



Flavor Bites: “Made for China”

Creating nuanced flavors for this booming market

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The Chinese flavor market has integrated a number of outside influences, but it still quite strongly reflects the traditional cuisine.

Many years ago I was hooked on a cult TV series called *The Water Margin*. The show had obviously been made on a shoestring budget—the production values were dubious and the English language dubbing was even more so. However, none of that mattered because the combination of humor and drama, plus the interwoven plot lines, made all 26 episodes of the series unmissable. The show was based on a 1,000-year-old Chinese story of the *Outlaws of the Marsh*, a sort of supercharged Robin Hood saga. Clearly, my ultimate reaction to the show was a strong desire to visit China to get a firsthand experience of this fascinating culture. It wasn't very long before that wish was granted, and I found myself in a land full of contradictions.

Trying to find the China of *The Water Margin* was not easy—old buildings were maintained, but they did not seem to have as much importance as they do in the West; add to that the difficulty of reading a character-based map. The main surprise, however, was the food. It was far better and much more varied than what is served in most Chinese restaurants in the West. Although a lot has changed during the intervening years, and while the Chinese



flavor market has integrated a number of outside influences, the country still quite strongly reflects the traditional cuisine.

Chinese Flavor Preferences

In my experience, the most popular flavors in China, in descending order, are orange, milk, strawberry, lemon, mint, tea, chicken, chocolate, apple, beef, vanilla, peach, pineapple, coffee, mango, grapefruit, butter, grape, lychee, coconut and honey.

Orange: Orange flavors are extremely popular in China, especially in beverages and many other applications. The flavor character is generally peely, rather than juicy, and often contains hints of violet and mandarin notes.

Milk: Milk flavors are also, surprisingly, very popular. The character is usually reminiscent of cooked or condensed milk, and contains noticeable sulfur notes.

Strawberry: Although I am not certain how so many consumers in China are familiar with the real fruit,

the strawberry flavor is nonetheless very popular. The character is normally fruity and sweet, rather than green.

Lemon: Like orange, the character of lemon flavor is often peely rather than juicy, and often contains at least a hint of lime.

Mint: Mint flavors in China are predominantly peppermint, with some instances of spearmint and spearmint/peppermint blends. The flavor character is most often decided more by economic, rather than quality, constraints.

Tea: Tea flavors are very popular in China, especially in beverages. The characters vary, but green and red traditional style tea flavors are particularly interesting. While all types of tea flavors are difficult to recreate, this is particularly true of the popular oolong type. Clearly, authenticity is essential in a market where everybody is very familiar with the natural product.

Chicken: Chicken flavors are unusually popular in China, and reflect the traditional cuisine. The character is quite different from that

of the chicken flavors in the West—fatty, roast notes are subdued, while boiled notes often dominate.

Chocolate: Sweet, vanilla and creamy notes dominate Chinese chocolate flavors, while the dark, cocoa notes are relatively subdued.

Apple: Chinese apple flavors are relatively authentic and fruity without being overly green or raw.

Beef: Beef flavors follow the same traditional pattern as chicken flavors, and often have a dominant boiled character.

Vanilla: Natural vanilla beans are quite uncommon in China; the preferred character of vanilla flavors is much simpler, less beany, and much more dependant on vanillin.

Peach: In contrast to the vanilla flavor character, peach flavors in China are often very authentic and reminiscent of the fresh fruit and skin.

Pineapple: Pineapple flavors are also often quite realistic, frequently with accentuated fruity notes.

Coffee: Coffee flavors in China often have some natural components and are realistic in character. However, fatty and especially phenolic notes can be a little exaggerated, adding a slight ashtray note to the flavors.

Mango: Different types of mangoes are found in China and the overall flavor preference is a little more influenced by α -pinene, compared to that in India.

Grapefruit: Like the other citrus flavors, grapefruit flavors in China

depend on peel oil for most of their character and can at times resemble orange.

Butter: Chinese butter flavors are slightly sweet and sometimes have a secondary cooked note.

Grape: Grape flavors tend to be notably sweet and floral, more in the direction of Muscat grapes.

Lychee: Lychee is an exceptionally difficult flavor to reproduce accurately, and many flavors in the Chinese market have an excess of rose character in them. That said, authentic flavors can be found.

Coconut: Coconut flavors in China vary; some can be quite simple, yet others reproduce the character of coconut milk and, less frequently, toasted coconut.

Honey: Chinese honey flavors are bright and floral, with less of the heavy notes familiar in the West.

Interpersonal Factors

Chinese culture is highly complex, rich and very strongly influenced by tradition. So, it is well worth reading a little about cultural etiquette beforehand, so that, for example, when one finds an unwelcome bone in a chicken dish, one does not remove it from the mouth using fingers. Visitors are strongly encouraged to socialize, and it is great fun to participate in social events. Banquets, in particular, are sumptuous and topped off by never-ending toasts of a memorably fiery grain spirit called Mao Tai.

The only social aspect I found challenging was karaoke, which seemed to be a national sport in China. Foreigners with mediocre vocal talents (like me) can sometimes get away with singing a duet to avoid total humiliation. However, if nobody sings a duet with you, fall back on self-deprecating humor—that will do the trick.

Making personal contacts in China is extremely important. It may take some time to make friends, but it is well worth the effort. Also, one should never put anybody in an embarrassing position or cause them to lose face, as it will be taken much more seriously than in the West. Job changes are quite frequent among Chinese youth, perhaps as a reaction to the restrictions of the past. Clearly, one needs to be well-organized to keep up with the staff changes at the customers' end.

As for Chinese cuisine, it is tough to recommend specific dishes given the huge variety of food choices. Dim sum is an obvious and easily found recommendation. Seeking out Hunan restaurants also helps, especially if one has a taste for spicy food—the flavors are spectacular and the dishes are relatively dry and stronger tasting than the Cantonese style food that is familiar in the West.

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