 - 10g salt
 - 10g garlic powder
 - 10g ginger powder
 - 10g white pepper
 - 10g chilli powder
 - 200g plain flour
 - 100g cornflour
 - Salt and black pepper (for seasoning the flour mix)
 - 150g toasted cashew nuts
 - 150g mixed fresh peppers, sliced
 - 150g onion, sliced
 - 100g beansprouts
 - 200g baby corn, sliced
 - 50g sweet chilli sauce
 - 15g fresh coriander, chopped
 - 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
 - 10g fresh ginger, finely chopped
 - Oil, for frying and stir-frying
1. Begin by marinating the chicken. In a bowl, combine the diced chicken with milk, Chinese five spice, salt, garlic powder, ginger powder, white pepper, and chilli powder. Mix well to coat the chicken evenly; cover, and allow it to marinate for at least three hours.
 2. While the chicken marinates, prepare the flour coating. In a separate bowl, mix the plain flour and cornflour with a pinch of salt and black pepper for seasoning. Once the chicken is marinated, coat the pieces thoroughly in the flour mixture.
 3. Heat oil in a deep fryer or large pot to approximately 180°C. Fry the coated chicken in batches until cooked through and golden brown. Once fried, remove the chicken and drain it on a plate lined with kitchen paper.
 4. Heat a wok or large frying pan over medium-high heat and add a little oil. Stir-fry the sliced mixed peppers, onions, beansprouts, and baby corn for 2-3 minutes until tender but still crisp. Add the finely chopped garlic and ginger, cooking briefly until fragrant.
 5. Pour the sweet chilli sauce into the wok and stir to combine with the vegetables. Toss in the toasted cashew nuts and add the fried chicken back to the wok. Stir everything together for 1-2 minutes to ensure the chicken is fully coated and heated through.
 6. Finish the dish by garnishing with freshly chopped coriander. Serve hot and enjoy!

BLACK TIGER PRAWNS WITH GARLIC & GINGER SAUCE AND SAUTÉED TENDERSTEM BROCCOLI

Ingredients

- 400g tiger prawns, cleaned and deveined
 - 20g garlic, finely chopped
 - 10g ginger, finely chopped
 - 400g tenderstem broccoli
 - 50g beer
 - 20g cornflour
 - 100g spring onions, finely sliced
 - 50g red chilli, finely sliced
 - 50g caster sugar
 - 10g white vinegar
 - Cooking oil, for frying
1. Begin by preparing the prawns. Clean and devein the tiger prawns, ensuring they are ready for cooking. Heat a large frying pan or wok over medium-high heat and add a splash of cooking oil. Add the chopped garlic, ginger, spring onions, and red chilli to the pan, stirring until fragrant.
 2. Add the prawns to the pan and cook until they turn red and opaque. Pour in the beer and reduce the heat, allowing the prawns to simmer for a few minutes to absorb the flavours.
 3. While the prawns are cooking, prepare the tenderstem broccoli. Blanch the broccoli in boiling water for one minute, then drain. Heat a separate pan with a little oil and sauté the broccoli until lightly golden and tender. Set aside for garnish.
 4. To finish the garlic and ginger sauce, mix the cornflour with a small amount of water to create a slurry. Add this to the prawns, stirring well to thicken the sauce. Add the caster sugar and white vinegar, mixing thoroughly to balance the flavours.
 5. Serve the prawns with the sautéed tenderstem broccoli as a garnish.