

| FOOD & TRAVEL |

# THE LAND OF RICE AND FISH

RETURNING TO HER ROOTS,  
YING CHANG COMPESTINE  
REDISCOVERS ONE OF CHINA'S MOST  
DELICIOUS REGIONAL CUISINES

*The Three Gorges area of the Yangtze may have been dammed, raising the water level of the massive river, but it remains a dramatic entry to a region that's rich in food and culture.*

**T**WENTY YEARS AFTER COMING TO AMERICA, I still dream of my beloved hometown, Wuhan, the capital of China's central Hubei province. I dream of shopping in the morning at vegetable markets along the Yangtze River, cooking with my grandmother in our small kitchen and eating cold noodles in spicy sesame-soy sauce at a street vendor's stall.

Last summer, I returned to Wuhan with my husband and son to research my upcoming novel, *Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party*. We flew to Shanghai and sailed up the Yangtze River to Chongqing aboard the cruise ship *Viking Century Sun*, and then back down to Wuhan. I had traveled the same route with my parents 15 years ago. Along the way, my father had introduced me to the natural wonders along the Yangtze River and to some of China's greatest cultural treasures: Fengdu Ghost City, Shibaozhai Temple and the hanging coffins in Bawu Gorge. It was our last trip together before my parents passed away.

Perhaps I'm biased, but I believe that the Yangtze flows through one of the most fascinating regions in the world. Its valley was the birthplace of Chinese civilization and the seat of power for many emperors. Situated on its banks at the crossroads of major land and water routes, Wuhan has been a critical base for Chinese rulers throughout history and was the flashpoint of the Communist Revolution. What most Westerners do not know, though, is that some of the most delicious cuisines of China come from this central region, known as "the Land of Rice and Fish."

Shanghai may be as well known for its bustling economy as for dumplings so delicate they practically melt in your mouth. In Chongqing, the people are said to be as spicy as their food; a bowl of noodles is so hot it will blur your vision, yet so delicious that you can't put it down. Located about 800 miles down river from Chongqing, halfway to Shanghai, Wuhan brims with fresh fish, seasonal fruits, vegetables and grains, and its cuisine reflects the best of China. One of its regional specialties, a delightfully savory-sweet rice wrapped in bean-flour pancakes, is said to have been a favorite meal of Mao Zedong.

On a warm summer evening, as our cruise ship slowly approached the city, I stood on my cabin's balcony anxiously watching an unfamiliar landscape glide past. It had been more than seven years since I had last seen Wuhan. I tried to pick

out the hospital compound overlooking the river where both my parents worked as doctors. I couldn't find it. The old buildings painted with revolutionary slogans and draped with red flags in the 1970s had been replaced by modern skyscrapers aglow with bright lights. Neon signs danced reflections off the river and brightened the night sky above. For a moment, I couldn't believe this was my hometown. I was overwhelmed with excitement and pride.

Then the gentle river breeze brought aromas of steamed dumplings and fish pan-fried with ginger and garlic from the restaurants lining the bank. Bits of laughter, interspersed with the familiar local dialect, brought back memories of evening strolls beside the river with my parents; learning to ride a bike with my brothers on the sidewalks; meeting my first date under the clock tower; and the farewell dinner with friends at a restaurant overlooking the river before my first trip to America.

Although the landscape of Wuhan has changed, the food

remains the same. During our three-week visit, my family and I went from street vendors to 12-course meals, eating with family and friends. The dishes we ate were the same as what my mother had served. My son was just as wild about garlic frog legs and *mijo*, a dessert made from fermented rice, as I had been as a child.

I came to America as a graduate student in 1986, and in the years since then I've found sometimes weeks pass by when I don't have a chance to speak or write Chinese. I read Western literature, listen

to jazz and play tennis. Yet, almost every day I eat Chinese food and it transports me right back to Wuhan. When I cook Pocket Eggs with Soy-Sesame Sauce or Lion's Head Meatballs, I remember my mother telling me how fresh the eggs were and how long the line was at the butcher's shop. When I make Long-Life Noodles with Green Tea, I recall my grandmother explaining that green tea stimulates the mind and calms the soul.

I have always believed that food not only satisfies our hunger, it connects us to others and to our past. It is by cooking the foods of my childhood that I keep the ties to my beloved China alive.




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*Ying Chang Compestine's latest book, Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party (Henry Holt & Co., August 2007), is a novel based on her childhood in Wuhan. Her website is [yingc.com](http://yingc.com).*



## Honey-Lemon Tea

**ACTIVE TIME:** 5 MINUTES | **TOTAL:** 3½ HOURS (including chilling time) | **TO MAKE AHEAD:** Refrigerate for up to 1 day.

This is a popular drink served in homes along the Yangtze during the summer. In China, honey is highly praised for its medicinal value. Some say daily doses of local honey may help ease hay fever. **SHOPPING TIP:** In China, you can buy dried chrysanthemums at “medicine stores” or vegetable markets; in the U.S., look for them at natural-foods stores or Asian markets.

- ¼ cup dried chrysanthemums (see Shopping Tip)
- 3 lemon slices
- 4 cups boiling water
- Honey to taste

Place chrysanthemums and lemon in a glass or ceramic pot. Add boiling water. Cover with a lid and let steep for 5 minutes. Stir in honey. Refrigerate until cold, about 3½ hours. (It’s not necessary to strain the tea.)


**MAKES 4 SERVINGS, 1 CUP EACH.**

**ANALYSIS NOTE:** With 4 tsp. honey, this has 21 calories and negligible nutrients per cup.

## Lion’s Head Meatballs

Lower ↓ Carbs

**ACTIVE TIME:** 45 MINUTES | **TOTAL:** 45 MINUTES | **TO MAKE AHEAD:** Cover and refrigerate the meatball mixture (Step 2) for up to 2 days.

 This is a famous dish along the Yangtze, with regional variations. In Shanghai, the sauce will be sweet and sour. In Chongqing, it will be hot and spicy. And in Wuhan...well, it will depend on the season and the mood of the chef.

- 1 cup “lite” coconut milk
- 2½ tablespoons reduced-sodium soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon curry powder
- 1 pound lean ground pork or beef
- ½ cup chopped scallions
- ¼ cup minced leek, white and pale green part only
- 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh ginger
- 2 teaspoons seeded and minced fresh chile pepper
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground white pepper
- 2 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 medium head Boston or iceberg lettuce
- ¼ cup chopped fresh basil or Thai basil
- 1 tablespoon freshly grated lemon zest

1. Combine coconut milk, soy sauce and curry powder in a large saucepan. Set aside.
2. Place pork (or beef), scallions, leek, cornstarch, flour, sesame oil, ginger, chile, salt and pepper in a large mixing bowl. Knead by hand until thoroughly combined and the mixture becomes sticky. Divide into 10 equal portions, about ¼ cup each. Roll each portion into a ball.
3. Heat olive oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium heat, swirling to coat the sides. Add the meatballs and cook, turning occasionally, until browned on all sides, 8 to 10 minutes. Transfer to a plate lined with paper towels.
4. Bring the coconut-milk mixture to a boil over medium-high heat. Add the meatballs; cover, reduce heat to low and cook for 8 minutes.
5. Line a serving bowl with lettuce leaves.

Arrange the meatballs on top. Garnish with basil and lemon zest. Serve hot with the coconut-milk sauce drizzled over the top or on the side for dipping.


**MAKES 10 MEATBALLS, FOR 5 MAIN-DISH OR 10 APPETIZER SERVINGS.**

**PER MEATBALL:** 115 CALORIES; 7 G FAT (3 G SAT, 1 G MONO); 26 MG CHOLESTEROL; 5 G CARBOHYDRATE; 10 G PROTEIN; 1 G FIBER; 297 MG SODIUM; 83 MG POTASSIUM. **NUTRITION BONUS:** Vitamin A (15% DAILY VALUE).

## Pocket Eggs with Soy-Sesame Sauce

Healthy ✨ Weight Lower ↓ Carbs

**ACTIVE TIME:** 15 MINUTES | **TOTAL:** 15 MINUTES

 In Wuhan, this is a common way of cooking eggs, which were hard to come by during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, when food was tightly rationed. After the Communists imprisoned my father, a famous surgeon, for being a counter-revolutionary, my mother served us this dish for the Chinese New Year dinner. It was the best food she could offer us. Serve warm over rice or noodles. (Photograph: page 81.) **SHOPPING TIP:** Black sesame seeds are slightly more flavorful and aromatic than white sesame seeds. Find them in the Asian-foods section of the supermarket or substitute the white variety if they aren’t available.

- 2 tablespoons reduced-sodium soy sauce
- 1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil
- 1½ teaspoons rice vinegar
- 1 tablespoon minced scallion greens
- 4 teaspoons canola oil
- 4 large eggs
- 2 teaspoons black sesame seeds (see Shopping Tip)
- 1 tablespoon dried basil
- ¼ teaspoon ground white pepper

1. Combine soy sauce, sesame oil, vinegar and scallion in a small bowl. Set aside.
2. Heat canola oil in a medium nonstick skillet over medium heat and swirl to coat. Crack 2 eggs into a small bowl; crack the remaining 2 eggs into a second small bowl.
3. Working quickly, pour 2 eggs on one side of the pan and the other 2 on the other side.



*This page: Succulent Lion's Head Meatballs are said to resemble a lion's head with a cabbage leaf (or lettuce leaf, in this case) serving as the lion's mane. Opposite: Ice-cold Honey-Lemon Tea with chrysanthemum flowers is refreshing on a hot summer day.*



*This page: Enlist some helpers to fold up the Scallop & Shrimp Dumplings and you'll have them ready in a flash. Opposite: Pocket Eggs with Soy-Sesame Sauce are seasoned with a magical combination of dried basil, black sesame seeds and white pepper (recipe on page 78). They make a wonderful simple supper but once you try them you may develop a craving for them for breakfast or lunch.*

The egg whites will flow together, forming one large piece.

4. Sprinkle sesame seeds, basil and pepper over the eggs. Cook until the egg whites are crispy and brown on the bottom and the yolks are firmly set, about 3 minutes. Keeping them in one piece, flip the eggs using a wide spatula and cook until the whites turn crispy and brown on the other side, 1 to 2 minutes more.
5. Pour the reserved sauce over the eggs. Simmer for 30 seconds, turning the eggs once to coat both sides with sauce. Serve in wedges, drizzled with the pan sauce.

**MAKES 4 SERVINGS.**

**PER SERVING:** 139 CALORIES; 12 G FAT (2 G SAT, 5 G MONO); 212 MG CHOLESTEROL; 2 G CARBOHYDRATE; 7 G PROTEIN; 1 G FIBER; 338 MG SODIUM; 123 MG POTASSIUM.

## Scallop & Shrimp Dumplings

**ACTIVE TIME:** 1 HOUR | **TOTAL:** 1 HOUR  
**TO MAKE AHEAD:** Prepare filling (Step 1); cover and refrigerate for up to 2 days, or freeze for up to 1 week.

*People along the Yangtze River enjoy dumplings with a variety of fillings, from seafood to red meat, eggs to vegetables. In Wuhan, dumplings may be served at any meal. During my childhood, I often stopped at a food stall on the street on my way to school and bought a dozen dumplings and fresh soy milk for breakfast. Crisp, pan-fried dumplings don't have to be loaded with fat. Cooking them in a mix of water and oil makes them crisp on the bottom, tender and juicy inside.*

- 8 ounces scallops, minced
- 4 ounces raw shrimp, peeled, deveined and minced
- 1/2 cup minced scallions
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons reduced-sodium soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- 36 round (gyoza) dumpling wrappers (see Kitchen Tip)
- 2 tablespoons canola oil, divided
- 3/4 cup water, divided
- Ginger-Garlic Dipping Sauce (recipe follows), optional

1. Combine scallops, shrimp, scallions, ginger,

garlic, soy sauce, sesame oil and pepper in a large bowl.

2. Organize your work area with a bowl of cold water, your stack of dumpling wrappers and a floured baking sheet to hold filled dumplings.

3. Working with one dumpling wrapper at a time, dip your finger into the water and moisten the edges of the circle. Spoon about 1 1/2 teaspoons of filling into the center. Fold the wrapper over to form a half circle. Pinch the edges together to seal. Repeat with remaining wrappers and filling. Cover the wrappers and finished dumplings with moist paper towels to prevent drying.

4. Preheat oven to 200°F.

5. Mix 1 tablespoon canola oil with 1/4 cup water in a large nonstick skillet and place over medium heat; bring to a simmer. Carefully arrange one-third of the dumplings in the skillet so they are not touching; cover and cook until the dumplings puff up and are light brown on the bottom, 4 to 5 minutes. Carefully flip the dumplings with tongs and cook for 1 minute more. Transfer the dumplings to a baking sheet and keep warm in the oven.

6. Repeat the procedure with another 1/4 cup water, the remaining 1 tablespoon canola oil and half the remaining dumplings. Cook the final batch of dumplings in the remaining 1/4 cup water, adjusting the heat as necessary to prevent scorching. (There will be enough oil left in the pan for the final batch.) Serve hot with Ginger-Garlic Dipping Sauce, if desired.


**MAKES 36 DUMPLINGS, FOR 12 APPETIZER SERVINGS.**

**PER DUMPLING:** 42 CALORIES; 1 G FAT (0 G SAT, 1 G MONO); 8 MG CHOLESTEROL; 5 G CARBOHYDRATE; 2 G PROTEIN; 0 G FIBER; 91 MG SODIUM; 37 MG POTASSIUM.

**KITCHEN TIP:** The best dumpling wrappers for this recipe are round “gyoza” wrappers. Look for them in Asian markets. Or substitute square wonton wrappers and use a 3- to 3 1/2-inch round cookie cutter to cut each wrapper into a circle (they need not be perfectly round).

## GINGER-GARLIC DIPPING SAUCE

**ACTIVE TIME:** 10 MINUTES | **TOTAL:** 40 MINUTES | **TO MAKE AHEAD:** Cover and refrigerate for up to 3 days.

 In addition to being a delicious dipping sauce for dumplings, this can be used as a marinade for chicken, pork or tofu.

- 1/2 cup reduced-sodium soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons rice vinegar
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 tablespoon minced ginger
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil

Combine soy sauce, lemon juice, vinegar, garlic, cilantro, ginger and sesame oil in a small bowl. Cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes to allow flavors to blend.

**MAKES 3/4 CUP.**

**PER TEASPOON:** 5 CALORIES; 0 G FAT (0 G SAT, 0 G MONO); 0 MG CHOLESTEROL; 0 G CARBOHYDRATE; 0 G PROTEIN; 0 G FIBER; 119 MG SODIUM; 9 MG POTASSIUM.






## Long-Life Noodles with Green Tea

High ↑ Fiber

ACTIVE TIME: 30 MINUTES | TOTAL: 30 MINUTES

 Many famous dishes cooked with tea come from the Yangtze River Valley where there are countless tea farms. A popular way of serving noodles during Wuhan's very hot summers is to combine them with ingredients like tofu and green tea that are considered "cooling" in Chinese culture. **SHOPPING TIP:** Precooked "baked tofu" is firmer than water-packed tofu and comes in a wide variety of flavors. We prefer flavors like "teriyaki," "Thai" and "savory" in this recipe. You might also like flavored baked tofu on a sandwich or in a stir-fry.

- 8 ounces udon or whole-wheat noodles**
- 2 tablespoons canola oil**
- 1 teaspoon loose green tea leaves, preferably gunpowder (optional)**
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh ginger**
- 2 cloves garlic, minced**
- 8 ounces flavored baked tofu, cut into matchsticks (see Shopping Tip)**
- 1 small red bell pepper, cut into thin strips**
- 1 small yellow bell pepper, cut into thin strips**

- 4 scallions, cut diagonally into 2-inch pieces**
- 2 tablespoons reduced-sodium soy sauce**
- 2 tablespoons rice vinegar**
- 1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil**
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper**

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Cook noodles according to the package directions. Drain and rinse with cold water to prevent sticking. Set aside.
2. Heat a wok over medium heat. (See page TK for tips on seasoning a wok.) Add oil and swirl to coat. Add tea leaves (if using), ginger and garlic. Cook, stirring, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add tofu and cook, stirring, for 2 minutes. Add red and yellow bell peppers and cook, stirring, until the peppers soften, 1 to 2 minutes.
3. Stir in the noodles, scallions, soy sauce and rice vinegar. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the noodles are heated through, about 2 minutes. Stir in sesame oil and pepper. Toss to combine. Serve warm or cold.

MAKES 4 SERVINGS.

PER SERVING: 420 CALORIES; 16 G FAT (2 G SAT, 5 G MONO); 0 MG CHOLESTEROL; 47 G CARBOHYDRATE; 22 G PROTEIN; 5 G FIBER; 593 MG SODIUM; 263 MG POTASSIUM. **NUTRITION BONUS:** Vitamin C (100% DAILY VALUE), Vitamin A (40% DV), Iron (25% DV). 🌱



Top: If it's sticky-hot out, serve Long Life Noodles with Green Tea cold—they're just as good that way. Bottom: Street vendors in Wuhan preparing their wares.

## CRUISE THE YANGTZE

Viking River Cruises has a 15-night tour of "China's Cultural Delights," including 3 nights in Beijing and a 9-night river cruise from Chongqing to Nanjing aboard the 153-cabin *Viking Century Sun*. The cruise features visits to Wuhan, the Three Gorges Dam and the Great Wall, with meals at local restaurants as well as on board. The trip starts at \$3,192 per person, all inclusive. (877) 668-4546, [vikingrivers.com](http://vikingrivers.com).





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