

VOGUE

How Authentic Regional Chinese Food Became the Culinary World's Newest Obsession

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I am periodically gripped by a desire to learn to cook something new. This is an admirable impulse, a virtuous impulse, a laudable impulse, especially at 40—if I were Victorian I'd be the matriarch of two generations; if I were a late-medieval I'd be in my funeral shroud. It is to my credit that I learn new tricks.

That, anyway, is the speech I deliver in a loud stage whisper—hoping that my husband is eavesdropping from the living room—while standing on a wobbly bar stool trying to secure a very large, very pale (very dead) air-chilled duck to a bungee cord tied to the clamp of our toddler's bouncy swing in the dining-room door frame.

What has led to this scene? The renaissance of Chinese food in America! Dining around New York recently, I have fallen under the spell of excellent dian xin (dim sum) from Hong Kong (at Tim Ho Wan) and Taiwan (at Pinch). I have sampled mouth-tingling mapo tofu from Sichuan, delicate mi fen from Guangxi, and irresistible crossing-the-bridge noodles from Yunnan—at Western Yunnan Crossing Bridge Noodle and the new Yun Nan Flavour Garden, both in Brooklyn. And oh—the subtle Cantonese snacks at Nom Wah! And the American mash-up of psychedelic nightclub and Chinese regional at Mission Chinese Food! (Chong qing chicken wings, tingly sour soup, steak tartare, and caviar service beneath an installation of kites by Jacob Hashimoto, anyone? *Yes, please!*)

Indeed, the cyclone of interest in all things culinary and Chinese is inescapable. In a single month last fall I received, from assorted publishers, four new Chinese cookbooks, including the excellent *Land of Fish and Rice*, by Fuchsia Dunlop, exclusively on the cuisine of the lower Yangtze, plus a useful history of Chinese food in America by Anne Mendelson called *Chow Chop Suey*. An exhibition on Chinese American restaurants—reached through a hanging wall of thousands of Chinese take-out containers—has been on view at Brooklyn's Museum of Food and Drink for more than a year. As Dunlop tells me, "Twenty years ago, China was still closed off. In the late 1990s, my Sichuan book, *Land of Plenty*, was rejected by six publishers as 'too marginal, too regional.'" *Land of Fish and Rice* is her fourth cookbook. "Now people are thinking of Chinese food in a different context," she says. "Chinese food is on the map."

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In the meantime, there are Ng's ducks at Decoy, and at midtown's new branch of a Beijing-based chain called DaDong, opened in December, specializing in Peking duck. But I may see what can be done with the pump for my yoga ball. To be continued.