

Simple Cooking

Electronic Edition



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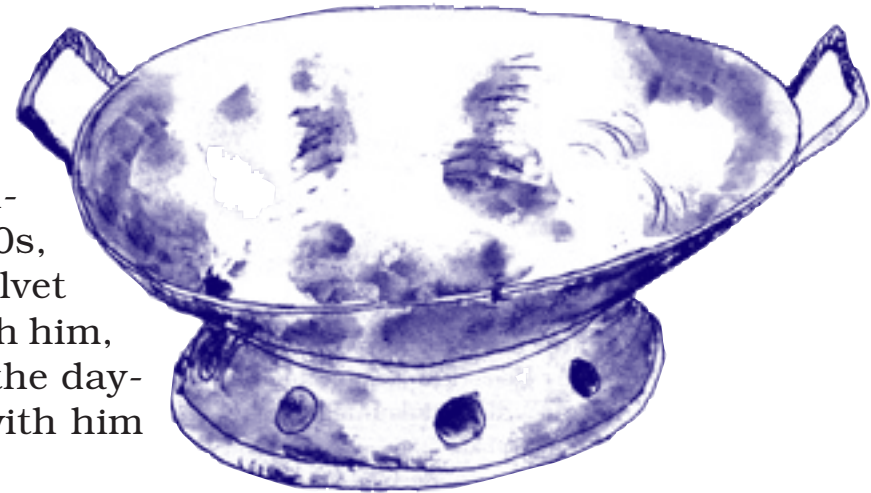
WOK FRAGRANT

MY GRANDFATHER WAS THE ONE who introduced me to the world of Chinese restaurants, at least as they were in the 1950s, beguilingly ersatz palaces spun of velvet and gold. As a teenager, I spent my summers with him, working at odd jobs at his apartment house in the daytime and otherwise generally hanging around with him when I wasn't off somewhere by myself.

Grampa was drawn to Chinese restaurants for all the usual reasons: here was food that, while piquantly exotic, hit all the right notes so far as price, quantity, and greasy goodness were concerned. But the selling point that clinched the deal was that in Boston's Chinatown they not only stayed open past midnight but were actually bustling then. If there's just you and a waiter in an otherwise empty place, it's hard to ward off inner tremors of self-pity. But if the joint is jumping, you feel instead like a welcomed initiate to a secret club.

So it was that, whenever the Jack Paar Show started to bore him, Grampa would launch himself from his prone position on the couch and come drag me out of my bedroom and away from my science fiction tale. He would rev up the '52 Cadillac Series Sixty and we would head off to downtown Boston. Once we turned onto Harrison Avenue, I started eagerly inhaling that ineffable—for a sixteen-year-old, at least—after-midnight aroma of the louche.

Our destination was China Pearl at 9 Tyler Street, and my grandfather always ordered *ho yu gai pu*, a dish of crisp, batter-coated pieces of fried chicken. (I remember this because every visit he had to work out with the waiter which of the many chicken dishes on the menu it was.) For me, the high points of the meal were the appetizers—spareribs and egg rolls—and the pork fried rice.



It would only take five more years for me to learn enough about Chinese food to become embarrassed at how touristy my taste was then, especially my fondness for the fried rice. This new awareness certainly affected how I ordered and ate in Chinese restaurants, as well as immediately dispelling any fondness I might have had for italyzizing whatever was set before me with the cruet of soy sauce.

However, I would also be a liar if I said that I never ordered red-glazed pork ribs or fried rice again. On the contrary. Like many people who reach this point, my tastes simply bifurcated. The lover of *real* Chinese food—clams with black bean sauce, mu-shu pork, fragrant crispy duck, *chiao-tzu*—went his own way, not entirely disowning but hardly ever mentioning his slightly furtive shadow, the lover of *sham* Chinese food.

For years in the early eighties, I worked in an office building that sat right at the corner of Boston's Chinatown, and I did a lot of happy culinary exploring there, in places like Henry's, Tai Tung, Moon Villa. Even so, one year when the assistant director of my department offered to treat me to a birthday lunch—anywhere and anything I wanted—I opted for spareribs and pork fried rice...and not from any of my Chinatown finds but from a takeout joint in the downtown shopping district. (Although the place itself was blatantly uncool, their sparerib portions blew away the competition's.)

There was an element here, no doubt, of that rarely discussed inclination to just eat bad food—which has more in common with taking a fistful of uppers, drinking moonshine whiskey, or smoking vile cheroots than it does with the pleasures of eating. But in this instance something else was also at work.

Restaurants in Chinatown that were frequented by actual Chinese diners had two menus with corresponding attitudes toward those who ordered from each. I had spent a lot of time getting recognized in such places as that unusual (and, in my own mind, highly estimable) *gwai lo* who wanted to eat the real thing. All it would have

*Although many Chinese have said this about chop suey, they are wrong—or, rather, didn't come from the right part of China. Li Shu-Fan, in his autobiography, *HONG KONG SURGEON* (1964), remembers eating chop suey in a restaurant in Toishan [China] in 1894 and speculates that the dish was brought to America by the people of that region, who were among the earliest immigrants to the U.S.

taken was three words—“pork fried rice”—to permanently erase everything I had so far managed to accomplish. In fact, by then I’d come to believe that fried rice, like chop suey, had no true roots in China at all, but was a phantasm created to please American eaters.*

The truth, however, turns out to be more complex. Ken Hom, in his affecting and delightful cookbook-as-autobiography, *EASY FAMILY RECIPES FROM A CHINESE-AMERICAN CHILDHOOD*, tells how the workers at his uncle’s restaurant used to joke about the abandon with which non-Chinese customers added soy sauce to everything in sight. His explanation for this—that Americans “prefer foods on the salty side”—seems an odd accusation, coming from a culture that relishes so many salt-laden sauces, condiments, preserved vegetables, bean pastes...the list is endless. Overuse of soy sauce may be ignorant, but it isn’t perverse.

I also think he is a bit misleading when he goes on to say that “never would soy sauce be...used in fried rice, especially when one wants the clean, mild taste of rice made subtly smoky as it is stir-fried in the wok.”

Point of fact: American customers have never had the opportunity to become familiar with real fried rice, because the ersatz stuff is way too profitable. Take yesterday’s leftover white rice, thoroughly dampen it with soy sauce, toss in bits of barbecued pork and various vegetables, leave it a vat on the steam table all day, and listen to that mental cash register ring every time another order goes out. The result, if not the method, isn’t all that different from the so-called rice pilafs that many restaurants offer as an alternative to baked or fried potatoes. So, let’s call the stuff “Chinese pork-flavored rice pilaf” and be done with it.* But hold onto that phrase “subtly smoky,” because, as we shall now see, those two words encapsulate the heart of true fried rice.

*This shouldn’t be confused with what might better be called “rice-tossed” dishes. In these, cooked rice is stirred into a mélange of wok-cooked ingredients and served directly after the rice is heated and has absorbed the small amount of cooking liquid. These are part of the repertoire of Chinese home cooking and are very good. But while they, too, can be called “fried rice,” they aren’t our subject here.

炒飯

Back in 1979 I was an exchange student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. My college's cafeteria had a few regular items on the menu, one of which was a plate of fried rice topped with an over-easy fried egg or two, which I would break up and mix into the rice. The rice was very lightly fried with some scallions, a dried chile, and a bit of minced meat, probably pork.

—R. W. Lucky, personal note

IT WAS A PREWAR ACCOUNT of a long train journey in China that shook my mind free of Chinese restaurant fried rice—and it is, alas, all too symptomatic of my reading habits that I can't recall the book. I'm rather good at remembering bits and pieces from my reading but terrible at remembering *where* it was that I actually read them. So, although what follows is to a certain extent confirmed in Buwei Yang Chow's *HOW TO COOK AND EAT IN CHINESE* (1945), it is extrapolated from memory and inked in by imagination.

When you wanted something to eat on a long train trip in China in the 1930s, what you got, most likely, was fried rice. The ingredients—cooked rice, eggs, scallion, seasonings—were easy to store, and it required only a few moments to make. Cooking oil was heated to smoking in a large wok. The rice and bits of scallion were tossed in, resulting in a burst of sizzling, as the damp surface of the rice vaporized. The cook tossed this around for a moment until all the rice was lightly seared in this manner. Then he pushed this up the wok's sides and poured a beaten egg onto the freed-up surface. With a few rapid twists of his spatula, this mass was first scrambled and then broken into pieces, which were quickly mixed into the rice. Finally, he dribbled over some soy sauce, rice wine, and toasted sesame oil and, with one quick motion, scooped everything, smoking hot, into an eating bowl...and was ready to start on the next order.

What enchanted me—enchants me still—about all this is a near-magical economy—of fuel, of ingredients, of effort, of equipment, of space—that produces—out of nothing! in seconds!—something filling and truly delicious to eat. Once perceived, this image pre-

vented me from ever looking at fried rice the same way again. Afterwards, whenever and wherever I came across that dish, I looked hopefully for some sign of this magic, even though I never found it.

There's a Chinese phrase for this sort of instantaneous, high-heat cooking, where even slivers of food retain their inner moisture and fresh taste beneath a crisply seared exterior—*wok hai* or, roughly, “wok fragrance.”* I've never seen this discussed in Chinese cookbooks, perhaps because it is generally considered the province of restaurant cooking, requiring as it does a well-honed deftness and the ability to endure furnace-like working conditions.

However, with the advent of the home-kitchen restaurant stove and, more to the point, the much cheaper wok-friendly outdoor propane burner, now aspiring home cooks also can achieve *wok-hai* creations. I've cast more than one longing glance at the Eastman Outdoors “Big Kahuna” burner, which retails for around fifty dollars, has a rating of 65,000 BTUs (*ten times* the average burner on a gas stove), and can handle a 22-inch wok with *éclat*.

However, such a unit isn't necessary to make wok-fragrant fried rice. Because cooked rice is light and particulate, it doesn't cool down a hot wok the way heavier, wetter ingredients can. This means it can be sear-fried pretty quickly, even when made on an ordinary home range.

WOK-FRAGRANT FRIED RICE

CAYEN. Be aware that this is one of those seemingly simple dishes where every word—including “and” and “but”—is the subject of fierce contention. Some cooks heat the wok before adding the oil. Some cook the eggs in the wok before adding the rice; others wait until the very end, then push the finished rice up the sides of the wok and scramble the eggs in the hollow in the center. Still others stir the

*It is also sometimes called *wok chi*, which means, again loosely, “wok energy” or “wok spirit”—*chi* being a hard word to pin down. Almost always the word “elusive” is appended to the phrase, since *wok chi* is considered to be something nearly mystical—hard to obtain and easily dissipated. Its presence is an indication that the chef is working at the very top of his form.

beaten eggs directly into the rice and stir-fry until set. Seasonings are various and optional—both Barbara Tropp and Ken Hom make a point of using nothing but salt. This is how I make mine, at least right now, in the summer of 2004.

THE RICE. The Qing Dynasty poet and essayist Yuan Mei (1716-1798) wrote of savoring the “juices” of rice, which is only possible, he said, if the rice is properly cooked in just the right amount of water. Ideal fried rice enhances this further by encapsulating the moistness within a crusty coating. (This is why the rice must be boiled in advance; during the resting time it absorbs the moisture clinging to its surface, which makes it less sticky and keeps it from sopping up all the oil.) A super-hot wok can achieve this with tender long-grain rice, but if you’re preparing it on a kitchen range, you’re much better off selecting a plump short-grain rice (but **not** the super-sticky “sweet” rice). My favorite for wok-fragrant fried rice is Chinese Royal rice (see sidebar on page 2), but I get good results using Lundberg organic short-grain “sushi” rice, which is commonly available.

THE WOK. To do this properly, you’ll need a standard cold-rolled-steel wok. These are the inexpensive, metal-colored woks sold at Asian grocery stores (my 14-inch one cost \$9.95). One with a flat bottom is fine—and necessary on an electric burner. If you’re buying such a wok new, know that it may have been coated with machine oil to keep it from rusting and needs to be thoroughly cleaned, then seasoned with with peanut oil. To do this, heat a tablespoon or so until the oil is almost at the smoking point, swirl it around the inside of the wok, let it cool down, wipe it clean with a paper towel, then repeat that process two or three more times. Once seasoned, the wok should not be washed but wiped out, scouring away any stubborn bits with coarse salt.

THE THING ITSELF. Wok-fragrant fried rice is as hard to describe as it is good to eat, and the best way to tell when you’ve achieved it is by taste. Don’t bring any expectations to the cooking. The rice won’t be visibly crusty, and it shouldn’t be burnt or scorched. But if you take a bite now and then as you cook it, you’ll find you can’t miss the transformation. It really is that noticeable...and that delicious.



[SERVES 1]

AT LEAST FOUR HOURS IN ADVANCE

1 cup uncooked short-grain rice • $\frac{1}{3}$ cups water

• Put the rice in a large bowl and rinse it in two changes of cold water. Meanwhile, bring the measured water to a boil in a small ($1\frac{1}{2}$ -quart) saucepan. Stir in the salt, then the strained rice. Reduce the heat to the lowest flame possible, cover the rice, and cook for 15 minutes. Then uncover the rice until most of the steam has evaporated. Turn off the heat, place a folded napkin over the rice, replace the cover, and let the pot sit off the heat for another 15 minutes. Finally, turn the cooked rice into a large bowl, breaking up any clumps. Cover it with plastic wrap and, depending on how soon you plan to make the fried rice, either put the bowl in the refrigerator or leave it on the counter. Jim Lee, in *JIM LEE'S CHINESE COOKING*, says that even in summer you can leave it out for a day or two. I certainly do overnight.

👉 **COOK'S NOTES.** The Chinese prepare boiled rice without adding salt. When making fried rice, this adds to the “sweetness” of the kernels and thus emphasizes the contrast with the savory seasonings. By the way, this is twice the amount called for in the recipe below. Save half for the next batch.

MAKING THE FRIED RICE

about $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups day-old cooked rice, at room temperature

2 scallions, trimmed and cut into slivers

1 garlic clove, minced • 1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger

$\frac{1}{2}$ Chinese sausage, cut into shreds (see note) **OR**

1 tablespoon coarsely chopped prosciutto or country ham

1 or 2 eggs, beaten • pinch of salt

Chinese rice wine or dry sherry • toasted sesame oil

2 tablespoons good fresh lard or peanut oil

light (ordinary) soy sauce (see note)

hot red pepper flakes or coarse-ground black pepper

• Use a spatula or your fingers to break up any clumps in the rice. Put the scallion

slivers, minced garlic, minced ginger, and shredded Chinese sausage or ham in a small bowl.

- Season the beaten eggs with a pinch of salt, a drizzle of the toasted sesame oil, and the Chinese rice wine/sherry. Lightly wipe a 9-inch nonstick skillet with about a teaspoon of the lard/peanut oil and put it over medium heat. When it is hot, pour in the eggs. When they have set at the bottom, tilt the pan slightly and use a spatula to lift this layer, allowing the uncooked egg on top to run underneath. Keep doing this until the egg is just set. Remove from the heat and cut into small pieces with a spatula.
- Put the remaining lard/peanut oil into the wok. Turn up the flame beneath it as high as it will go. Let it heat until the fat starts to haze—i.e., just before it starts to smoke. Swirl it gently to coat the lower sides of the wok, then turn in the scallions, garlic, ginger, and meat. Notice how, immediately, your kitchen smells like a Chinese restaurant. Stir a few times with a spatula and add the cooked rice. Toss with the spatula to thoroughly coat it with the oil and to mix it and the seasonings together.
- Keep turning the mixture over. After a minute, dribble in some soy sauce and more Chinese rice wine/sherry with one hand, while still turning the mixture with the other. If you want to measure this, use no more than 1/2 tablespoon of each. When this has been absorbed, toss in a pinch of red pepper flakes or coarse-ground black pepper.
- Continue tossing the rice over high heat until the surface of the grains becomes slightly translucent and toasted-looking. This will take from 4 to 5 minutes. At this point remove the wok from the heat. Stir in the chopped egg and, if you wish, a little more sesame oil. Serve at once.

👉 **COOK'S NOTES.** The brand of **soy sauce** I use is Pearl River Bridge Superior Light, **sesame oil** is Kadoya Pure, **Chinese sausage** is Sun Ming Jan (the one with gin in it). I should note that cookbooks tell you to poach Chinese sausage before using it in a stir-fry. My own feeling is that by shredding it and cooking it over this kind of high heat, there's no danger, and I love the densely chewy result. As to **rice wine**, food writers universally condemn Chinese rice cooking wines as grossly inferior, which they doubtlessly are. However, in the world of bad choices, I think I prefer it over the usual substitute, dry sherry, with which it really has nothing in common except

some flavor notes. Rice wine is not, in the true sense, a wine at all, but a grain-based brew like sake or barley wine. In any case, when Matt and I were pondering the three or four versions of cooking wine at our Asian market, a Chinese woman, pleased by our interest in her country's cooking, struck up a halting conversation with us. We asked her about rice wine, and without hesitation she plucked Yu Yee Brand Chinese Shao Shing Cooking Wine from the shelf. No lectures, no sad sighs. Instead, she proffered the selected bottle with a smile. "This one is the best, I think," she said.

👉 **VARIATIONS: WITH FRIED EGGS**—use these instead of the usual scrambled eggs (as described by Bob Lucky on page 5) • **WITH SHRIMP**—substitute 6 to 8 shelled and coarsely chopped raw shrimp for the ham • **WITH COOKED GREEN PEAS OR EDAMAME** (tender green soybeans)—add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup with the scallions, garlic, and ginger.

After I had made this one or two times, I realized that I could never eat pork fried rice in a Chinese restaurant again; I would only burst into tears. I haven't been eating many glossy red spareribs either, having discovered crispy-skin roast pork belly, which blows the ribs out of the water. But the *gwai-lo* factor still comes into play. When I go into a Chinese BBQ store to order some, the cashier confers with the cook, then comes back to ask, "You sure you not want *sparerib*?"

Despite my happiness with my own wok-fragrant fried rice, I still like to imagine that in every Chinatown in America, there's an unmarked four-table joint where Chinese can sneak off to order fried rice—the real stuff, served smoking from the kitchen. But I know I'll never find it. And if I do, they probably won't let me in. ♦

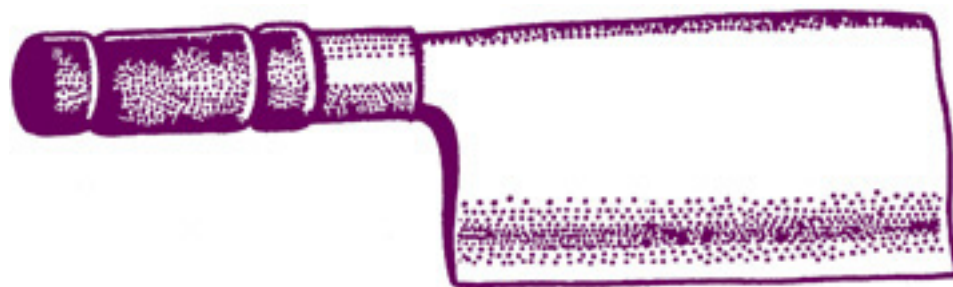




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CHINESE RICE

In Tibet, a dumping ground for China's worst commodities and its worst food products, the rice was tasteless, stubby-grained kernels, speckled white spheres that were devoid of flavor and character. Indeed, for all the rice consumed in China, much of it is undistinguished, is of such shadowy and shallow flavor that it is seen as the food of peasants; at banquets in fancy restaurants rice is almost never served.

— Edward Gargan, *THE RIVER'S TALE: A YEAR ALONG THE MEKONG*

THE CHINESE GROW ninety percent of the world's rice crop and eat most of what they raise—the average Chinese eats almost two hundred pounds of it a year (a lot, but nowhere near the record; *that* goes to Myanmar, where the per-person average is four hundred and forty-one pounds! To put all this in perspective, the average American eats about twenty pounds a year). The Chinese have such a profound relationship with it that their word for cooked rice is synonymous with “meal.” I’ve read more than one account where, facing an American (riceless) dinner, Chinese guests would make plans to seek *real* sustenance before or afterwards. As her friend Huan confessed to Emily Hahn, in *CHINA TO ME* (1944),

“When I have my meal here, I go first to Jimmy’s Kitchen and eat something. Or I go over afterwards to Sun Ya and have noodles. Without rice, we Chinese go hungry.”

Still, one wonders, is there ever anything *special* about this rice? Although Chinese cookbooks can be highly opinionated on how to cook it, I’ve yet to read a Chinese-born food writer waxing nostalgic about the wonderful rice grown in the paddies along the Li River in Guangxi or on the astonishingly lovely mountainside terraces of Yuan Yang in Southern Yunnan.

The reason for this, I suspect, is that until very recently most Chinese had never tasted the best that their country can produce. As H. Frederick Dale explains in an article in *Amber Waves*, a publication of the USDA, on the growing Chinese consumer revolution,

Until the 1990s, urban Chinese consumers purchased generic rice at set prices from government-run grain shops. Rice was usually procured by government authorities from local farmers, who tended to offer the government their lowest quality product. It was often broken and unpolished, and stones and other foreign material were often mixed in with the grain.

As the new and ever-growing class of consumers showed a willingness to purchase the more expensive, imported Thai Hom Mali (jasmine) rice instead of the native inferior product, Chinese entrepreneurs started getting the message. Today, Dale continues,

China’s rice industry is highly competitive, and rice is no longer a generic commodity. Consumers can choose among numerous brands differentiated by type, quality, and origin, and price.

These higher quality, regionally grown Chinese rices have already started appearing in the United States. One that I found at our local market was labeled “Royal Rice,” a short-grain variety grown in Xiaozhan, Tianjin, and supposedly the favorite food of the Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799). It is conspicuously nubby, off-white in color, and nearly opaque, with a deep “toasted-rice” aroma. When cooked, the grains are almost tubular, nearly as dry as long-grain rice, and possess a pleasingly chewy texture and lots of flavor. The English text on the back of the bag describes it as “the ideal ingredient in making fried rice,” and I found that to be true, since the grains

were plump enough to hold their moisture and relatively unsticky.



*Raw "Royal Rice." Not unlike
Italian risotto rice in appearance.*



*Wok-fried "Royal Rice" (enlarged).
You can see how unsticky it is.*

Another interesting thing that I learned during my research is that this same consumer population is turning away from rice entirely as the defining element of a meal, just as they also see switching from drinking tea to coffee as a sign of affluence and more sophisticated taste. It reminds me, in a way, of the diffidence toward ordinary bread that developed during my lifetime, when au courant consumers turned first to dinner rolls, then to artisanal loaves, and now, thanks to the low-carb craze, entirely away from it. Inferior quality was often given as the reason, and this was certainly true. But, although rarely discussed, it was equally the case that affluence allowed treating what had only recently been a necessary part of the meal as, first, an accessory to it, then as something entirely dispensable.

Even so, you cannot understand China if you don't understand the meaning of rice. In *THE ATTIC*, a memoir by Guanlong Cao of his childhood as the son of a "class enemy," which is to say a former peasant farmer. He tells how his family was forced to live in a cramped attic over a button factory and scrape out a living however they could, all the while subjected to endless humiliations. They were always hungry, and so food becomes one of the book's major themes. Some of the passages are revoltingly cruel, others are humorous, still others profoundly sad.

Among the latter is Cao's account of the behavior of his brother, Bao, on his return from serving two years in prison on suspicion of making antirevolutionary remarks. (He was never actually charged or brought to trial.) Before, Cao writes, he "ate like a

fireman,” finishing off his food before the rest of the family had a chance to settle in. Now, he ate slowly, taking tiny bites of rice and chewing them forever, all the while keeping one arm raised and curved around the bowl as if to ward off attack until he had eaten it all. Then, Cao continues,

Although Mother never allowed us to leave a grain of rice in our bowls, she never permitted us to lick the bowls, either. But in front of all our eyes, Bao gracefully polished his bowl with his tongue. The bowl, covering his face, revolved slowly. The tip of his tongue flicked over the rim, like a snake peeking from behind a boulder. After licking, he put his bowl down on the table and, blankly, looked at Mother as she wept. For a long time after he got out of jail, he didn't allow anybody to wash his bowl. It didn't look as if it needed washing, anyway.



photo © H. Frederick Gale 2004

COOKING MIDNIGHT

Uncooked, rice is called *mai*; cooked, it is *fan*. Once cooked, rice was traditionally taken as food at least three times each day, first for *jo chan*, or early meal, either as congee or, if the weather was cool, cooked and served with a spoonful of liquid lard, soy sauce, and an egg. To eat rice is to *sik fan*, and there is, in addition to those morning preparations, *n'fan*, or “afternoon rice,” and *mon fan*, or “evening rice.” There is even a custom called *siu yeh*, which translates literally as “cooked midnight” and means rice eaten as a late evening snack. No time of any day in China is without its rice.

—Eileen Yin-Fei Lo, *THE CHINESE KITCHEN*

ALTHOUGH THERE'S NO EXACT EQUIVALENT, the closest we come in this country to the casual everyday eating experience of the Chinese is when we attend a country fair or something like one, where inexpensive, open-air food stalls abound and masses of people stroll about, sampling from them as they go. Food courts aren't really the same, because you go to these to eat, you buy food, you sit down and consume it, and you leave. Nor are these right outside your front door, so you can't slip into a bathrobe and duck outside for a quick eat before sleep. Nor do we have the tiny, hole-in-the-wall, single-dish snack joints that, in China, complement the stalls and expand the concept of snack without adding any inconvenience or expense.

In this country, there is nothing casual about casual eating. Food, even snack food, comes well-wrapped, both physically and metaphorically. Those wrappings signal order, sanitation, property boundaries, and more. Imagine wandering into McDonalds for a bag of fries, crossing the street to Wendy's for a cheeseburger, and stepping into Burger Chef for a shake—even if this were your ideal fast-food feast, the effort involved in trying to assemble it would make the whole experience risible.

At home, snack makings are hidden inside cabinets and the refrigerator, where they're packaged up in bags, jars, boxes, aseptic containers. Consequently, the appetite isn't allowed to flow smoothly from the moment of hunger to that of fulfillment but continually brought up short along the way, like a dog on a leash. As a result, we end

up spending more, eating more, and enjoying it less.

What is most obviously wrong here is the tyranny of portion control, especially when that controlling is done from far away and with intentions sometimes diametrically opposed to our own. Where food is cheap and packaging expensive, you are made to pay substantially extra for choosing just what you want, even if you're able to find an approximate fit in the mini-, maxi-, mega-sizes spread before you. And there's always the built-in tilt to persuade you to take just a little bit (or, in some instances, a whole lot) more.

But this is only the start of the story. In cultures where food is costly, great ingenuity is expended in spinning something out of nothing, in tempting palates with what, in our own culture, is often tossed into the rubbish bin. More expensive foods are prepared with the intent of making a little go a long way—compare a skewer of sate (in calories and pleasure) to a Big Mac or a Whopper.

These speculations came to mind as I was reading, in his eponymous cookbook,* Jim Lee's account of growing up in a small village in the province of Canton. When he came home from school, he would head straight to the kitchen and to the rice pot, where he was almost sure to find some rice left over from the previous family meal.

I would scoop some into a large bowl, pour some peanut oil on it at random, then sprinkle some dark soy sauce on it and mix it well and have a feast! If they were available, and my hunger could wait, I chopped some scallions and sprinkled them on the rice. It needed nothing more.

To prepare this properly, the boy had learned that the oil had to be thoroughly stirred in first, to coat each grain of rice. Otherwise, when he added the soy sauce, it would be all soaked up by the first bits of rice it touched. Although Lee presents the dish in recipe format, it's clear that, as a boy, no such thing existed for him. The amount of each seasoning would depend on how much rice there was, his appetite, the presence of his mother in the kitchen. In other words, such thinking as he did was done through his hands, his eyes, his tongue.

* JIM LEE'S CHINESE COOKING (Harper & Row, 1968), which is well worth seeking out—he's good company in the kitchen.

One can see him at it, intently concocting, then happily eating, his impromptu creation. The image not only touches my heart and my appetite but also stirs my inner cook. I'm immediately drawn to dishes where the preparation and eating are a pleasingly inseparable whole, where the meal begins when the old rice pot is, once again, found to be a willing co-conspirator.

It goes without saying that the delicious phrase “cooked midnight” embraces a wide universe of which the following rice bowl recipes are just a part. I took that phrase for the title of this piece because as I leafed through our Chinese cookbooks, seeking out what they had to say about fried rice, I noticed that I kept coming across certain rice bowl dishes to which words like “bachelor,” “late-night,” “solitary,” and the like were attached—dishes, in other words, that are for private eating, even when shared with family or friends. Rosa Chang, writing about her own youth at her family website, captures their intimate spirit to perfection:

Siu yeh, or supper late at night, became a treat to look forward to, and night-time outings often ended with fried noodles brought home and eaten from their warm lotus leaf wrappings. *Siu yeh* could also be homemade and turned into Malayan versions of midnight feasts à la boarding school stories. The spice of it was the secrecy. Stealing into the kitchen, the four of us, led by Daai-Ga-Je set the wok on the charcoal stove to fry rice or noodles. Plates of the forbidden food were stealthily carried upstairs with cups of Chinese tea, and a midnight feast was had, beyond the dreams of Enid Blyton. On an occasion to honour Didi's visit to the house, an over-enthusiastic stirring of the rice made a hole in the wok for which a confession had to be made to Mamma the next morning.



COOKED RICE SNACK

(elaborated from JIM LEE'S CHINESE COOKBOOK)

A recipe is hardly needed for this dish, but some encouragement might be: i.e., this is, in fact, really good. Lee writes that he was always curious to know what his Caucasian

friends would think of it, since he could hardly serve it as a dinner dish. He found out when he encountered one of them, a restaurant cook, eating it. Surprised, Lee asked where on earth she had gotten the recipe. From you, she told him. He had described the dish to her years ago, and she had been making it for herself ever since.

[SERVES 1]

1 bowl of cooked rice at room temperature

2 tablespoons Chinese peanut oil (see note)

1 to 1¹/₂ tablespoons dark soy sauce (see note)

2 scallions, trimmed and minced

- The rice should not be cold (i.e., not fresh from the refrigerator). Using your fingers or a soup spoon, break up any large clumps. Gently toss in the peanut oil, turning over the rice until it becomes a lightly glistening mass. Add the dark soy sauce drop by drop, stirring it in as you do. After 1 tablespoon has been added, taste the rice—if it needs more seasoning, add the rest in the same fashion. Finally, thoroughly mix in the minced scallion.

🍷 **COOK'S NOTES.** CHINESE PEANUT OIL has a more distinct peanutty taste than American ones. It's available in Asian markets. DARK SOY SAUCE can sometimes be oppressively salty. We prefer Pearl River Bridge Superior Dark Soy Sauce. If your digestive system objects to raw scallions, put them in a wok with the peanut oil, cook them gently for a few minutes, toss with the rice, and season with the dark soy sauce as directed.



HACKED MEAT RICE BOWL

All the recipes I know for this dish call simply for ground meat, most often beef. However, my guess is that hamburger, perishable as it is, is not something you find in most Chinese markets. And the dish tastes much better if you chop the meat yourself—the small amount called for here takes but a minute to mince, and it's enjoyable knife work.

[SERVES 1]

scant cup water • heaping ¹/₂ cup uncooked rice

- 1/4 pound lean beef, pork, or lamb
- 1 teaspoon Chinese rice wine or dry sherry
- 1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil
- 1/4 teaspoon EACH salt, sugar, and black pepper
- 1 tablespoon light (ordinary) soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon finely minced fresh ginger

- Put the water in a small (1¹/₂-quart) saucepan and bring to a boil. Put the rice in a bowl and rinse it in 2 changes of cold water. Drain and add to the pot. When the water boils, reduce the heat to the lowest flame possible, cover, and cook for 13 minutes.
- Meanwhile, use a cleaver or other knife to mince the meat. Mix it with the rest of the ingredients and form it into a thin patty a little smaller than the diameter of the rice pot. At the end of the 13-minute cooking time, uncover the rice and set the patty on top of it. Cover the pot with a folded napkin or dish towel and put the lid back. Cook for 2 more minutes, then turn off the heat. Let the covered pot sit for 15 minutes. At that point, gently break up and stir the meat into the rice and turn the mixture into a bowl.



CHINESE SAUSAGE RICE BOWL

Chinese sausages, about the size, shape, and, minus the chile powder, the color of a small pepperoni, are tightly packed with chunks of pork, pork fat, and, sometimes, duck liver. They have a sweet “Chinese sparerib” taste and a deliciously chewy consistency. Their fragrance permeates the rice while it cooks, which is why this is one of the most popular rice-bowl snacks. As a dinner dish, a whole sausage per person is often inserted into the rice and cut up by the diner. But for casual eating, it’s simpler if the sausage is cut into shreds beforehand, as directed here.

[SERVES 2]

1²/₃ cups water • 1 cup uncooked rice

2 Chinese sausages, cut into small chunks

- Put the water in a small (1¹/₂-quart) saucepan and bring to a boil. Put the rice in a bowl and rinse it in two changes of cold water. Drain and add to the pot. When the water boils, reduce the heat to the lowest flame possible, cover, and cook until all the water on the surface of the rice has disappeared, about 10 minutes. Then lift the lid and distribute the bits of sausage over the rice, poking them down into it with the end of a chopstick. Re-cover and cook for another 5 minutes (for a total of 15). At that point, uncover again, place a folded napkin or dish towel over the rice, re-cover, and let sit off the heat for another 15 minutes. Serve.

- VARIATION: CHINESE SAUSAGE WITH GREEN PEAS. Either stir 1/2 cup freshly podded peas into the rice at the start of cooking or spread the same amount of frozen green peas on top of the rice after the sausage has been poked in and mix them into the rice when it is done. Either way, I like to drizzle over some toasted sesame oil just before serving.



STIRRED EGG RICE BOWL

This dish is the epitome of rice-bowl dishes. Kenneth Lo says, in THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CHINESE COOKING (1979): "Rice cooked in this manner is often served to the very young, the aged, or the infirm.... It is the sort of rice dish which is seen only in the most Chinese of surroundings, for example, in Chinese villages."

[SERVES 1]

scant cup water • 1/2 teaspoon salt

heaping 1/2 cup uncooked rice • 1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil

2 eggs • 1 scallion, trimmed and minced

1 teaspoon Chinese rice wine or dry sherry

to garnish: a drizzle of soy or oyster sauce

- Put the water and salt in a small (1¹/₂-quart) saucepan and bring to a boil. Put the

rice in a bowl and rinse it in two changes of cold water. Drain and add to the pot. When the water boils, reduce the heat to the lowest flame possible, cover, and cook for 13 minutes.

- Meanwhile, beat the eggs gently with the minced scallion and the rice wine/sherry. At the end of the 13-minute cooking time, lift the lid from the rice and pour the beaten egg mixture over its surface. Cover with a folded napkin or dish towel and put the lid back. Cook for 2 more minutes, then turn off the heat. Let the covered pot sit for 15 minutes. At that point, gently stir the cooked eggs into the rice and turn the mixture into a bowl. Season with a drizzle of soy or oyster sauce and eat.

- **VARIATION: STIRRED EGG WITH CRAB.** Stir half a small (6-ounce) can of crabmeat into the egg mixture before pouring it over the rice. Crab and egg is a favorite Chinese flavor combination, and canned crab meat works nicely here.



SHANGHAI VEGETABLE RICE BOWL

This dish gets its name from a type of bok choy with light green stems that is very popular in Shanghai. Baby bok choy is a good substitute. Otherwise, use a smaller-sized ordinary bok choy. Traditionally, this dish is made in standard rice-bowl fashion, with the vegetables cooked along with the rice. But the extra work required to make it this way preserves the crisp sweetness of the bok choy and makes for a livelier dish.

[SERVES 2]

- 4 to 6 Chinese dried black mushrooms
- 2 or 3 baby green- or white-stemmed bok choy or
1 small regular bok choy, carefully rinsed
- 1 tablespoon lard or peanut oil
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1/2 teaspoon EACH salt and black pepper
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
- 1 1/2 cups cooked rice



- Soak the dried mushrooms for 20 minutes in warm water to reconstitute them. Trim off and discard the stems. Coarsely chop the caps. After trimming away and discarding the very bottoms of the bok choy, coarsely chop the rest.
- Heat the oil in a wok or frying pan over high heat. When it is at the verge of smoking, add the minced garlic. Stir this once or twice, then add the mushrooms, bok choy, salt, pepper, and toasted sesame oil. Stir-fry this until the bok choy is tender, from 2 to 3 minutes. Turn in the cooked rice and stir gently until the rice is heated through and everything is well mixed. Serve and eat at once.



CHILE BAMBOO RICE BOWL

Although this dish is ordinarily made with preserved (pickled) bamboo shoots, I substitute Taiwanese chile-pepper-infused bamboo shoots packed in soy oil. Both can be found at Asian groceries, but, in a pinch, ordinary canned bamboo shoots can be used instead.

[SERVES 2]

2 tablespoons EACH soy sauce and Chinese rice wine or sherry

1/4 cup chicken stock or water • 1/2 teaspoon sugar

1 tablespoon peanut oil (or chile oil from bamboo shoots)

2 scallions, trimmed and minced

1/2 tablespoon minced fresh ginger • 1/4 pound ground pork

1/4 pound chile bamboo shoots (see above), drained

1/4 cup thawed frozen peas • hot, freshly cooked rice for two

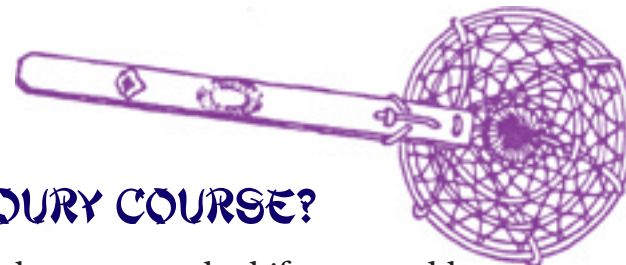
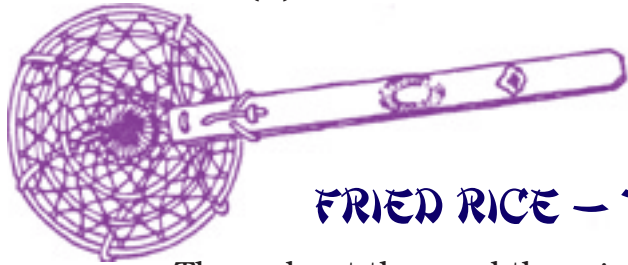
- Mix the first four ingredients together in a small bowl. Heat the peanut oil in a wok over high heat. When it is close to smoking, add the scallions and minced ginger and cook, stirring for several seconds, until the garlic is translucent. Add the ground pork and stir-fry, breaking it into bits with a spatula as it cooks. Add the bamboo shoots and seasoning sauce. Reduce the heat and simmer for 5 minutes. Stir in the peas and cook for another 2 minutes. Divide the rice into two bowls and cover with the contents of the wok. Serve at once. ♦



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FRIED RICE – THE CHINESE SAYOURY COURSE?

Throughout the meal there is always rice and, at the end, you are asked if you would like chow-fan or noodles. Chow-fan is usually rice with egg and is provided in case there are lacunae that have not been filled up by what has gone before. It is usually more polite to indicate that you could not face chow-fan, even if you are still hungry, which is almost inconceivable. Most Europeans are only too thankful that now they have really reached the end, and can surreptitiously undo a top button or two and relax.

—P. D. Ommanney, *FRAGRANT HARBOR: A PRIVATE VIEW OF HONG*

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Table Talk



ANOTHER PISTACHIO SPLITTER. CAROLYN WYNNE (RYDERWOOD WA) wrote us in response to my solution to dealing with hard-to-split pistachios with what she considers a better own: use a screwdriver. After all, she notes, that tool is essentially a wedge, and it comes in various small sizes. “It works beautifully.” As it happens, using a screwdriver crossed my mind, too, but I had, to say the least, indifferent luck. Apparently, Carolyn does not open pistachios while reading or playing a computer game. In those circumstances, a screwdriver is actually a menace, because if you let your attention wander for a mere second, you’ll find that the blade has slipped off the shell and stabbed you in the hand.



However, I was very interested in her alternative suggestion, a pocket screwdriver sold by Lee Valley Tools (www.LEEVALLEY.COM), which looks like a plumpish but sharp-edged 1-inch-wide steel washer. What makes it special is that it is “ramped” so that the edge gradually increases in thickness from 0.030 to 0.090 inch (see illustration). This allows it to handle a wide range of screwheads and, more to the point, pop open almost any pistachio. And, since you have to buy them by the dozen (\$5.95), you can send me one when you do so.

MORE ON LARDO. NANCY JENKINS (CAMDEN ME) wrote to tell us that “the best *lardo* in Italy, everyone agrees, comes from Colonnata, high up in the marble mountains above Carrara, in Tuscany. Even the Ligurians get their *lardo* from Colonnata. It’s the best because it’s actually cured in big coffins made entirely of white Carrara marble, an extraordinary sight. The best place to eat it is at a restaurant called da Venanzio, right in the center of that little town. You should come to Italy and try it. You could go through Liguria on your way to Carrara and try the same *lardo di Colonnata* sliced thin (I like Kramer’s simile

‘as thin as lingerie’) and draped over an extremely hot plate of *farinata*—the chickpea-flour pie that is as ubiquitous to the Ligurian coast as pizza is to Naples—fresh from a wood-fired oven and lightly flecked with olive oil and rosemary.”

Nancy’s message got me to do a little online searching...and I sort of wish I hadn’t. In its June 2001 issue, *The Ecologist* printed a short report on *lardo di Colonnata*, by Giorgio Ferigo, a doctor who works in the Italian public health service. He starts by describing how *lardo* is made in that town, by family businesses, each with its own jealously guarded recipe.

In cellars excavated from the local rock, the lardo is aged in marble tubs. This complex process involves filling the tub with layers of lardo alternated with layers of sea salt, aromatic herbs, and spices. After a week, a dense brine is poured over the mixture, and the tubs are then laid to rest. Six to ten months later, the lardo di Colonnata is ready to eat: a delicious appetizer served in very thin slices, an incomparable delicacy celebrated throughout Italy.

This process is at least five centuries old. However, in 1996, Italian health authorities arrived and sealed the marble tubs with lead, prohibiting their further use. When the owner of the Ristorante da Venanzio applied for a permit to continue producing *lardo di Colonnata*, he was told it would be granted, but only on several conditions. Among them, these two in particular stand out: that the porous rock walls and brick floors of the cellar, which allow moisture to create the particular microclimate that makes the aging process possible, be covered with resin so as to make them easily washable, and that the marble tubs be replaced by plastic containers. In other words, an artisanal product, by government fiat, is to be transformed into a semi-industrial one.

THE CASE OF THE VANISHING PEPPERCORN. Readers in search of Sichuan peppercorns (*Zanthoxylum piperitum*), either online or at their local Asian food stores, may well have found an empty slot on the shelf. In May of last year, the Plant Protection Quarantine Division of the USDA banned their importation into the United States for the foreseeable future because they carry a disease that is potentially devastating to California and Florida citrus trees. Stores were allowed to sell out what stock they had, but by now most have—a situation which gives a sadly ironic twist to the recent publication by

W. W. Norton of Fuchsia Dunlop's superb **SICHUAN COOKERY** (reviewed in SC•79)—with the new title **LAND OF PLENTY**. It may be an exaggeration to state, as one reader did in a recent e-mail, that their absence renders the book “virtually useless,” but it definitely crimps the authentic flavor of many of its dishes.

Well, you think, no matter—I have a jar of them buried in my spice cupboard. Ah, but here comes the twist of the knife: they are most likely travesties of the real thing. The Sichuanese say that its fragrance is so strong that you can rub it on your palm and then smell it on the back of your hand. The way to tell if yours is the superior kind, Dunlop writes, is to take a single husk and chew it gently once or twice before spitting it out. A few seconds later, “a cool tingly feeling will begin to creep over your lips and tongue.” I tried this with ours—from a very reputable supplier—and had the sensation of chewing a lightly mentholated wood chip. They weren't even batting in the same league.

There is a possible solution to this dilemma, if you live nowhere near citrus groves and are willing to run the risk. I found some very decent Sichuan peppercorns for sale at Seasoned Pioneers, a top-quality spice business in Liverpool, U.K., priced at \$2.60 for 12 grams (about half an ounce), plus shipping. The package arrived quickly and uneventfully—I had bought something else, too, and the customs slip was marked simply “culinary spices.” The peppercorns weren't quite as good as the sample Dunlop sent me, but they definitely had that tingle and a nice flavor. Case solved? Well, bear in mind that in this sort of situation what works for one person is no guarantee that it will for another. And while I *believe* that the only consequence of being detected is to have the consignment confiscated, I don't have any firm proof of this. Caveat emptor. **Seasoned Pioneers Ltd.**, 101 Summers Road, Brunswick Business Park, Liverpool, L3 4BJ, UK • 44 (0)151-709-9330 • WWW.SEASONEDPIONEERS.CO.UK.

Matt and I extend special thanks to Tang Shaoqing of the China National Rice Research Institute for answering my questions about the Chinese and rice and to H. Frederick Dale, of Senior Economist at the USDA's Economic Research Service for his generous permission to reproduce the photographs that appear on pages 11 and 14 of this issue.



The Art of Rice

Spirit and Sustenance in Asia

Roy W. Hamilton

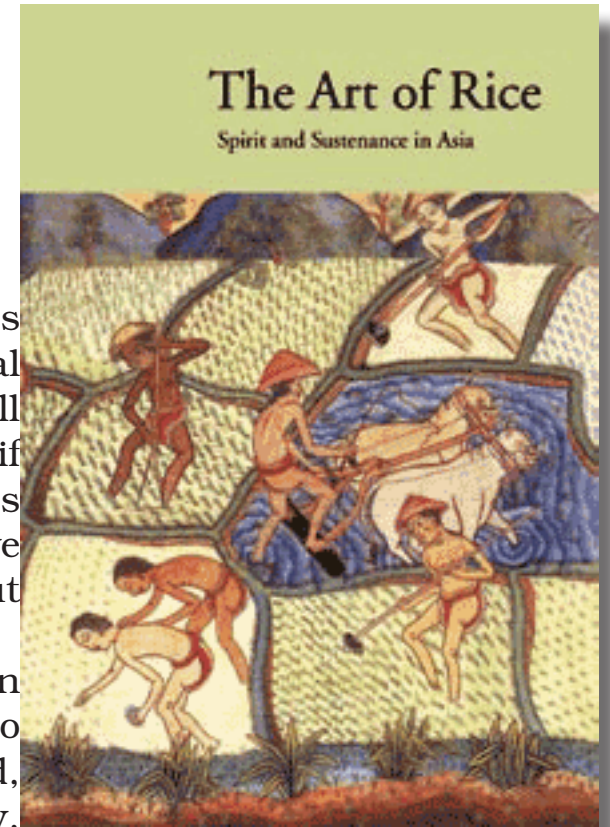
UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History • 552 pages • \$65

What do Brazil, Guatemala, Chile, and the United States have in common? What unites us as, in the continental sense, “Americans”? Not a hell of a lot, you might well think—not language, not geography, not culture. But if you wanted to find something that at once unites and differentiates us all, a viable possibility would be corn (*Zea mays*), the ways we grow, ferment, prepare, and eat it, and the many other uses we put it to apart from food.

The term “Asian” is equally as problematic as “American”—as can be frustratingly clear when trying to navigate an “Asian” cookbook. So many edges must be pared, so many awkward dissonances ignored, to make things neatly fit. But as this astonishing (and, admittedly, astonishingly hefty) book reveals, find the right prism and cacophony resolves itself into a myriad of illuminating patterns.

THE ART OF RICE* was published in conjunction with, and in accompaniment to, the largest exhibition ever mounted by the Fowler Museum of Cultural History in Los Angeles. Roy Hamilton, the curator, as well as the author/editor of this book, spent seven years researching, selecting, and acquiring a wealth of examples to illustrate, no, *illuminate*, how rice has penetrated every aspect of Asian culture, folklore, history, life. Among these are ceramics, statues of the rice goddess in her many guises, puppets, woodblock prints, farm tools, wood carvings, baskets, even several kimonos decorated with rice motifs.

*Available from the University of Washington Press, WWW.WASHINGTON.EDU/UWPRESS/, and major online booksellers.

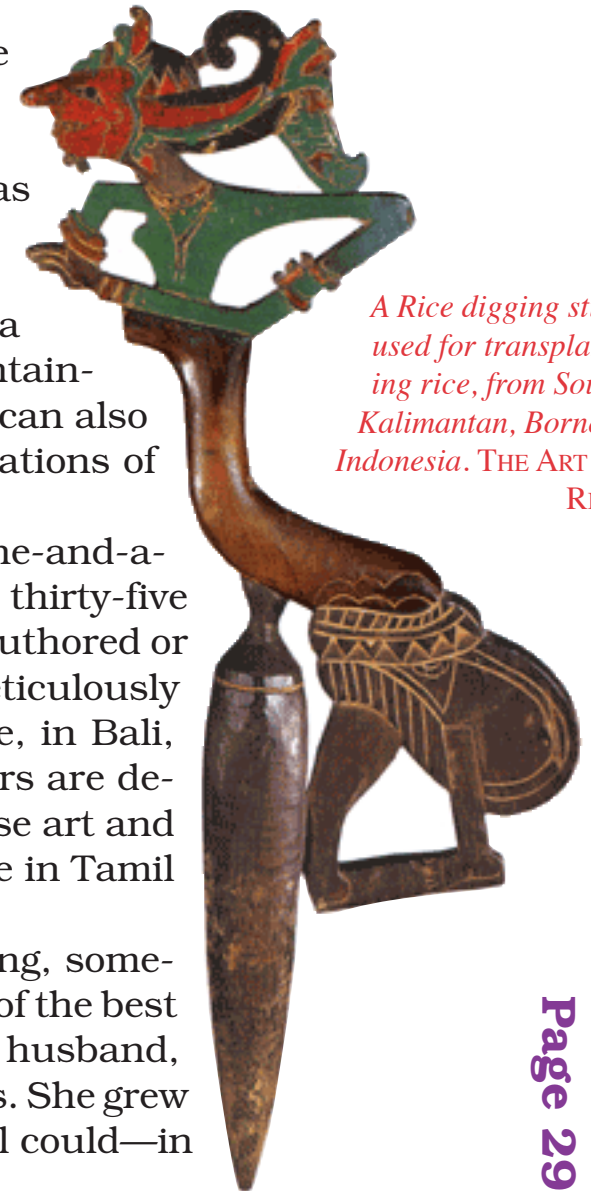


The book, thanks to its generous number of full-page color photographs, presents many of these objects, as well as pictures taken at rice ceremonies and of people all over Asia engaged in the array of tasks involved in the growing and harvesting of rice and the many crafts that are intimately connected to it.

While these may not have the same impact on the viewer as the actual exhibit, they are certainly worth the price of the book—at least for those with an interest in Asian life and arts and crafts. Pick the book up and you’ll find it almost impossible to put down, it has so many unexpected ways of holding your attention. These range from the dramatic and beautiful Javanese shadow puppets to the seemingly mundane photo of a platoon of *onggi* in the backyard of a Korean restaurant. *Onggi* are large ceramic jars used as storage containers for *ssal*, raw rice; *makkolli*, rice brew; and *soju*, rice liquor. They can also be found on Korean rooftops and cemented into the concrete foundations of private homes.

The photographs, however, are but the frosting on this five-pound, one-and-a-half-inch-thick cake. The heart of the book is the prose, specifically thirty-five essays especially commissioned for this volume (about a third were authored or co-authored by the editor). A good proportion of these consist of meticulously described and explained rice festivals, planting rituals, and the like, in Bali, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Others are devoted to single subjects: rice straw, the rice granary, sake in Japanese art and culture, images of rice in Imperial China, rice in the human life cycle in Tamil Nadu, India.

For me, the most engrossing essays discuss the often disturbing, sometimes disastrous effect of modernity on traditional rice cultures. One of the best of these is “Let’s Hope the Bile Is Good,” by Aurora Ammayao and her husband, Gene Hettel. Ammayao is a native of Banaue, Ifugao, in the Philippines. She grew up lending a hand in the rice fields and participating—so far as a girl could—in the rice ceremonies, at which her father often officiated.



A Rice digging stick used for transplanting rice, from South Kalimantan, Borneo, Indonesia. THE ART OF RICE

The essay's title refers to the bile sac of a chicken or pig, traditionally consulted for predictions about the rice harvest. But in this instance the augury was performed to reveal the prospects of the author's marriage (the signs were good, and the neighbors chanted, "We bear witness; we tasted the pig he [Gene] bought.")*

Like many rice cultures, that of the Ifugao depends on an elaborate system of rice terraces, the survival of which is increasingly threatened as people leave the land and abandon and forget the traditional ways. Despite the enormous difficulties, many rescue efforts are underway.

One of the more successful of these has been to document the old ways with small, handheld video cameras. Watching themselves on television has sparked an unexpected appreciation among the villagers, and especially among the young, for the life they lead. Marshall McLuhan may have been right all along. ♦



A Vietnamese water puppet rice barge. THE ART OF RICE

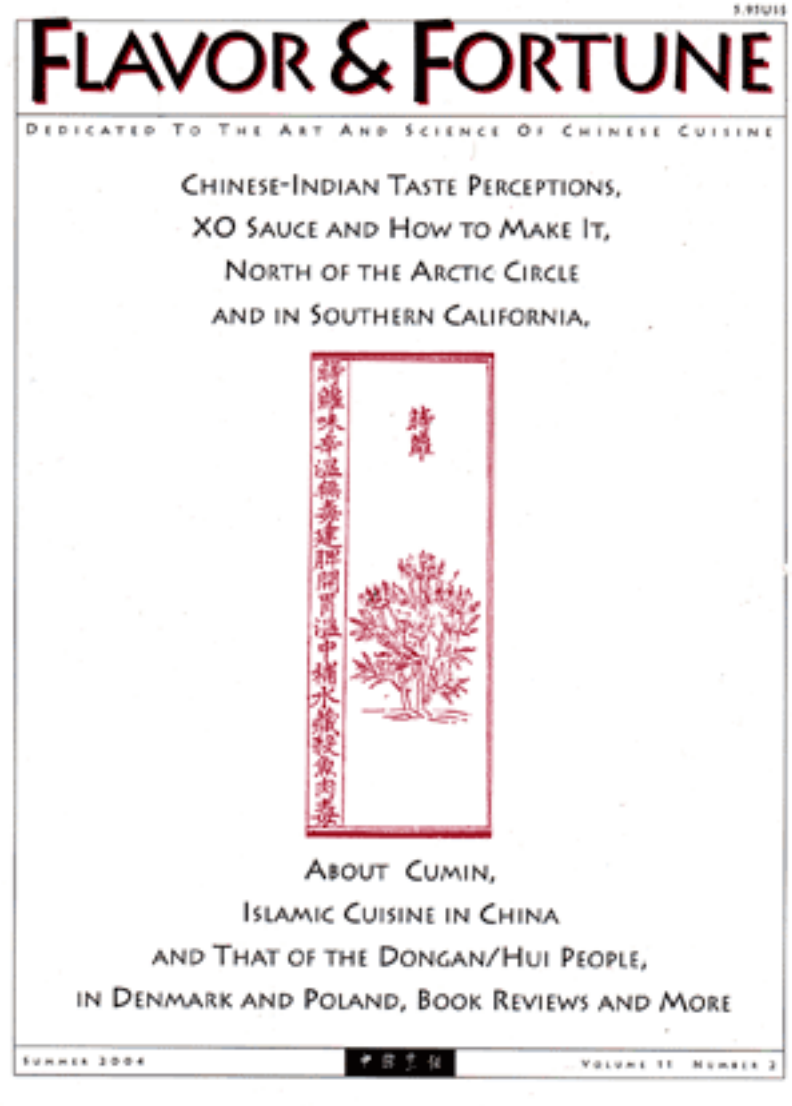
*When Gene asked what would happen if the signs were bad, one of Aurora's cousins answered, "You'd have to buy another pig."

FLAVOR AND FORTUNE

I HAD A LITTLE EPIPHANY recently when I opened up a copy of Flavor & Fortune—a feisty if little-known publication devoted to Chinese cuisine, edited by Dr. Jacqueline Newman—to an article on Chinese restaurants in Venezuela. After staring dumbfounded at the title for a moment, I realized that the very obscurity of the topic was a sure sign of a journal willing to go where more commercial publications never tread. In F&F, you'll find reviews of books like the handwritten, small-press-issued New Kyrgyz-English Culinary Dictionary, essays on the foodways of China's many minority populations (the Kyrgyz again), and general nose-poking into out-of-the-way corners to see what's to find.

Then there's the detail: the visit to the soy sauce factory, the lengthy essay on bamboo shoots and another on ancient Chinese culinary and medicinal uses of sugar; the ongoing series on Chinese vegetables and a similar one on Chinese spices. And every issue is packed with authentic recipes. In short, this is a must for the Chinese food enthusiast. A year (four 32-page issues) is \$19.50 in the US (see website for foreign rates). Make out checks to ISAAC (the sponsoring institution) and send to PO Box 91, Kings Park NY 11754

WWW.FLAVORANDFORTUNE.COM



The Website Truffle Hound

One of the most frustrating aspects of Internet searches in recent months has been the increasing number of bogus conduit sites that “capture” searches and then redirect them to anywhere that will pay a referral fee. Almost always, in my experience, this leads to a dead end—and a lot of wasted time. That’s because no matter how specific your search is, these sites are able to pretend to link to places that meet it, while actually sending you off to sites that only match one or two of your terms. Persistence can eventually win through, but not always, and almost certainly only after a great waste of time. Since I spend a lot of time online searching for kitchen equipment, imported ingredients, and other food-related stuff, I thought readers might welcome direct links to some of my favorite discoveries.



Japanese Knives. The two knives I use most in my kitchen are a plain 9-inch utility knife and a Chinese cleaver. Recently, however, I’ve been itching to own a *usuba*. This is a knife designed solely for slicing vegetables. The high-quality carbon steel is thinner and lighter than equivalent Western-made stainless-steel knives, so using it causes less wrist fatigue. The same lightness means that it is easy to balance correctly without a bolster. (These are commonly described as a safety feature, but in fact serve as a counterbalance to heavy Western blades and can intrude in a way that makes it impossible to sharpen the full length of the blade.)

Finally, the edge on a Japanese kitchen knife is traditionally ground on only one side, with the other side left flat or even hollowed a bit, like Japanese chisels. The blade tends to slant slightly to the left as it cuts, freeing the slices as it does. (This makes it ideal for mincing as well as slicing.) At the same time, since the cleaving pressure is applied solely to the slice, the blade simply glides down over the surface of the vegetable being sliced, leaving the cut surface smooth and glossy. This is why sliced radishes, carrots, etc., in Japanese restaurants are so attractive. The *usuba* is truly the ideal vegetable knife.

To enter the world of Japanese traditional knifemaking is to step back at least a

century, where blacksmiths work inside dark, sooty, primitive-looking foundries, individually crafting each blade. A photograph at one site, www.japanwoodworker.com, shows what looks like a husband-and-wife team, she wearing her apron. Under the light of a single bare bulb, he is holding the hot metal blade against a concrete block while she flattens it with a sledgehammer. You can't get much more artisanal than that!

From what little I knew about these knives, I believed them to be prohibitively expensive. This isn't entirely wrong. A top-of-the-line *yanagi* (sushi knife) from Suisin, a high-end maker, costs almost eight hundred dollars. (If price is no limit, they also sell a three-thousand-dollar *yanagi*—a price you would think more appropriate to a sword than a thin carbon-steel blade, no matter how carefully crafted.) However, if you're neither a sushi chef nor a knife enthusiast, these blades can be much more affordable. Suisin's utilitarian models sell for about a hundred dollars, and some Internet searching can find blades—especially for a *usuba*—for far less than that.

In fact, the model I initially chose cost a little over thirty. This was one of several Tosagata knives, made in Tosa on Shikoku Island, a very rural and forested area of Japan. These are crafted by farmer/blacksmiths who only work at the forge during the winter months, when their fields are covered with snow.

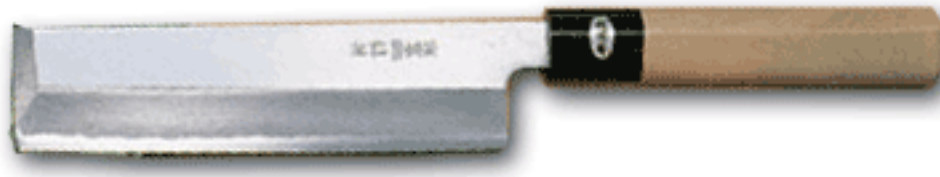
The knife is forged of *Aogami Hagane* (blue carbon steel) between two pieces of soft wrought iron. The blacksmith shapes the blade with a sledgehammer and then tempers it to Rockwell c63, making it extraordinarily hard. The forging marks are not polished off, in the belief that the unfinished surface protects the “soul” of the blade. If you admire simple honest craftsmanship, this knife will warm your heart. (Like all the knives discussed here, the blade is about six-and-a-half inches long.)



Unfortunately, just before I placed my order, a little further research (once you start on this subject, it's hard to stop) revealed that this sort of blade has to match

the hand that uses it, with most of them quite naturally made for right-handed users. Since I'm left-handed, I'd be slicing with the bevel facing the wrong way, thus defeating the whole purpose of the knife. So, reluctantly, I had to start my search all over.

I was able to find only one left-handed *usuba* online, a *hon kasumi usuba hocho*, although JAPANESE-KNIFE.COM will special-order left-hand versions of some of the many Japanese knives they sold. *Hon kasumi* refers to the process in which a layer of hard “white steel” is hand-forged onto a piece of softer wrought iron, which leaves a characteristic misty lamination line between the two metals.



I wasn't as attracted to this *usuba* as I was to the previous one. For one thing, it cost twice as much; for another, it looks trickier to use—you'd think its pronounced chisel shape would make it harder to see exactly where you were cutting. And while the knife is very sharp its edge is rather fragile; the description at Japan Woodworker warns against using it to cut “hard rind vegetables.” In other words, it sounds a bit too specialized and care-needy to be allowed into my kitchen. (If you're interested, I found the best price [\$74.95] for this particular *usuba* at WWW.BLADEGALLERY.COM.)

As for myself, well, my heart had been stolen by another knife at Japan Woodworker, a double-beveled *dojo kakugata nakiri*. “*Nakiri*” indicates a knife for home use, while “*kakugata*” designates the cleaver shape (and may, although I'm even less certain about this, also indicate that it is beveled on both sides—which it is).

Dojo blades are made by forge-welding a core of high-carbon blue steel between two layers of stainless steel. Since the blue steel provides the edge, the steel is beveled (i.e., angled) to expose it on both sides, and, consequently, unlike the *usuba*, it is also sharpened on both sides. This means it can be wielded ambidextrously (Matt can use it, too!), and the stainless steel lamination won't stain. The carbon-steel edge, tempered to Rockwell c62, is fiercely sharp and stays that way for some time. And at

just under fifty dollars, it seems a terrific knife for the money.

Even so, unlike the *usuba*, there's nothing unusual or distinctive about the way it slices. So, at this point, here's where I am: totally uncertain as whether I've talked myself **out** of buying a *usuba*, or **into** buying a *dojo kakugata nakiri*.

RECOMMENDED LINKS

The Japanese Woodworker Catalog. An informative site as well as a good source for Japanese knives and kitchen equipment (don't miss the hyper-expensive and totally weird Finnish garlic peeler/chopper), as well as woodworking and gardening tools. They also sell camellia oil, the traditional Japanese way to keep carbon blades from rusting.

Hida Tool. Another good source for Japanese kitchen knives, woodworking tools, and tools specifically designed to work with bamboo.

Japanese-Knife.com. Worth visiting for the Zorro-like flash intro page alone, this site is loaded with Japanese knives, information, and lots of related material, including copies of the DVD **THE CHEF'S EDGE**, a 48-minute film devoted to the artisanal craft of Japanese knifemaking.

Suisin Knife English Website. The Suisin Knife was founded in 1990 by Junichiro Aoki, a young and energetic knife craftsman, who produces knives that combine traditional quality with modern designs. Lots of interest here.

BladeGallery.com. A site devoted to custom-made blades from around the world. Navigating it can be confusing when searching for particular knives, but perseverance pays off.

Dieter Schmid - Fine Tools. This is a German site selling woodworking tools and a selection of high-quality knives. The reason to visit it, though, is for the comprehensive directions for sharpening Japanese blades, which—especially the single-beveled ones—requires some instruction.

