

# Food is Heaven

All Chinese are born gourmets. Eating is their favourite pastime. Rich and poor, Chinese people enjoy good food, cheap and expensive alike. Not only do they enjoy eating, they also like to talk about food, comment on restaurants, boast of their culinary skills.... Food is just an integral part of Chinese culture.

Chinese concepts of food are very interesting, if not incredible. All foods, for instance, are by nature divided into two main categories according to Chinese traditional medicine: 'hot' and 'cold' (not in the thermal sense, nor spicy). In between, some are graded as 'warm', 'cool' or 'neutral', depending on their 'hotness' or 'coldness'. 'Hot' food causes thirst and will probably damage the throat and skin if too much is taken. 'Cold' food causes problems to the stomach and should be avoided by those with weak digestion. Examples of 'hot' food include lychee, mango and spicy foods while

melon, American ginseng and bitter foods are typically 'cold'. The Chinese believe in food curing. Different foods have different medicinal or remedial properties. The key to good health is simply to strike the right balance between the two categories in one's diet.

Food plays a central role in many traditional Chinese festivals in that it helps bring people together. Like at the Lunar New Year, family members, male and female, young and old, gather around at home and all help in the preparation of snacks and feasts. Similarly,

a cornucopia of good foods tops the list of gifts exchanged among relatives and friends during family visits. It can be any good food, just name it. The mere presence of food is almost enough to put everyone in a festive mood.

At the day-to-day level, Chinese speech is notably characterised by its frequent reference to food. In Hong Kong, the most common greeting among the Chinese must be: "Have you had your meal?" This sort of greeting may sound intrusive by western standards, but in the Chinese community, it is just a way of starting a conversation much the same as saying "How're you going?" in Australia.

The abundance of food elements featured in Chinese proverbs comes as no surprise. Very often, Cantonese of the older generation like to say to the youngsters, "I have tasted more salt than you have eaten rice" in boasting about their experience while accusing the

younger generation of their ignorance. "Sipping vinegar" is used to describe a jealous lover. In Hong Kong, when you hear that a gentleman has "eaten a lemon", you should be sympathetic because he has been turned down by a lady whom he courts.

Apart from satisfying the palate, food does the Chinese the world of good by serving medical and social purposes. Now you can probably understand why the Chinese are so concerned about food. To say "food is heaven" is no exaggeration at all.

