



About Sichuan, Chengdu and Sichuan Cuisine

Sichuan – The Heavenly Kingdom

Sichuan, lying in China's South-West, has acquired the moniker "The Heavenly Kingdom" for the province's abundance of natural resources and cultural heritage.

History

The Sichuan basin was one of the first areas to be settled in China. Records show that people lived in the area since the 5th century BC. Sichuan became famous during the Warring States period (475-221BC) when a famous engineer, Li Bing, managed to harness the Du River on the Chuanxi plain with his weir system built at Dujiangyan, allowing Sichuan more than two millennia of irrigation and prosperity. In 2000, Dujiangyan became a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Sichuan has been the site of various breakaway kingdoms throughout history, perhaps the most famous being the Shu Kingdom which was an independent state during the Three Kingdoms Period (AD 220-80). Interestingly, the Kuomintang spent its last days in Sichuan before being vanquished and fleeing to Taiwan. Most recently, Chongqing was split from Sichuan when it was promoted to the status of Municipality in 1997.

Geography and Culture

The name Sichuan (Four Rivers) refers to four of the more than eighty great rivers flowing across the province, making their way from the soaring Tibetan plateau in the province's west along fantastic gorges at the edge between the highlands and the lowlands and from there across the Chuanxi plane to the East. Sichuan's mountainous terrain, fast rivers, and the daunting Tibetan plateau have kept it relatively isolated until quite recently and once prompted the Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai to compare the journey to Sichuan as being more difficult than the road to heaven.

The largest province in the South-West, Sichuan is also one of the most interesting, and its population displays as much diversity as its landscape. In the east, the fertile Sichuan basin supports one of the densest rural populations in the world while in the west, the Tibetan plateau rises up in giant steps and houses less than 10% of the province's population. This is where green tea become butter tea, Confucianism yields to Buddhism and the soft, curved hills swell into jagged snow-capped peaks.

(This summary is an extract from the Lonely Planet China guide.)

Chengdu – The City of Leisure

Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan. It has a population of approximately 10million. It is crisscrossed by rivers and has several large parks in which many traditional tea houses bustle with life. Strolling through one of these parks and watching life go by, ever so slowly, makes one understand why there is a popular saying that suggests you shouldn't visit Chengdu when you're young, lest you never leave and, given the residents predilection for leisure, your life will end up in indolence.



It is in Chengdu where Sichuanese cuisine is celebrated like no other place.

Sichuan Cuisine – A Feast from the Land of Plenty

The residents of Chengdu are fond of a saying:

*China is the place for food
But Sichuan is the place for flavour*

Chengdu's climate is nearly subtropical. In the summer it gets hot and somewhat humid. As is often the case in hot places (like Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia or India) where food runs the risk of being spoiled by heat, Sichuan's cuisine is zesty. What gives Sichuan Cuisine its particular reputation for spiciness is the home-grown Sichuan Pepper, also known as prickly ash (花椒). It is one of the most ancient Chinese spices and has an extraordinary, heady aroma that carries hints of wood, citrus peel, and the languid scents of summer. It produces a weird numbing effect on the lips and tongue. This tingling sensation is known in Chinese as ma (麻), which also means "anaesthetic" and "pins-and-needles".

But not all Sichuan dishes are spicy to the point of numbing. Quite to the contrary. First, it is a maxim of good Sichuan cooking that a dish should never be so spicy such that it obliterates the natural taste of the raw ingredients. Instead, you should always be able to taste their fine aromas at the heart of all this spiciness. (辣中有鲜味). Second, the range of flavours and textures is so vast that it has given rise to a saying that "while one dish has one flavour, hundred dishes will have hundred different flavours." (一菜一个, 百菜百味).

Sichuan Cuisine is also characterised by a large number of cooking methods, counting fifty six according to Fuchsia Dunlop's excellent book on Sichuan cuisine, "Land of Plenty".

All this results in tremendous diversity that is well illustrated in Ms. Dunlop's book when she references the menu of a memorable lunch at the Drifting Fragrance (飘香) restaurant, held in honour of the food conference organised by Sichuan University and the Sichuan Institute of Higher Cuisine in May 2000:

Cold Dishes – five-spiced "smoked" fish, chicken with cold rice jelly in a spicy sauce, cucumber in mustard dressing, "phoenix tail" lettuce stems in sesame sauce, tea-smoked pigeons, dry bean curd with peanuts, Sichuanese cold meats, tripe in hot and garlicky sauce.

Hot Dishes – braised sea cucumber, hot-and-fragrant crab with red chiles, fast-fried duck tongues in fermented sauce, steamed port with rice meal, braised white cabbage with Yunnan ham, traditional bowl-steamed duck with pickled vegetables, braised turtle with potatoes, South Sichuan boiled beef slices in fiery sauce, fish with pickled vegetables, "dragon-eye" sweet steamed pork with glutinous rice, soup of green vegetable tips with a chicken-breast coating.



“Send-the-rice-down” dish – pickled string beans stir-fried with green chiles

Snacks – deep-fried sweet potato cakes, boiled dumplings in spicy sauce, leaf-wrapped cones of glutinous rice with Sichuan pepper.

Welcome to Sichuan cuisine!