

## Chapter 1

# How to Think Like a Chinese Chef

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Exploring the history of Chinese cuisine
  - ▶ Three Chinese cooking guidelines
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**I**f your idea of Chinese cooking is egg rolls, wonton soup, and fortune cookies, you're about to get quite a wake-up call. One of the most diverse and unique of the world's cuisines, Chinese cooking offers an endless variety of flavors, textures, shapes, and cooking techniques. But don't let that variety overwhelm you; at the heart of even the most elaborate imperial dish lies a no-nonsense simplicity and some common ingredients. Start thinking like a Chinese chef, and you'll soon become one.

So how do you think like a Chinese chef anyway? If you ask me, the best way to start is to remain flexible. Chinese cooking isn't fraught with strict rules or recipes that you have to follow to the fraction of a tablespoon. After all, you'll find China's best cooks not in the lavish hotel or restaurant kitchens, but rather in the home kitchens scattered throughout the country's towns and villages. These culinary magicians have learned to keep an open mind about how and what to cook, since access to ingredients and equipment is sometimes sketchy at best.

But, boy, have they turned scarcity into an art form. Chinese cuisine's flexible philosophy naturally breeds the creativity that makes Chinese foods so exciting to prepare and, of course, to eat. Just follow some basic guidelines — guidelines that will become second nature to you with the help of this book — and you can sharpen your Chinese culinary instinct and turn the contents of your pantry into authentic Chinese treats at the same time. It's this openness to invention that makes Chinese cuisine truly egalitarian. Power to the people!

## *Chinese Cooking and I, We Go Way Back*

If you think that you spend a lot of time in the kitchen, consider this: Chinese people started cooking almost 500,000 years ago — and we're still at it! In northern China, Peking man used simple stone tools to hunt deer, tigers, water buffaloes, and other wild game. It's a pity that few of their cookbooks survived. I, for one, would be interested in finding out how to fillet a prehistoric wild boar.

Food, cooking, and agriculture have always played important roles in Chinese religion and society, too. For centuries, religious deities kept watch over all Chinese kitchens; poets and scholars sang praises of dining and drinking; and folk heroes were known for their appetites for good food and wine. Even today, faithful Chinese make offerings of fresh fruits, dumplings, barbecued meat, and whole chickens to the spirits of their departed love ones.

China has had its share of hard times and scarcity, however, and its people have learned to be resilient to keep food on the table in the face of floods, droughts, earthquakes, typhoons, and famines. Feeding one quarter of the world's population takes a lot of creativity and hard work, even under the best of circumstances.

That's why, over the centuries, Chinese cooking has adapted and changed while still paying homage to time-honored recipes handed down from generation to generation. Yet, it never shies from innovations — taking advantage of modern technology in food cultivation and preservation and incorporating new ingredients into the Chinese diet. Some recently “invented” Chinese dishes are actually modifications of older ones, with the addition of a few new ingredients and flavor twists. For example, common American-Chinese restaurant dishes such as chop suey and egg fu young were actually “invented” by Chinese immigrants to the United States; plenty of Chinese have never even heard of them. And what about those fiery, chile-packed Chinese recipes, or even tomato beef, a popular stateside menu choice? Well, neither chile peppers nor tomatoes entered Chinese kitchens until Western traders brought them there only a few hundred years ago.

## *The Three Tenets of Chinese Cooking*

You don't have to be well versed in Confucianism or Taoist principles to think like a Chinese cook, and you don't have to master fancy cooking techniques or buy a ton of kitchen equipment either. You really need only a few simple tools (see Chapter 3) and the willingness to follow a few basic guidelines — not rules — that all Chinese cooks first followed as children in their own parents' kitchens. I talk about three of those guidelines in the following sections.

## *Keep it in balance*

The Chinese pay a great deal of attention to contrast and harmony in their everyday existence. Balancing yin and yang is a way to achieve harmony in your life, as well as your culinary creations. These two elements complement and contrast each other, and a thorough understanding of them goes a long way toward understanding the Chinese philosophy in the kitchen. Here's what these two terms mean:

- ✓ Yin represents feminine, soft, cold, and wet forces.
- ✓ Yang is masculine, bright, hot, dry, and vigorous.

So how does this harmony translate to food? Chinese classify bland, low-calorie foods as yin, whereas richer and fattier items fall within the yang category. By harmonizing the yin and yang ingredients in a dish, the cook creates a good meal that maintains a healthy balance. If this concept sounds a bit too abstract, consider the popular dish sweet-and-sour pork — a clear example of the yin/yang balance of taste (sweet is yin, and sour is yang).

Balancing isn't restricted to taste alone. You can create texture contrast by combining soft, steamed items with crispy, fried ones. Or how about contrasting the color scheme with the spiciness in a single dish? Cooking techniques as opposite as deep-frying and steaming can join forces to create meals that are not only tasty but also philosophically stimulating.

## *Cook seasonally, buy locally*

For much of China's history, its people have had to adapt their daily menus to those ingredients available in their own gardens and at local markets on that particular day. Chinese home cooks somehow managed to turn this liability into an asset, taking limited, simple ingredients and turning them into masterpieces. The popularity of wheat-flour dumplings and noodles and of root-based dishes in northern China; the deft preparation of fresh seafood in the regions running along the country's coast; and the prevalence of fresh produce and rice dishes in the semitropical south all attest to the use of local, seasonally accessible foods.



Perhaps the best place to start is at your local farmers market. Always ask what's in season. Fruits and vegetables that are in season are abundant and at their peak of flavor, color, and texture, while those out of season are few, and their quality can be questionable. Go with the numbers, and you have a better chance at getting high-quality ingredients.

Don't see what you want in your local market? Check out the seed store, and you may turn your backyard into a healthy Asian vegetable garden. You can rather effortlessly grow many vegetables that are common in Chinese dishes in small backyard plots or gardens. I know this because I consider myself a gentleman farmer on a small scale. Over the years, I've grown fresh chile peppers, Asian herbs and greens, and even a number of different cucumbers and squashes 15 feet from my bedroom window.

Granted, raising poultry and hogs in midtown Manhattan or catching live river shrimp in Nebraska may not be practical. Nevertheless, you should still think "fresh, fresh, fresh" when seeking these and other ingredients at your local market or your favorite butcher's counter.



Many substitutes are available for the traditional ingredients and cooking tools used in Chinese cuisine. But there is no substitute for freshness. None.

## *If all else fails, improvise!*

Chinese chefs are experts in developing endless alternatives in ingredients and cooking methods in the face of scarcity and hardship. If you want to cook like the Chinese, you, too, should adopt a flexible approach when it comes to the availability of ingredients.

Many ingredients in traditional Chinese dishes sound foreign to novice cooks — and for good reason! Even with the ever-expanding stock of most supermarket chains, finding yard-long beans in suburban Detroit may still be a bit challenging. However, regular green beans can make a nice substitute. So be flexible: Buy fresh, crisp regular green beans and enjoy.

The next time you hit an ingredient-availability wall, don't give up on the whole recipe. Use your imagination to scope out attainable items that can take the place of ones not quite at peak freshness or still on the dock in Shanghai. No one but you will know the difference.

In all Chinese markets, you find an array of dried, pickled, salted, bottled, canned, or otherwise-preserved counterparts for seasonal or less-readily available ingredients. Take advantage of the assortment and stock up on dried noodles, grains, and dried black mushrooms, for starters.

If you don't have the time or inclination to make your own sweet-and-sour stir-fry sauce, the Asian foods section of your local store can pick up the slack with countless bottled versions. Remember that canned, sliced water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, and straw mushrooms — all easy to find — take the core out of your prep work. By throwing in a little patience and imagination, anyone can cook Chinese like the Chinese.