

A DIFFERENT FAMILY RITUAL: HOT POT; COMING TOGETHER AROUND A CONTAINER OF BOILING BROTH

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Body

I've never eaten turkey for Thanksgiving.

Such holidays were foreign to my immigrant family, so my parents extended their own traditions.

Instead of stuffing ourselves with sleep-inducing meat, we ate the Chinese version of holiday food, huokuo, or hot pot. The effect was the same -- the whole family gathered around food and ate ourselves silly. But overall I think our meal was healthier and, for me, even tastier.

Hot pot is traditionally eaten on Lunar New Year's Eve. The communal activity represents the bond of the family, which gathers around a warm pot to share good wishes for the coming year.

International flavor

The dish is just what it sounds like: a hot pot of boiling water or broth into which food is dipped and cooked.

According to "Food Lover's Companion," each country has its own version of hot pot. The English have a Lancashire hot pot that includes mutton, sheep kidneys, oysters and potatoes. The French hot pot or hochepot contains pig's ears and feet.

The Asian version of hot pot originated in northern China, where the dish helped fend off the chill of harsh winters. The Japanese hot pot, or shabu-shabu, is named after the sound made when meat is swished through the broth. It tends to be lighter in flavor than the Korean hot pot, which contains more garlic and pepper, or the Thai hot pot, which includes more hot, sour and sweet tastes.

For my family's hot pot, my mom uses an electric frying pan, but an electric wok or deep soup pot will also do the trick.

Instead of sitting down to food that's already prepared, family members submerge raw food into the pot of boiling liquid, cook it and dip it into sauce. You don't really need a recipe for hot pot, since almost anything will work. But here are some tips to create your own hot pot tradition:

Use separate wooden chopsticks for the pot and for each diner. This way raw and cooked food never mix. For slippery food that escapes chopsticks, use a metal ladle. Remember, it's called hot pot for a reason -- tongues should beware of piping hot food.

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The fun thing about hot pot is it isn't just a great meal -- it's an activity. Family members, at least in my family, will literally fight over the single pot to grab the food they laid down.

Thinly cut meat boils faster. The thinner the better. Chinese supermarkets, such as Lion or 99 Ranch, carry meat cut specifically for hot pot. Or you can ask a butcher to cut it for you. We usually use pork, chicken and beef. The meat is done when the color fades completely, but beef can get tough really fast if it's overcooked, so watch your pot carefully.

Seafood adds a nice touch to the meal. But be sure to buy fresh seafood and to clean it and cook it thoroughly. Certain raw foods can make you sick. In Hong Kong, the Department of Health issues warnings about improperly prepared seafood in hot pot or the use of raw eggs.

Even veteran hot pot diners can make mistakes. When we were in college, my brother and I figured hot pot was an easy way to escape cooking, so we ate hot pot for a week, without changing the soup. The result: a stinky apartment and two sick siblings.

For a balanced meal, add vegetables and pasta, such as clear vermicelli or egg noodles. Spinach and napa cabbage are favorites in my family. But noodles absorb water or broth, so remember to have lots of liquid on hand or save the noodles for last.

For kicks, add something exotic. We add pork rinds for crunch, tofu for texture, mushrooms for flavor and meatballs for fun. You can even toss in some dumplings.

Sauce and soup

Finally, the traditional dip is usually a sauce made of raw egg and shacha, or dried shrimp, peanuts, garlic, hot pepper, tea leaves and salt. But for those worried about using raw eggs, any sauce made from peanut paste, sesame oil, vinegar, hot sauce or soy sauce will work.

The best part of the meal is the end -- the soup. Although water works, starting your hot pot with chicken broth makes the result even more savory. Finishing up with some noodles and a soup made of all your boiled goodies really warms the stomach -- no matter what the holiday.

Graphic

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PHOTO: VICTOR JOSE COBO -- MERCURY NEWS

Some Bay Area restaurants offer hot-pot dishes. At Hot Pot City in Milpitas, patrons select their ingredients and then cook the food.

PHOTO: VICTOR JOSE COBO -- MERCURY NEWS

Hot pot is traditionally eaten on Lunar New Year's Eve. But it's a delicious communal activity any time of the year.

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