

[Brandywine Table]

Feast Among Friends

A GROUP GATHERS TO MAKE CHINESE NEW YEAR AN ANNUAL CULINARY TRADITION

Alyssa Thayer

IT WAS 29 YEARS AGO WHEN A GROUP OF EIGHT friends gathered for the first time to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Their elaborate, multi-course meal would be the first of many, stretching deep into the evening before the last courses were finished.

Today, the group still gathers annually for their good luck feast, albeit with fewer courses and a much earlier end time.

Liz Girvin-Marcus, the organizer of the event, has always loved hosting. When she moved to a new place (first New York City, then Boston and the Philadelphia suburbs), she used it as a way to forge new relationships. “Food is an invitation. People can be hesitant to host, but they always like to be invited,” she says.

Liz’s husband, David, who worked in the food industry, would often talk about lavish banquets he attended in Chinatown. After years of hearing of these festive affairs, Liz thought, “I love Chinese



food. Why don’t we try to make some and celebrate the Chinese New Year?” And so it began.

It started small, just one other couple, a noodle dish and stir fry. But slowly the group grew and so did the menu.

For a few years Liz did all the preparations. “It was like the Olympics of cooking,” she remembers. She would begin pouring through cookbooks months in advance. The week-of, she’d venture down to Chinatown to gather ingredients. Finally, in the days leading up to the dinner, she’d begin chopping, mincing and prepping for hours.

As with any longstanding tradition, it shifted over time. “As we’ve gotten older, we’ve paired down the number of dishes,” says Liz. The group kept the recipes they loved and dropped the ones they didn’t, and group members began taking on parts of the meal. One friend perfected sweet and sour soup, while another couple created the winning dessert combination of traditional almond cookies and refreshing citrus sorbet.

Deep fryers and rice cookers made preparation more efficient (and reliable). And about ten years ago, they began ordering a centerpiece protein, Peking Duck, from a local restaurant (Sang Kee Asian Bistro in Wynnewood) and never looked back.

There were plenty of laughs and lessons learned along the way—like the time a grease fire broke out thanks to an unstable wok, and when they ended up deep frying spring rolls in the snow. And there was the memorable year when they prepared and devoured Ken Hom’s fried cashews, only to realize they weren’t hungry for the other courses.

As she thinks back on this tradition and the meaning of the holiday, Liz says warmly, “It’s about being with family and food. And this group is truly our chosen family.”

Hot and Sour Soup

Liz says you can tell how good a recipe is by how many grease and food stains there are on the page—the more the better. This recipe for hot and sour soup enjoyed for many years is from one member’s graduate school cooking class or “cooking therapy.”

Find the typed recipe on our website, CountyLinesMagazine.com.



Chinese Broccoli in Oyster Sauce

Chinese broccoli, or gai lan, is a deep green vegetable with flat leaves, long thin stalks and smaller florets. It has a slight bitterness that subsides when cooked. If you can’t find it, substitute broccolini (as seen in photo), regular broccoli or bok choy in a pinch.



Good Luck Eats . . .

The Chinese New Year—aka the Spring Festival or Lunar New Year—has a whole host of traditional foods and customs. All of them are meant to help usher in a prosperous New Year. Many of the foods have names that are similar to a saying or greeting.

Spring Rolls – These crowd-pleasers are said to represent wealth, as they closely resemble bars of gold. They are a savory mix of meat and vegetables rolled into a thin dough wrapper and deep fried to golden perfection.

Fish – Similar in Chinese to the word for leftover, fish (often prepared and served whole) represents having abundance to carry over into the New Year. There’s significance given to the type of fish, how it’s prepared and how it’s served, depending on how deeply you want to dive (pun intended).

Dumplings (Jiaozi) – Their purse shape also symbolizes prosperity. Word to the wise, make sure dumplings are well pleated and stuffed. Flat purses are not a good omen!

Nian Gao – The name of this sticky, soft cake sounds like the words for tall and is said to represent achieving or rising higher in the coming year. It’s made with traditional ingredients including glutinous rice flour and brown sugar bricks.

Noodles (long ones) – Many noodle dishes are found at almost every Chinese celebration. While the type of preparation can vary, the length of noodles does not. Long noodles represent a long and prosperous life.

- 2 lb. Chinese broccoli*
- 1½ T. vegetable oil
- 2 scallions, finely chopped
- 1½ T. grated ginger
- 3 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 3 T. oyster sauce
- 1½ T. light soy sauce
- 1 T. Shaoxing rice wine
- 1 tsp. sugar
- 1 tsp. sesame oil
- ½ C. chicken broth
- 2 tsp. cornstarch

***Note:** The larger the stalks, the more fibrous. If large and tough, peel the outside layer of stalk off before preparing.

Wash broccoli, chopping off and discarding tough ends. Cut diagonally into ¾-inch pieces. Blanch in boiling water for 2 minutes, drain and refresh in cold water to keep vibrant green color and stop the cooking. Dry completely.

Heat a wok over high heat. Add the oil and heat until very hot (should be shimmering). Stir-fry scallions, ginger and garlic for 10 seconds. Add broccoli. Cook until heated through.

Whisk together remaining ingredients in a small bowl. Pour into wok, and stir until the sauce has thickened. Toss to coat the broccoli and serve warm.

Serves 6.



Tips for Feasting with Friends

Not only is it a big job for one person to do all the cooking for a group gathering, it can be more fun to include others in the preparations. Here are a few tips and tricks to create your own super-club style event.

Take the Lead – Successful dinners have someone at the helm. This person can coordinate menus (see below), set up times and communicate changes. Liz says people want to participate, but they just need a little direction.

Set a Date – Trying to navigate schedules for busy people is tough. Choose a date and frequency well in advance and stick to it, even if it means you don't get everyone in the group every time.

Pick a Theme – Choosing a new cuisine makes the event more exciting and helps people think outside the box. It also keeps the menu cohesive so you don't get a potluck hodge podge.

Make a Menu – Just as we balance flavors in a dish, we should also balance the components of a meal—sweet/savory, rich/refreshing. Each element plays a part.

Ditch Perfection – Often people will delay hosting until they have acquired the perfect china, house or skills. Liz encourages us to find the courage to start where we are.

Know Your Audience – Have a vegetarian in the group? Add plant-based proteins. Know someone who doesn't like to cook? Assign them a dish along with suggestions of restaurants with to-go menus.

Pickled Vegetables

Liz prepares a batch of these for the table, as they offer some fresh acidity to the meal. To lighten the cooking burden on the day, prepare ahead of time and serve chilled day-of.

- 1 turnip (approx. $\frac{2}{3}$ lb.)
- 1 medium carrot
- $\frac{1}{3}$ lb. green cabbage or cauliflower
- 10 slices fresh ginger root
- 2 small dried hot peppers, finely chopped
- 2 tsp. salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ C. sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$ C. white vinegar or rice vinegar

Cut turnip, carrot and cabbage (or cauliflower) into bite-sized pieces. Combine in a large bowl. Add ginger root, red peppers and salt. Mix well. Cover and let stand at room temperature for 6 hours.

Lightly rinse vegetables with cold water and drain well. Add sugar and vinegar. Mix well. Cover and refrigerate for 6 hours. Serve cold.

Keeps in the fridge for up to 1 week.

Serves 6–8.

Lovebirds Shrimp

This recipe serves up two delicious preparations of shrimp in one dish and has become a perennial favorite among the group. One of the best parts of preparing new cuisines is the opportunity to try new ingredi-

ents—in this case it's the complex acidity of Shaoxing rice wine and the warm heat of chili bean paste.



- 1 T. cornstarch
- $\frac{1}{2}$ egg white, beaten
- 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. large shrimp, peeled and deveined
- High heat oil for deep frying
- $\frac{1}{4}$ lb. snow peas, ends trimmed
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. sugar
- 1 scallion, finely chopped
- 1 tsp. ginger, finely chopped
- 1 T. light soy sauce
- 1 T. Shaoxing rice wine*
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. sesame oil
- 1 T. chili bean paste (toban jiang)
- 1 T. tomato puree

***Note:** *Its amber color differs from clear rice wine and has a more complex flavor.*

Combine cornstarch with enough water to make a paste. Stir in egg white and a pinch of salt. Then add shrimp, stirring.

Fill a wok one-quarter full of oil and heat until a piece of bread fries golden brown in 15 seconds. Add shrimp and cook for 1 minute, stirring to separate. Remove from wok with a slotted spoon as soon as the color changes, then drain. Pour the oil out, reserving 1 tablespoon.

Reheat the reserved oil over high heat until very hot and stir-fry the snow peas with the salt and sugar for 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ minutes. Remove and place in center of serving platter.

Reheat the wok again and stir-fry the scallion and ginger for a few seconds. Add the shrimp, soy sauce and rice wine, and stir-fry for 30 additional seconds. Then add sesame oil. Transfer half the shrimp to one end of the serving platter.

Add the chili bean paste and tomato puree to the remaining shrimps, blend well, tossing to coat. Then transfer to the other end of the platter.

Serves 4.

Chicken with Fish Flavor

Asian recipes are filled with interesting word puns and naming conventions. Although the “fishy” name could seem off-putting, Liz assures us that “the dish does not taste like fish; it means the chicken is served in a sauce that is also used for fish.”

- 1 T. egg white
- Salt to taste
- 2 tsp. sugar
- 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. cornstarch
- 6 dried black mushrooms
- 2 T. chili paste with garlic
- 2 T. light soy sauce
- 1 T. dry sherry or Shaoxing rice wine
- 1 C. shredded bamboo shoots*
- 8 small long green hot peppers, julienned
- 3 T. fresh ginger, peeled, thinly sliced
- $\frac{1}{2}$ C. carrot rounds, thinly sliced
- 4 cloves garlic, flattened but left whole
- Peanut, vegetable or corn oil
- $\frac{1}{3}$ C. plus 3 T. water
- 1 tsp. sesame oil

***Note:** *These are most commonly found canned. Substitutions could include canned or fresh water chestnuts or sliced jicama.*

Put shredded chicken in a large bowl. Add egg white, salt, $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. sugar and 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. cornstarch. Blend well. Refrigerate for at least 30 minutes.

Put the mushrooms in a bowl and add boiling water to cover. Let stand 15–30 minutes. Drain, cut off tough stems, and cut caps into shreds. Set aside.

Combine chili paste with garlic, soy sauce, 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. sugar, wine and salt to taste. Set aside.

Add bamboo shoots, fresh hot peppers, ginger and carrots to the mushrooms. Set aside.

Prepare smashed garlic and set aside.

In a wok heat 1 cup oil and add chicken shreds, stirring to separate. Cook 30 seconds, stirring, over high heat. Drain immediately.

To the same pan add 2 T. fresh oil and garlic. Cook, stirring, over high heat for 30 seconds. Add the mushroom mixture and cook, stirring, over high heat for about 50 seconds. Add the chili paste mixture and $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of water. Stir and cook over high heat about 2 minutes. Then add the chicken and cook, stirring, about 30 seconds.

Blend the remaining 2 tsp. of cornstarch with the 3 T. water and stir it in to thicken. Cook for about 1 minute, stirring.

Pour into a serving dish. Drizzle with the sesame oil.

Serves 6.

Almond Cookies

These light cookies are a perfect treat to wrap up your “good luck” dinner—and in our opinion much tastier than a fortune cookie.

Orange sorbet or granita makes an excellent accompaniment and a refreshing bright note after the multi-course dinner.



- 1 C. shortening (don't use butter; Crisco works well)
- 1 C. sugar
- 1 egg, beaten
- $\frac{1}{2}$ C. ground, blanched almonds
- 1 tsp. almond extract
- 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ C. all-purpose flour
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt
- 36 blanched almonds (wholes or halves)
- 1 egg yolk
- 1 T. water

Grease baking sheets and set aside. Preheat oven to 350°.

Mix shortening and sugar in a large bowl until smooth. Add egg, ground almonds and almond extract. Mix well.

In a separate bowl, sift together flour, baking powder and salt. Gradually add to egg mixture, mixing well. Dough will be stiff.

Shape dough into 36 small balls. Place balls 3–4 inches apart on greased baking sheets. Place an almond on top of each ball then press with the palm of your hand to make a 2-inch disc shape.

Mix egg yolk with water in a small cup to make a glaze. Brush each cookie with glaze and sprinkle with sugar. Place in preheated oven to bake for approximately 20 minutes or until lightly golden.

Cool on wire racks.

Makes 36 cookies. ♦

Alyssa Thayer found her love of food at an early age, frolicking around her mother's organic farm and eating her weight in berries and snap peas each summer. She is a self-proclaimed urban farm girl, whose mission is to bring inspired ideas to life, passionate people together, and good food to every table.



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