

The Longevity Soup

Soup is a huge category in Chinese cuisine, especially in the south. Cantonese are well-known for their obsession with soup, from simple clear broth to elaborate stews, there is a soup for every season and occasion. The term “Cantonese” refers to the Han Chinese living in the region of Guangdong province, which is at the southern end of China, and includes cities such as Guang Zhou, ShenZhen and Hong Kong, and towns such as Taishan, Zhongshan and Zhuhai.



Cantonese people consume soup daily; for them, no meal is complete without a soup. Often, soup is the first course of a meal. Due to its subtropical location, the weather in Canton is generally humid and hot in the summer, damp and cool in the non-summer months. Therefore, including soup in the diet is a great way to replenish the body with fluid, electrolytes and nutrients.

Even nutritionists agree that starting a meal with a small cup of soup is scientifically proven to be beneficial to our body. It is like warm-up before exercise. By moistening the digestive pipes, lubricating the mouth, throat, esophagus and stomach, a warm soup can lessen the impact of hard food on the mucous membranes and stimulate the secretion of digestive enzymes. As a result, soup as a starter may improve the absorption of nutrients from food.

Having 100% Cantonese blood -- my parents and grandparents from both sides are Cantonese, I grew up with soup. Although Beijing (where I was raised) is in the northern region of China, our family never had meal time without soup. Of course, that was not the case when my parents first moved there.

It might seem difficult to understand, but in my parents' generation it was normal for college graduates to settle in places where the government assigned them to go. For the young graduates, the needs of their country were always above their own, so there was very limited exercise of free will. Many years ago, heavy industries dominated the northern part of China.

With a major in Chemistry, my father was assigned to Beijing after graduation. He specialized in making a type of porcelain container whose inactive nature enabled it to endure the corrosive chemical reactions, even more durable than strong metals. With little hesitation, my parents left the humid and warm weather of the south and resettled in dry and cold Beijing.

Of course, they had a hard time adapting to the new lifestyle at the beginning. For one thing, the staple food in the south was rice, while in the north it was wheat. In addition to tolerating the cold winter and dry heat of the summer, they missed the food of the south, especially the Cantonese soups.



There is a saying that people tend to stick to the diet that they grow up with -- my father is living proof of that theory. Having lived in Beijing for more than twenty years, he still prefers rice to bread. Whenever we have Chinese buffet in a restaurant, after several plates of vegetables and meats, when everyone else around the table is ready to quit, my father gets up from his seat to go for his rice! A bowl of rice to him is like dessert to Americans; without rice there is an unfilled void in his stomach.

Their situation quickly changed for the better when my grandma moved in after their first child, my sister, was born. Food was rationed then, each family had a certain number of tickets for wheat and rice. My grandma traded the wheat tickets for rice with our neighbors. It was such a brilliant idea, especially because our neighbors seemed never to have enough wheat buns and noodles -- they were so happy to trade with her. Now with grandma in the kitchen, rice and soup on the table, the days in Beijing finally warmed up and were bathed in a sweet aroma!

Grandma taught us how to prepare Bao tang and Dun tang --“tang” means soup in Chinese. *Bao* and *Dun* are the different methods for making soup. A rule of thumb is “three *Bao* four *Dun*” which means *Bao* takes about three hours to cook and *Dun* about 4 hours. Though using identical ingredients for each soup, the difference in *Dun* tang is that the soup is cooked in a

water bath, similar to steaming. This method ensures an even and constant temperature in the soup, neither overheating nor underheating it during the entire cooking time.

Bao tang is cooked in a stockpot directly on the stove top. The soup is brought to a hard boil at the beginning, then kept on low heat for hours to develop the flavor. *Bao tang* often involves dry products like dried shiitake mushrooms, and fruits like dates and lotus seeds, together with root vegetables and nuts, and mixed with dried seafood such as scallops and squid, many times with bones and medicinal herbs. *Bao tang* is my favorite.



It often took my grandma a whole day to *bao* the soup. There are certain rules as to when to put in certain ingredients. Living now at a much faster pace, I often skip all the rules and dump the ingredients into a slow cooker, turn it on in the morning and the soup is ready for dinner in the evening. The only rule I follow by heart is to hold the salt until the soup is about done. Salt may draw the water out of the meat and the water loss often leads to tough meat in the soup. What is more, salt speeds up the process of protein degradation and Cantonese believe in doing so one can ruin the fresh taste of the soup.

For the Cantonese, soup is not just about its delicious taste but also for its therapeutic function – true in the Chinese diet in general. Many times, certain medicinal herbs and twigs are deliberately added to soups. For example, my grandma adds HeShouWu (Mr. He’s Black Hair) for shiny black hair – it works at least in her case; at age 96, my grandma has no gray hair! My mother often puts DangGui (Ought-to-Return) in the soup after menstruation, since DangGui is a Yin tonic, effective in regulating blood, especially for women. And there are soups for fatigue, fertility and even prolonged bedroom pleasure. Truly, there is a soup for every physical condition.

There is a soup for every season, too. On a hot summer day, for example, a soup with mung bean and winter melon can clear away the agonizing heat in the body. In a cold winter month, Chinese ginseng stewed with chicken may boost your energy. However, a word of caution about ginseng -- although it can provide an uplift in energy, it should be reserved for winter months only. The ideal time to consume ginseng is when the energy in the environment, such as from the Sun, is weak. Western ginseng is not as “warm” as the Chinese ginseng, therefore it is safe to consume, even in the summer months. However, consuming Chinese ginseng soup in the summer, when Yang is at its peak, may lead to nose bleeds sometimes.

Of course, there is a soup for stopping the nosebleed !

Just as a good soup takes time to develop its delicate taste, Cantonese women liken cooking a good pot of soup to having a great marital relationship. You need the initial “hard boil” for the loving relationship. However, nobody can sustain the boiling heat forever. It is the continuous simmering, the daily “slow cooking”, that brings out the rich flavor of life.

A Cantonese woman is a practical being, she is not the kind who spends hours cooking in the kitchen and then waits up till midnight for her man. On the outside she may look weak and feeble, inside she is full of self-confidence and persistence in her nature. Once she identifies her future husband, she follows him all the way. She supports her husband on his journey from nothing to something, from nobody to somebody. Like making soup, she takes whatever ingredients she has and works from there. She knows that they are in that “pot,” or journey, for the long haul.

Also, a Cantonese woman knows that patience is key. Just take a close look at the different raw materials in the soup – the twigs, herbs, spices, meat and vegetables. After many hours on the stove, they are mixed in such a way that they have become ONE. Only the mouth-watering aroma of the combined mixture remains, no more single-ingredient individuals!

One last thing-- you should take your time with soup and enjoy it slowly. Don't rush a soup.

So, no matter which stage you are in now, in heated love or that which is slowly simmering, still under construction or ready for the table, may God bless your journey together. Let Him be the cook, you are the soup. In the end, it is about satisfaction, like the sipping of a delicious soup.

Recipe for a simple yet nutritious bone soup

Ingredients: 1-2 pounds bones with meat – preferably pork (without H1N1!), a handful of Job's tear grains, erroneously called Chinese pearl barley, Chinese yam, Chinese wolfberry, Horseshoe or Chinese water chestnut- all available at an Asian or Oriental store.

You need a clay casserole pot, if you don't own one, the stockpot will work fine. First, put bone/meat into boiling water (enough to cover the bones), then wait for the water to boil again. After a few minutes of boiling, there will be foam floating to the top of the water. You may either skim off the yucky foam or simply change water and rinse the bone/meats to get rid of the foam. Then, put back the bone/meats together with all of the other ingredients, into a clean pot of water. Turn to low heat after a hard boil, cook a few more hours until the soup turns white and cloudy, and meat on the bones is tender. By this time the bones become delicate enough to be chewed. Add salt to taste, cook a few more minutes, the soup is done.

The soup is a good for additional calcium intake.