

China 360

Cuisines across China: Traditions and new implications

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China enjoys a rich food history and food culture, with an astonishing diversity of cuisines. Despite a myriad of changes in China over the past 30 years, the central role played by food and cuisine in social and business life has remained constant. Dining is also a critical part of China's business culture. (For more, see *China 360* Issue #3 '**Gan Bei: Mastering Chinese Dinner Banquets**'¹)

It can be challenging to sample and learn about authentic Chinese cuisine outside China. The variety of ingredients and cooking styles involved in Chinese cuisine ensures that no one can truly say they have sampled every local specialty and dish.

Yet, as business travel to every region of China becomes both more convenient and more necessary, it is important to understand some of the fundamentals of eating in China, and some of the key regional variations and major cuisines. Food is also a universal topic of conversation in China, and one which your local hosts or contacts will be keen to discuss: a bit of background knowledge can be a big help.

This issue of *China 360* explains some of the basics about eating in China, and looks at some of the more important regional cuisines. Also covered are some of the issues concerning food safety and supply chains in China that are creating new business opportunities for local and foreign companies. **Bon appétit!**

1. <http://www.kpmg.com/CN/en/issuesAndInsights/ArticlesPublications/Newsletters/China-360/Pages/China-360-Issue3-201211-Chinese-dinner-banquets.aspx>

CHINESE STAPLE FOODS

In China, the 'anchor' element of a meal is not the protein, it is the grain-based carbohydrate, the 'staple' food (主食 – zhǔshí); without such foods, no meal in China can be considered complete. Most Westerners assume rice would fill this role throughout China. While this is true in much of the country, there are regions where rice is not king.



Rice

Rice is traditionally grown in the southern areas of China, where water resources are more plentiful; it is now widely grown in the north, especially in northeast China. It is the main staple in those regions and can be served in a number of ways:

- **Rice 米饭 (mǐfàn)** – Plain steamed white rice. Rice in China is usually short-grain and 'stickier' than long-grain rice varieties, such as basmati.
- **Fried rice 炒饭 (chǎofàn)** – There are several regional styles, such as Yángzhōu fried rice.
- **Congee/Porridge 粥 (zhōu)** – Congee is a versatile dish and a common breakfast food (usually eaten with savory pickles). The addition of beef, fish, preserved eggs or other ingredients turns congee into a meal. In the south, congee is cooked into a relatively thick porridge, while in the north, rice congee is thinner.

You can also encounter rice made into large savory dumplings wrapped in leaves (粽子 – zòngzi), rice noodles (米粉 – mǐ fěn), and sticky round 'tāngyuán' (汤圆) dumplings made from rice flour, usually sweet and served in soup.

HAVE YOU EATEN?

你吃饭了吗

The question: "Have you eaten?" (你吃饭了吗 – nǐ chīfàn le ma) is a universal informal greeting in China, similar to saying "How's it going?" in English



Wheat-based

Wheat is another main staple food in China. Wheat is mainly grown in the north. In addition to noodles (discussed later), other popular wheat-based staple foods include:

- **Dumplings 饺子 (jiǎozi)** – thin dough wrappers (made from flour and water) are filled with a savory mixture, such as minced vegetable and meat or seafood, and sealed to make a bite-sized packet. The variety of fillings is endless, but Chinese cabbage and pork is the 'classic' ingredient. Jiǎozi can be boiled (shuǐ jiǎo), steamed (zhēng jiǎo) or pan-fried (pot-stickers or guō tiē).
- **Stuffed buns 包子 (bāozi)** – bāozi are steamed buns with a filling. The range of fillings can be similar to those of dumplings. Bāozi are a common breakfast food but can also be served as part of a meal.
- **Steamed buns 馒头 (mántou)** – mántou, often referred to as Chinese steamed bun/bread, are typically eaten as a staple in northern parts of China. They are usually shaped like a dome or a rounded loaf, and their size can range from bite-sized to the size of a fist.



Noodles

Chinese noodles come in an impressive variety of sizes, shapes, and textures. They can be served fried, in soup, or as a cold dish. Typically noodles are made from wheat, but rice noodles, or noodles made from mung beans are also popular in many regions of the country.

Pulled noodles 拉面 – (lā miàn) are a popular type of noodle in China. Lā (拉) means to pull or stretch; miàn (面) means noodle. Lā miàn is traditionally made by stretching and folding the dough into strands by hand.

NOODLES ON THE RUN

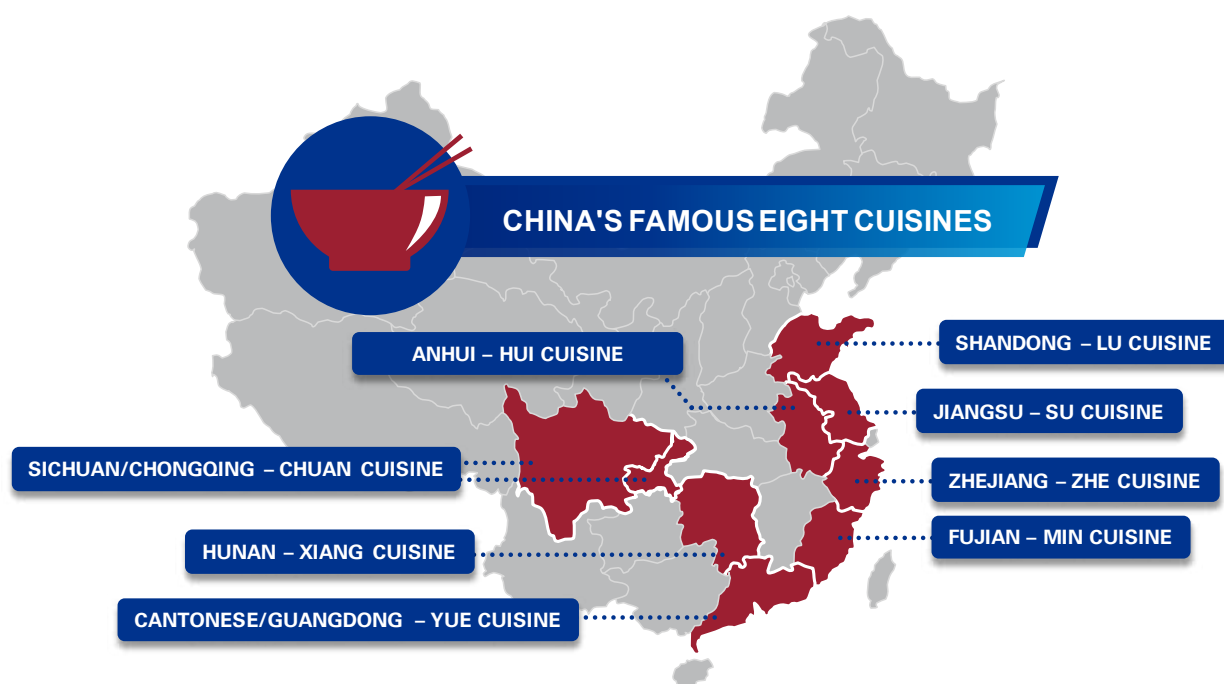
Last year, Chinese diners consumed over 42 billion packets of instant ramen noodles 方便面 (fāngbiànmiàn), representing 43 percent of the global market.² That's around 30 packets per person per year!

2. <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/eats/china-eats-noodles-article-1.1083364>

THE FAMOUS EIGHT CUISINES

Most people outside China are familiar with a few of the main cuisines of China, primarily Cantonese or perhaps Sichuan or Hunan food. In fact, there are eight 'classic' cuisines in China.

Cuisine	Chinese name	Taste	Specialties
Shandong	Lǔ	Salty	Seafood – scallops, prawns, squid, sea cucumbers
Cantonese	Yuè	Slightly sweet, not heavily spiced	Braised, stewed and sautéed dishes. Seafood dishes including steamed whole fish Dim Sum – variety of bite-sized portions of food served in bamboo steamer baskets or on small plates
Sichuan	Chuān	Numbing hot / spicy / sour	Hot pot – meat and vegetables boiled in a pot, in either spicy oil or soup Chuan – meat and vegetables on a skewer, boiled with various spices in a pot
Hunan	Xiāng	Dry hot / spicy / aromatic	Known for its liberal use of chili peppers, shallots, and garlic. Famous for being dry hot 干辣 (gan la)
Anhui	Huī	Natural	Uses local ingredients from mountainous areas such as frog, mushroom, bayberry, tea leaves
Jiangsu	Sū	Salty / sweet	Six distinct styles covering different areas of Jiangsu province. Emphasis on soups, fish, and duck
Fujian	Mǐn	Sweet and sour / spicy and sweet	Soups are a specialty. Combines mountain and sea ingredients
Zhejiang	Zhè	Moderate saltiness, fresh	Features seafood, fresh water fish. Bamboo shoots and even tea leaves feature as ingredients



Source: KPMG analysis

Below three of these eight classical cuisines are introduced: Cantonese and Sichuan cuisines, which are well-known outside China, and Shandong cuisine, which is less well-known.

Cantonese cuisine

Cantonese (actually Guangdong or 'Yuè') cuisine is relatively well-known outside China, due to historical emigration from Guangdong Province.

Despite its location in the south, Cantonese food is generally not spicy. Seafood is featured heavily in this cuisine, as well as poultry, beef and pork. There is an emphasis on freshness, while spices and flavorings are light and restrained. Stewing, braising, and steaming are common cooking techniques.

Dim sum is also a significant element of Cantonese cuisine. A traditional dim sum breakfast or lunch includes various types of steamed buns, dumplings, and rice noodle rolls. Dessert dim sum is also available and many places offer the customary egg tart. Dim sum is also well-known for the unique way it is served in some restaurants, where ready-to-serve dim sum dishes are carted around the restaurant for customers to choose, while seated at their tables.

Dish	Chinese	Characters
Dry-Fried Beef and Noodles	gān chǎo niú hé	干炒牛河
Soy Sauce Chicken	chǐyóu jī	豉油鸡
Dace (fish) Balls	língyú qiú	鯪鱼球
Steamed Frog on a Lotus Leaf	héyè zhēng tián jī	荷叶蒸田鸡
Shark Fin Soup	yúchì gēng	鱼翅羹
Sea Cucumber (Hoi Sam)	hǎishēn	海参

Highlights



- Well-known outside China
- Generally not spicy
- Seafood is featured heavily
- Emphasis on freshness
- Spices and flavorings – light
- Common cooking techniques – stewing, braising, and steaming.
- Famous for – Dim sum



Sichuan cuisine

Sichuan (or 'Chuān') cuisine is one of the most popular and widely served cuisines in China. Sichuan cuisine is famous for its hot/spicy or sour flavors, along with liberal use of pepper and chili. Key ingredients include poultry, pork, beef, fish, vegetables, and tofu.

Sichuan cuisine tends to use quick frying, quick stir-frying, dry braising, and dry stewing. In quick frying and quick stir-frying, the food is fried very quickly in a hot wok.

Sichuan peppercorns are found in many dishes – combined with chili peppers they make the dish 'numbingly' spicy. Chengdu and Chongqing are the best places to go for authentic Sichuan cuisine, including the famous Sichuan 'hotpot' (火锅 – huǒguō). Diners cook slices of meat and vegetables in a central pot. The pot contains boiling oil-based soup, usually very spicy, although some pots have two sections to cater to diners with different tolerance for 'heat'.

Dish	Chinese	Characters
Sichuan Hotpot	Sichuān huǒguō	四川火锅
Husband and Wife Lung Slices (slices of beef and lungs seasoned with chili oil)	fūqī fèi piàn	夫妻肺片
Fried Bean Curd and Beef with Chilli	málà tàng	麻辣烫
Kung Pao Chicken (diced chicken fried with peanuts/cashews)	gōngbǎo jī dīng	宫保鸡丁
Sesame Oil Chicken	máyóu jī	麻油鸡
Boiled Fish with Pickled Chinese Cabbage	suāncàiyú	酸菜鱼

Highlights



Most popular in China

Hot / spicy / sour flavors

Poultry, pork, beef, fish, tofu

Liberal use of pepper and chili

Common cooking techniques – quick frying, quick stir-frying, dry braising, and dry stewing

Famous for – 'hotpot'



Shandong cuisine

Shandong Cuisine (or 'Lǔ' cuisine) originated from the native cooking styles of East China's Shandong Province, with a history and culture dating back to the Qin Dynasty (221 BC to 207 BC). This type of cuisine is generally referred to as the 'mandarin' cuisine of the north. These regions were greatly influenced by Manchurian and Moslem cuisines and are famous for their aromatic lamb dishes.

Shandong is a coastal province; hence seafood is a notable ingredient of Lǔ cuisine, including scallops, prawns, clams, sea cucumbers, and squid. Shandong cuisine is popular not only in the coastal province of Shandong, but also in the northeast areas of China and Beijing. Shandong cuisine is well-known for its unique flavor and artisanry, and is more inclined to emphasize the freshness of ingredients than other cuisines in China. The taste tends to be on the salty side, but diners appreciate it for its tenderness, rich taste, and crispness.

Cuisine	Chinese	Characters
Diced Pork Cooked in a Pot	tánzi ròu	坛子肉
Lungs in Milk Soup	nǎi tāng dài fèi	奶汤焗肺
Sweet and Sour Yellow River Carp	tángcù huánghé lǚyú	糖醋黄河鲤鱼
Chicken Juice Shrimps	jīzhī xiārén	鸡汁虾仁
King Prawns Stewed in Brown Sauce	hóngshāo dàxiā	红烧大虾
Abalone Consommé (in Broth)	qīngtāng bǎoyú	清汤鲍鱼
Quick-fried mutton slices with scallions	cōng bào yáng ròu	葱爆羊肉

Highlights



Greatly influenced by Manchurian and Moslem cuisines

Generally referred to as the 'mandarin' cuisine of the north

Emphasize the freshness of ingredients

Seafood is a notable ingredient

Appreciated for its tenderness, rich taste, and crispness

Famous for – aromatic lamb dishes



THE DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSPORTING AND DELIVERING FOOD IN CHINA

The local cuisines are some of the freshest food in China, as they are produced largely from local ingredients. However, since more food is being imported and there is growing demand all across China for greater diversity of local and international cuisines, supply chains are being extended and stressed. In addition, basic transportation methods are often still used in China to transport food and beverages, exposing food to various types of contamination or spoilage.

The issue of safety in food logistics is recognized as an urgent regional problem. One analyst³ outlined that by 2030, Asia will face a “food train-wreck” unless it can immediately address five critical issues: time taken from harvest to plate, cost of food, rates of spoilage, rates of contamination, and sustainable food production.

In China, these issues are exacerbated by a number of factors. First, since supply chains are extending, this is resulting in food being transported longer distances across the country and contributing to higher spoilage rates. Second, new logistics

providers lack the skills, safety, and awareness to handle some food products. There are more than 15 million sub-contractors for logistics and delivery in China: their level of food safety awareness, capability, and compliance may differ substantially. Third, within China there are critical challenges with last mile delivery, as food is not necessarily delivered across the country in high quality assets. Fourth, food safety frameworks in China are mostly reactive in nature, where other more developed markets have established preventative measures to identify and contain contamination before food products are released for consumption. Finally, penalties for lack of safety enforcement in China have yet to make an impact in the local food manufacturing and preparation market.

To prevent a 2030 food crisis, considerations regarding the process of food transport and delivery must be addressed, especially in light of the next 20 years of China’s urbanization, where the relocation of many millions of people will further challenge supply chains.



3. In September 2012, Douglas H. Brooks from the Asian Development Bank

POLICY-RELATED IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FOOD INDUSTRY

Following the 2008 milk scandal that affected more than 300,000 people, consumers are becoming more educated and demanding more accountability and regulation for food producers in China. Other concerns, such as mislabeling of food and the distribution of unsafe products and food decay have also been platforms for policy changes.

In 2012, the Chinese government addressed such concerns and published its Food Safety Plan for 2012-2017, with the intention of cleaning up inefficiencies in food quality and implementing national industry standards. This ambitious overhaul of the food regulatory system in China targets to meet World Health Organization (WHO) food safety standards by 2015, and will allow for the development of China's cold chain food logistics industry. Currently, only around 15 percent of perishable food (such as fruit, fish, vegetables, and meat) are transported via cold chain logistics in China, compared with 90 percent in more developed nations.⁴ The ongoing development of China's cold chain logistics will effectively reduce the percentage of food decay in transport, and will increase food safety and transparency around China.

The number one objective for policy changes to support food safety is to maintain integrity and quality of food and beverage products; therefore the industry needs to:

- measure and confirm the integrity and quality of food products across all stages of the supply chain
- extend quality control procedures to trading partners and suppliers
- be able to demonstrate the quality of raw materials right back to the start of the food value chain.

These steps may prove very difficult in industries such as dairy, where there is an absence of testing procedures and capability at the farm level. The good news is that there are various industry solutions that have been adopted in some mature markets.

4. <http://www.globalintelligence.com/insights/all/implication-of-china-s-food-safety-plan-for-food-and-logistics-industry-players>

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These practices, via joint venture or M&A, can be leveraged and applied in China. Many multinational companies with food manufacturing facilities in China have supported reasonably good food transportation practices.

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Thus, in the future one could expect to see more food services related joint ventures and M&A activity, to secure the safety of food and better serve China's growing middle class – an increasingly safety conscious group of consumers demanding safe and high-quality food.

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