

Title:

Regional Cuisine Hunan Cuisine

Word Count:

580

Summary:

Hunan cuisine shares many commonalities with its close, more well-known cousin, Szechwan cooking, Both cuisines originate in the Western region of China. The climate there is sub-tropical - humid and warm enough to encourage the use of fiery spices to help cool the body, and to require high spicing of food as a preservative. With similar climate, the two regions also share many ingredients - rice is a major staple in both diets, and chili peppers are an important part of most...

Keywords:

cuisine,Hunan cuisine,Hunan cooking

Article Body:

Hunan cuisine shares many commonalities with its close, more well-known cousin, Szechwan cooking, Both cuisines originate in the Western region of China. The climate there is sub-tropical - humid and warm enough to encourage the use of fiery spices to help cool the body, and to require high spicing of food as a preservative. With similar climate, the two regions also share many ingredients - rice is a major staple in both diets, and chili peppers are an important part of most dishes. The two styles of regional cuisine are similar enough that many restaurants and cookbooks lump them together under 'Western Chinese cooking' or simply refer to both as Szechwan cuisine.

There are some important differences, though. Hunan cooking is, for one thing, even more fiery than most Szechwan dishes. Szechwan dishes often include chili paste for rubbing into meats, or including in sauce. Hunan chefs include the entire dried chili pepper, with its intensely spicy seeds and rind.

The differences in the actual land of the two regions also has an effect on the differences in their cuisine. The Szechwan region is mountainous jungle, with little arable land for farming. The Hunan region, by contrast, is a land of soft rolling hills and slow rivers. Because of its fertile hillocks and valleys, the Hunan region has access to an amazing variety of ingredients that aren't available to Szechwan chefs. Seafood and beef are both far more common in Hunan cooking, as are many vegetables.

The land, and the hardships associated with it, also give the Hunan more time to concentrate on food. Hunan cooking features complex and time-consuming preparation time. Many dishes begin their preparation the day before they are to be served, and may be marinated, then steamed or smoked, and finally deep-fried or stewed before they reach the table. The same attention is paid to the preparation of ingredients, and it is said that Hunan cuisine is the most pleasing to the eye of all Chinese cuisines. The shape of a food in a particular recipe is nearly as important as its presence in the final dish. Hunan chefs are specialists with the knife - carving fanciful shapes of vegetables and fruits that will be used in preparing meals, or to present them.

Hunan cuisine is noted for its use of chili peppers, garlic and shallots, and for the use of sauces to accent the flavors in the ingredients of a dish. It is not uncommon for a Hunan dish to play on the contrasts of flavors - hot and sour, sweet and sour, sweet and hot - pungent, spicy and deliciously sweet all at once. Hunan chefs are noted for their ability to create a symphony of taste with their ingredients. A classic example is Hunan spicy beef with vegetables, where the beef is first marinated overnight in a citrus and ginger mixture, then washed and rubbed with chili paste before being simmered in a pungent brown sauce. The end result is a meat that is meltingly tender on the tongue and changes flavor even as you enjoy it.

More and more, restaurants are beginning to sort out the two cuisines, and Hunan cuisine is coming into its own. Crispy duck and Garlic-Fried String Beans are taking their place alongside Kung Pao Chicken and Double Cooked Spicy Pork. But there is no battle between the two for a place of honor among Chinese Regional cuisines - rather, there are only winners - the diners who have the pleasure of sampling both.