

The image shows two fish, likely trout or salmon, lying on a metal tray. Each fish is wrapped in large, vibrant green leaves, possibly chard or spinach, which are folded around the body of the fish. The fish are positioned vertically, with their heads at the top and tails at the bottom. The background is a light-colored, slightly textured surface, possibly a wooden cutting board or a metal tray. A dark green horizontal band is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the title and author information in white and light green text.

# DISCOVERING GLOBAL CUISINES

• TRADITIONAL FLAVORS AND TECHNIQUES •

NANCY KRCEK ALLEN

# DISCOVERING GLOBAL CUISINES

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TRADITIONAL FLAVORS  
AND TECHNIQUES



NANCY KRCEK ALLEN

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*Of course the patterns vary from place to place, from culture to culture, from age to age; they are all manmade, they all depend on culture. But still, in every age and every place the structure of our world is given to it, essentially, by some collection of patterns which keeps on repeating over and over again.*

— Christopher Alexander from *The Timeless Way of Building*

## INTRODUCTION

Cuisine is a mark of civilization, one of the most simple and direct ways to enjoy life. It offers a place where diverse peoples can connect, discover their ancient bonds, and celebrate their creative differences. Learning about and respecting other people and their food helps to soften the rigid lines separating country from country and people from people.

For most of the world, skills like cooking or woodworking pass from parent to child, friend to friend, or master to apprentice through demonstration. Aspiring woodworkers discover the feel, scent, and look of pine, birch, and maple, how to hammer a nail, turn a table leg, or join two corners. Aspiring cooks learn the perfume of parsley and cilantro, the feel of properly risen bread dough, the look of perfectly cooked rice, and how to chop and sauté. They begin to intuitively interact with food and experience the taste, texture, color, and scent of properly prepared dishes. Because this approach originates with skills, senses, and intuition, it's fluid and flexible. It makes room for whatever the surroundings offer.

Successful professional cooks, instead of relying solely on recipes, need to master taste and cooking skills. How can an aspiring cook ever learn to really “swim” if he or she always wears the life jacket of recipes? *Discovering Global Cuisines* is designed to build a structure of traditional technique and seasoning skill by providing an understanding of the structure of each culture's dishes, flavor-balance, and cuisine-shaping cultural, historical, and geographic influences. From this, students will hopefully discover the commonalities and connections between cuisines as well as fascinating creative differences.

Ultimately, the goal of a good culinary training is to teach the basics and encourage taste, passion, and imagination. This book can't make anyone an expert global cook. The richness and depth of creativity of each cuisine is mind-boggling and cannot be captured in one volume. Instead, it is meant to introduce some important timeless, fundamental cooking techniques, foods, and dishes. Hopefully students will incorporate the knowledge into their personal repertoire, and become inspired to search deeper. The study of world cuisines offers new, exciting perspectives, which can inspire students to eventually translate what they learn into fresh, original dishes. *Discovering Global Cuisines* can provide a solid reference that will accompany culinary professionals throughout their careers.

The cuisines in this book were chosen for their successful flavor combinations, strong techniques, and creativity. Though desserts are an important part of cuisine, because there is far more material than is possible to cover, *Discovering Global Cuisines* chooses to focus only on savory dishes. Although nutrition isn't directly addressed, it is fundamental to every one of the cuisines represented. Ayurveda and other diet-health modalities in Indian and Asian cuisines have blurred the lines between food and medicine, and the West is awakening to this way of thinking.

Successful cuisines (and many successful culinary professionals!) seem to share several characteristics: early interactions with other cultures, creative transformation of new or foreign foods, and techniques to suit personal tastes and, most importantly, access to and respect for good quality food grown locally. Prepared with whole, fresh, high-quality ingredients, most of the dishes in this book can satisfy not only good nutrition, they can satisfy good taste.

## PREFACE HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

- Slowly read through a recipe (to the end) before starting.
- Take notes the first time a dish is prepared.
- Each recipe ingredient in this book is arranged in this order: weight, piece size, and volume. They are all useful. It's helpful to know the weight of something if multiplying the recipe and ordering the food for a catering or restaurant event. Weight is the most accurate measure, and it saves time when preparing small amounts of food to know that 1/4 ounce of garlic will yield approximately 1-1/2 teaspoons peeled and minced, and that 1 large trimmed (peeled) green onion weighs 1/2 ounce and yields 2 to 3 tablespoons chopped. Piece size is helpful to know when running to the cooler to grab something. Volume is a simple check for consistency since scales are not always available.
- Flour weights and volumes vary in this book. Depending on how flour is placed into a measuring cup, 1 cup of all-purpose flour may weigh between 4-1/2 to 5 ounces. For most recipes this is not a problem, but always add the lesser amount and hold back the extra to add as required.
- Please pay attention. Although every attempt at accuracy has been made through research, recipe testing, and editing *Discovering Global Cuisines*, some errors are inevitable. Please bring them to the attention of the book's publisher and author.
- Water, salt, and pepper are not included in the ingredient list but do appear in the text of the recipe. Always have water, kosher salt, and a pepper grinder on hand.
- The recipes assume that all of cilantro (except the very thickest stems) will be finely sliced from top to stems and rarely chopped. Most cuisines that use cilantro do not pick off the leaves and toss away the flavorful stems.
- Likewise, both Italian parsley leaves and tender stems may be used when a recipe calls for chopped parsley. Large or tough stems may be saved for stock.
- Salt is one of the most important tools of culinary success. Taste a dish and season it with salt several times throughout cooking. If unsure of how to use salt, refer to the Primer Essay on salt.
- Make it a habit to taste a dish before it goes out.
- Some chapters, like Southeast Asia, cover more than one country. This close juxtaposition demonstrates how cuisine melts borders. Notice the overlaps and influences of each cuisine and how each has, similarly or differently, absorbed and transformed the foodstuffs and cooking techniques that came its way.
- If a dish or cuisine sparks an interest, investigate! Cook with home cooks from that culture. Pick up a book listed in the bibliography. Read and cook through it. Practice will get a passionate student-cook further than a recipe alone ever could.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### NANCY KRCEK ALLEN

Chef-educator Nancy Krcek Allen has traveled extensively, and has worked in kitchens and classrooms for more than thirty years. Allen graduated from California Culinary Academy in San Francisco. While living in New York City, Allen worked full-time teaching recreational and professional cooking for the Institute of Culinary Education (ICE) and the Natural Gourmet Institute in Manhattan, and in Viareggio, Italy, for Toscana Saporita. During her time at ICE, Allen wrote curriculum for the professional and recreational programs. While living in New York, Allen was a member of the New York Association of Culinary Teachers, Women Chefs and Restaurateurs, and the International Association of Culinary Professionals, where she attained a Certified Culinary Professional rating.

Allen has traveled extensively to learn about food, owned a restaurant and cooking school, catering business, and has worked as a freelance writer for various publications. She currently works as a cooking teacher and writer. Allen lives in Leelanau County in northern Michigan along the glacial moraines of Lake Michigan.

# PRIMER ESSAYS

ONE SALT

TWO UMAMI

THREE PARTNERSHIPS

FOUR CULTIVATE FLAVOR MEMORY

FIVE THE MOST IMPORTANT COOKING SKILL

## ESSAY ONE SALT

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### High Salting, Hyper Seasoning

The *New Yorker* writer Adam Gopnik has noted that professional cooks use a technique he calls “high salting.” It’s what he feels helps to make a professional cook’s food taste professional. The liberal use of salt sets the professional cook apart from salt-timid home cooks, but “hyper seasoning” and the proper amount of salt can allow even amateur cooks to produce highly satisfying meals.

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Salt is the premier flavor-enhancer. Not only are human tastebuds hard-wired for it, human blood salt level is very close to that of the ocean. Until recently salt was always in short supply. Although it was all around—the seas, oceans, and inside the earth—extracting it was slow and tedious. Modern technology has made salt cheap and abundant, available to all, for use in everything from pies to potato chips. Salt’s overabundance has turned it into a dangerous exile. What’s a cook to do?

Salt serves many masters, but none better than cooks. Though it’s a valuable colleague in the kitchen, salt is no substitute for a lack of flavor from fresh, quality ingredients. But used well, salt will bond with olive oil to bring the best flavor out of salad greens or a pan of sautéed aromatic vegetables headed for a soup or stew. Not only will salt help to soften vegetables, draw out moisture, and concentrate their flavor, it will embed itself into them to subtly heighten their flavor. Two exceptions: salt toughens eggs and corn during poaching or boiling; season them with salt after cooking.

Salt insinuates itself into meat or fish when you sprinkle it on just before cooking to boost flavor. Short brining helps salt move into meat fibers to increase its juiciness and texture. Notice how salt plays off apples and watermelon or atop caramel, the contrast making fruit and caramel taste sharper and sweeter. Salt softens “off tastes” and inhibits bitterness: Japanese and Chinese cooks salt raw fish or seafood briefly and rinse to remove fishy odors and improve texture.

Many cooks wait to the end of a dish to salt, or justify under-salting by saying that diners can salt at the table. To achieve balance and complexity, a properly salted dish doesn't spend all its salt in one place; it's salted in layers. At the beginning of cooking, use salt to brine, with an aromatic vegetable sauté base, or in blanching water (it will set green color). Use salt in the middle of a dish as food simmers, and again at the end as a final correction, or as a garnish to hit the tastebuds with pre-emptive salty pinpricks. Layered salting assures that each element of a dish will take just enough salt into itself to be properly enhanced.

Taste a dish many times as it's seasoned: too little salt and your dish won't achieve its full flavor potential; add too much and salt will be the first, last, and only thing remaining on the tongue. Salt should make food taste more intensely of itself but leave little trace of itself.

A good salt collection can be split into four basics: sea salt for the table; kosher salt for cooking, preserving, blanching, brining, or where large amounts are needed; a specialty salt (like fleur de sel) for garnishing salads, sliced tomatoes, or dishes like polenta with a few crunchy grains just before serving; and rock salt for use as a salt bed and ice cream making.

Salt measures differently depending on shape: granulated, flake, or rock. There is more saltiness per teaspoon of granulated than flaked: 2 teaspoons granulated table salt equals the saltiness of about 3 to 4 teaspoons flaked kosher salt. When salt amounts are important, as in confit or preserving, weigh the salt.

Salt comes from salt mines that are remnants of ancient seas, and from evaporated seawater. Theoretically salt tastes, well, salty, but at a world salt tasting, tasters would discover subtle differences. Unrefined sea salts taste more of the sea and its minerals. Shape, and mineral and moisture content determine how salt will interact and play up food flavor. Larger flakes add drama. Expensive small-grained salts used as a finish endow dishes with a salty snap that hits the tongue and blossoms.

Where does the ubiquitous box of iodized salt fit in? Good chefs avoid it for cooking. The added iodine masks the pure salt flavor and leaves a chemical aftertaste. Flaked kosher salt has cleaner taste than iodized, but good French or Italian sea salt without additives has the most distinct, clean salt taste. It's good sense to have a varied selection of salt on hand:

- \* Hawaiian ala'e pink salt, colored by iron-rich, red clay salt ponds, tastes of the earth that colors it. Good on grilled fish, rice, and pasta.
- \* Sel gris or Celtic sea salt is a moist, unrefined, coarse, mineral-rich gray salt, from the French Atlantic coast, that tastes less salty-sharp.
- \* Korean gray salt is similar to Celtic sea salt, and found in Korean markets. Good on meat, root vegetables, and fish.
- \* Indian black salt is a sulfurous, pinkish, not-so-salty component of chat masala, the favored spice mixture of pregnant Indian princesses who sprinkled it on summer fruit salads to cool themselves.
- \* Fleur de sel is the premier salt gathered by hand from crackly thin layers of salt bloom on sea salt ponds off the coasts of northwestern and southern France and Portugal. Good on buttered toast, caramel, fruit, and salad.
- \* Maldon salt, from Essex on the English coast, is soft and flaky with a salty crunch. Try it on steamed vegetables, baked potatoes, or fries.
- \* Trapani salt, a dry-grained crystalline salt from Sicily, is considered the best-tasting sea salt. Good on vegetables, seafood, pasta, risotto, and to top polenta.



## ESSAY TWO UMAMI

## Big Taste

Writer and chef Paula Wolfert coined the term “Big Taste.” Food with Big Taste is sensually fulfilling food that imbeds its flavor, taste, and aroma deeply in memory.

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Umami is the Japanese term for deep, rich, savory flavor. Many people hail umami as a “new” discovery, the fifth taste after sweet, sour, salty, and bitter. (Spicy-hot, pungent, and astringent are sensations, not tastes.) But umami isn’t really new.

In the early twentieth century, Professor Kikunae Ikeda of Tokyo Imperial University noticed that kelp gave a rich flavor to dashi broth. He observed that there was a taste “common to asparagus, tomatoes, cheese and meat,” but wasn’t one of the big four tastes. Ikeda linked umami with foods that naturally contain the flavor-enhancing and protein-building-block amino acid salts monosodium glutamate, sodium inosinate, and sodium guanylate.

Professor Ikeda began experimenting, and extracted crystals of glutamic acid from kelp broth. From glutamic acid, he isolated monosodium glutamate salt, a product with similar physical characteristics as sugar and salt, which enhances the flavor of other foods. Ikeda’s discovery is also known as MSG, Accent, hydrolyzed vegetable protein, amino acids, or “natural flavorings.” They sometimes cause havoc in sensitive diners. But, unlike MSG, the amino acids responsible for umami don’t naturally occur alone: they are part of many foods and not usually harmful.

Soy sauce, miso (fermented soybean paste), kimchi, seaweed, beef, bonito (fish in the mackerel family), onions, Parmesan cheese, tart cherries, tomatoes, mushrooms (shiitake and porcini), Thai fish sauce, sardines, and green tea are umami-rich foods. Long cooking (stews, curries, and chilli) and fermentation (kraut, kimchi, and fish sauce), break down amino acid bonds to release umami.

Umami-rich foods synergistically enhance other ingredients in a dish. Notice how tomatoes make anything taste better. Think of the flavors of gazpacho, tart cherry pie, long-cooked beef stew, mushrooms simmered with soy sauce, or soup simmered with a rind of Parmesan cheese. Teamed together with other foods, umami-rich foods can increase a dish’s flavor eight- or nine-fold. The result is every cook’s dream: really big flavor with lots less work. Think of the mysterious umami as food packed with charisma: a cook’s secret voodoo.

## ESSAY THREE PARTNERSHIPS

A truly fulfilling dish often contains a special partnership of foods. The familiar combinations of tomato, mozzarella cheese, and oregano on pizza or apples; maple syrup and cinnamon in applesauce and pie are examples of partnerships that work.

Partnerships infuse dishes with style and vivid, memorable flavor. Investigate the dishes that leave a lasting impression: that’s where to strike gold. Long-lasting dishes contain combinations that have been sifted by a jury of ancestors: pork, prunes, and cream; potato and leek; basil, garlic, pine nuts, and olive oil; tomato, onion, chili, and garlic; or white wine, garlic, parsley, and clams.

Partnerships have benefits. They keep a dish from being overly fussy and confusing for the diner by offering a clear personality. Working with a partnership a

cook won't be tempted to add "everything but the kitchen sink." Partnerships invite improvisation. They can transform everyday techniques into surprising and original meals. Pizza's team of tomato, mozzarella, and oregano also works well in a rice pilaf. Carry duck sausage, sun-dried tomatoes, and goat cheese into a sandwich or salad, and shrimp, cilantro, and dried cherries might go well tossed into pasta or stuffed into an egg roll.

Partnerships are everywhere. Query friends for their favorite food combinations. Search through cooking magazines or menus from local restaurants or borrow from restaurant meals or dinner with relatives. Keep a journal of favorite partnerships. If a cooking rut hits, pull them out to spark a spontaneous creation.

Tomato, brown butter, and cinnamon  
 Almonds, garlic, and grapes  
 Rabbit, red wine, and chocolate  
 Bananas, chocolate, marshmallow, and graham crackers  
 Orange, fennel, and olives  
 Salmon, fennel, and lemon  
 Shallots, mushrooms, and nutmeg  
 Watermelon, feta, and mint  
 Dates, mascarpone cheese, and caramel  
 Sweet potatoes, lime, and cilantro  
 Wheat, honey, and cardamom  
 Pear, honey, lemon, and olive oil  
 Pear, walnut, blue cheese  
 Mushrooms, sherry, and shallots  
 Pecans, dried cherries, and maple syrup  
 Smoked salmon, dill, and cucumbers  
 Chicken, tarragon, and cream  
 Garlic, parsley, and lemon  
 Feta, olive, and oregano  
 Potatoes, chilies, and cheese  
 Grapefruit, avocado, and orange  
 Pineapple, coconut, and lime  
 Asparagus, egg, and orange  
 Fish sauce, lime juice, and palm sugar  
 Basmati rice, cashew, and golden raisins  
 Apples, onions, and cabbage  
 Beans, bacon, and molasses  
 Eggs, bacon, and toast  
 Beets, caraway, and dill  
 Carrots, caraway, and butter  
 Cheddar cheese, beer, and mustard  
 Tomato, vodka, and cream  
 Arugula, papaya, and red onion  
 Broccoli, peanuts, and garlic  
 Golden raisins, pine nuts, garlic, and parsley  
 Peaches, basil, and honey  
 Butternut squash, onions, and pecans

Apple cider, butternut squash, and apples  
 Lamb, tomato, and artichoke  
 Roasted red bell pepper, walnuts, and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

## ESSAY FOUR CULTIVATE FLAVOR MEMORY

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### Storing Flavor Memories

Indian chef, writer, and teacher Madhur Jaffrey relates how before she learned to cook she had stored many strong flavor memories from her early life in India like cumin and tamarind. When Jaffrey began to cook they were ready, waiting, and available to help.

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For some, the flavor of grandmother's chicken soup, mom's mac-and-cheese, or dad's barbecue ribs unexpectedly fleet across mind and tastebuds. Repetition of specific flavors can lodge them permanently into memory. Tie those flavors to a positive event and they will embed even deeper. Scent, taste, and memory are then inextricably united into flavor memory.

Smell and taste work as one to make flavor: about 75 percent of flavor is aromatic scent and 25 percent is taste. When a person chews, food molecules vaporize into scent and travel to the nose's 1,000 scent receptors. Scent is a hugely complex mix of elements: it's possible to discern up to 10,000 different elements. Taste is perceived on the tongue. Taste covers just five: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and umami. The addition of scent multiplies those simple five into an infinite variety of flavors.

Dr. Avery Gilbert, smell scientist, sensory psychologist, and author of *What the Nose Knows: The Science of Smell in Everyday Life*, has found that humans use some of the same "cognitive processes" to interpret smells that they use to determine information coming in from their other senses. Gilbert believes that how someone responds to scent "can change with experience and learning." He says that humans can "educate" their noses and learn to recognize and evaluate smells and this, in turn, can lead to a better understanding of our responses to them.

Flavor recall may be an important key to a food professional's success. It helps cooks to set a benchmark of flavor and teaches them to recognize (and pair) certain flavors like the resinous bite of rosemary or the sweet-sour perfume of strawberry. It also helps a cook to untangle the flavors in a dish, which ultimately may increase her or his culinary skill.

No one starts out with an intuitive, perfect sense of flavor, but everyone has a flavor memory that can be developed. Like all skills, building a sense of flavor and a solid memory of it takes time, attention, and practice. Take the time to form a flavor memory with the ten steps below.

#### 1. Prime the senses: collect food experiences.

Artists study and copy the masters to develop their artistic eye and writers read the classics. Cooks should dine at the tables of masters and great granny cooks, local and international. Travel to foreign lands or an ethnic neighborhood and explore native food. Try everything: eat kimchi with your Korean neighbor or boudin blanc in Louisiana.

#### 2. Start memory-tasting with simple combinations.

Dishes with too many flavors don't allow tasters to easily discern each component. Start simple: sauté a batch of onions with Spanish smoked paprika. Toss the onions with rice to clearly taste, and commit to memory, the flavor of pimentón (Spanish smoked paprika).

3. Pay attention.

The more the focus is on tasting, the deeper a certain flavor will lodge in memory.

4. Play favorite music.

Tie memory-tasting with good music. Positive emotions cement memories into place.

5. Cut down on stimulation. Blind taste foods.

Perform memory-tastings alone whenever possible; it will help to better focus on flavor. Blind taste foods: cut a potato, apple, celery root, and jicama into similar sizes and toss into a bowl. Close the eyes, pinch the nose, and lick each piece of food. Then un-pinch and lick again. Buddhists-in-training sit in deep quiet, with eyes shut, and slowly experience the taste and texture of one raisin or grape. Try it with one pomegranate seed or a dab of tamarind paste.

6. Explore new flavors.

Cook nothing but Indian, Greek, Ethiopian, or Mexican food for a month. It's guaranteed to build strong flavor memories.

7. Taste and smell a dish as it cooks.

Notice how a chicken curry or pot of chili at first tends to smell and taste dissonant, how it comes together after simmering for 20 minutes, and how it forms a cohesive, delicious taste-team after an hour or after an overnight rest in the refrigerator. Some cooks swear that a dish smells different, fuller, after salting.

8. Keep a journal. Take photos.

Recording food experiences reminds cooks of dishes they've had and can be a source of future inspiration. Keeping track of cooking and dining experiences forces cooks to pay close attention to each dish and embed their flavors in memory. Learn from both successful flavors and those that miss the mark.

9. Educate.

Learn herbs and spices. Taste them over and over again until they've deeply embedded themselves in memory. Get to know the citrusy snap of coriander seed, the smoky exotic flavor of nigella seed, and the flowery surprise of Kaffir lime leaf. Discern cilantro from Italian parsley and know the difference between fruity-aromatic Thai basil and the stronger kick of Italian basil.

10. Practice. Be persistent.

The more a cook practices, the faster the flavor memory will fill with tools to boost culinary creativity.



ESSAY FIVE THE MOST IMPORTANT COOKING SKILL

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Chef-Educator Nancy Krcek Allen

During culinary school my chef-instructors dropped gems of advice, which I eagerly collected. My favorite gem came from an esteemed chef early in my culinary training. It instantly embedded itself into my memory: The most important cooking skill a cook can cultivate is to learn to pay attention.

What I have learned after chewing on that piece of advice is that when I cook I must set aside distractions and focus on my cooking. If I entered a kitchen and began to gossip, worried about my boyfriend, or carried anger about a driver cutting me off, my onions burned and my broccoli turned yellow. Paying attention in the classroom and in the kitchen had other benefits: I noticed important details that others missed.

Meditation is about focusing on one thing, usually the breath, to the exclusion of all else. Meditation asks the practitioner not to follow his or her thoughts; instead to allow thoughts to arise and just fall away. No judgments or criticisms, just a noticing and letting go. Zen masters might call paying attention during an activity a sort of moving meditation that enables the practitioner to “be one” with whatever he or she is doing. This practice can become a sort of culinary sixth sense, a kitchen intuition that alerts you to check the boiling potatoes, sautéed onions, or roast beef at just the right moment.

Paying attention has become my most treasured cooking skill. We pay attention to what we love and cherish, and I love and cherish cooking. I often say that paying attention can help cooks to avoid kitchen mishaps that no amount of skill can fix.

# UNIT I

## ASIA

### CHAPTER ONE

## CHINA: COMPLEX AND CREATIVE

### CHAPTER TWO

## JAPAN AND KOREA

### CHAPTER THREE

## SOUTHEAST ASIA: THAILAND, VIETNAM, AND INDONESIA

### CHAPTER FOUR

## INDIA: LAND OF SPICE, RICE, FLATBREADS, AND LEGUMES

# CHINA: COMPLEX AND CREATIVE



*This chapter will:*

- Introduce the history of China, its geography, far-reaching philosophical, religious, and cultural influences and its climate.
- Discuss the importance of the Silk Road, how it connected China across continents to the Middle East, Mediterranean, and Rome, and its effects on Chinese cuisine.
- Introduce China's culinary culture, its four main regional cuisines, and dining etiquette.
- Identify Chinese foods, flavor foundations, seasoning devices, and famous cooking techniques.
- Teach by technique and recipes the major dishes of China.



**FIGURE 1.1** Map of China.

### *The Balance of Opposites*

*Chef and writer Barbara Tropp has observed how the Chinese dualistic philosophy of yin (dark and yielding) and yang (light and firm) are deeply fundamental to Chinese culture and cuisine. Chinese people know that successfully blending these opposites results in balance and harmony. Chinese cooks, from a humble street cook and the home cook to the restaurant chef, have the knowledge of yin and yang bred into them. Working intuitively with this concept, Chinese cooks incorporate it into every meal, whether they're aware of it or not.*

To know Asia one must begin with China. Over millennia, the Chinese birthed many strains of thought and doctrines, more than twenty dynasties, over a dozen kingdoms, several empires, and many wars. Paradoxically, between 403 BCE and 221 BCE, a time of frequent deadly conflicts, philosophies of humanist Confucianism, Taoism (dao-ism), which preached compassion, moderation, and humility, yin-yang, the balance and interdependence of opposites, and the Five Elements, or Wu Xing, arose. The Five Elements described relationships between phenomena, and between foods. Fire, earth, metal, water, and wood connected to five tastes: fire–bitter, earth–sweet, metal–spicy and pungent, water–salty, and wood–sour. Cooks and doctors consider all five when planning a balanced dish or menu. A balancing of yin-yang and the Five Elements affected all aspects of Chinese life, from Chinese medicine, feng shui, the martial arts, military strategy, and the I Ching to Chinese culinary culture.

China has arguably the world's oldest continuous civilization. Primitive humans first lived in what is now China more than a million years ago. They evolved to the upright walking, tool- and fire-using Peking Man and, independently of the Mediterranean, they eventually developed agriculture, animal husbandry, and metal-working.

The Han Dynasty (202 BCE to AD 220) saw the beginning of the 7,000-mile Silk Road, a series of land and sea trade routes begun for the Chinese silk trade. It spanned two continents and crisscrossed Eurasia, from Xian, China, through the Tian Shan Mountains, Iran, Iraq, down to India, and ended in Istanbul. Smaller land and sea branches connected Korea, Japan, the Indonesian Spice Islands, Turkey, Ethiopia, and imperial Rome.

The intersections, introductions, and trade among Chinese and peoples from diverse cultures along the way inextricably linked China to India, Persia, Arabia, Greece, and Rome. Through the fourteenth century, the Silk Road promoted an unprecedented sharing of ideas, arts, sciences, innovations, cooking techniques, and foods like onions, dates, figs, olives, oranges, apples, grapes, spices and herbs, tea, salt, potatoes, melons, sesame seed, walnuts, almonds, carrots, cucumbers, peanuts, wheat, chickens, and pomegranates.

From the seventh to the fourteenth centuries, China was the world's most advanced civilization, the epicenter of Asian influence. Through trade, China's 6,000-year-old culture filtered into and shaped every culture in Asia and Southeast Asia, most especially Korean and Japanese. China, Korea, and Japan are like three sparring sisters cut of the same cloth. They share wok, chopsticks, rice, fresh produce, seafood with accents of meat, and similar beliefs and background, yet each is a highly evolved individual. Korea, Japan, and China have influenced each other's cuisines and cultures; it's difficult to determine who influenced the other's first.

Chinese civilization survived and changed through warring dynasties and foreign incursions from Mongols and the British. The Chinese fought with the British in the Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) over diplomatic, trade disputes, and restriction of the lucrative British opium trade—and lost. This eventually led to uprisings, rebellions, and the end of dynastic China.

The Chinese endured the domestic strife of Mao Tse Tung's Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), which attempted to transform China from an agrarian economy to a modern communist one. Mao failed, causing mass deaths through violence and starvation. Mao initiated the Cultural Revolution in 1966 in an attempt to stop capitalism in China. It became a campaign of extreme violence that pitted many young communists against the Chinese connected with the "bourgeois" West and its education, art, music, calligraphy, and gourmet food.

The Chinese developed many things we take for granted: paper-making, printing, the compass, gunpowder, written characters, currency, written laws, a tax system, and agriculture. Chinese literature, painting, calligraphy, pottery, porcelain, sculpture, and a delightful, complex cuisine continue to influence Asia, Southeast Asia, and the world. China has the fastest growing major economy since the 1978 initiation of market-based reforms; it is the world's largest exporter—and the second largest importer—of goods.

About the size of the fifty United States, China boasts the world's largest population—20 percent—and over a billion more people than the United States's 300 million plus. With nuclear capabilities and the largest army in the world, China is fast becoming a world superpower.

## LANGUAGE, PHILOSOPHY, AND RELIGION

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Unlike the United States and Canada, China, Korea, and Japan have linguistically and culturally homogenous populations. Though China is home to fifty-six ethnic groups, more than 90 percent of its population is Han Chinese—originating from a dynasty begun in 202 BCE.



The philosophies of Confucius, Taoism, and Buddhism helped form fundamental Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cultural and culinary practices, values, and beliefs. Confucius, a Chinese sage (551 BCE to 479 BCE), shaped Chinese and Korean philosophical and ethical codes. Confucius attached great importance to food, naming it as one of three conditions (along with an army and trust) for founding a state. He wrote that proper relationships are the basis of society and that maintaining group harmony is fundamental.

Buddhism (see *India*) and Taoism came to China from Persia, Central Asia, and India through the Silk Road in the first century, to Korea in the fourth century, and Japan in the sixth century. Taoism, based on the writings of Lao Tzu in the *Tao Te Ching*, considered to be the most influential Taoist text, spoke about concepts that have filtered into Western culture: the unchanging nature of the universe, nonaction, yin-yang, qi (pronounced *chee*)—the life force, and moving in concert with nature. These philosophical and religious beliefs influence every part of Asian life from family conduct and politics to cooking and health.

China's most revealing concept is that of "being One." In *China, Japan, Korea, Culture and Customs*, John and Ju Brown disclose that Chinese people feel that *unity* means "order, strength, and unified power" while *division* means "chaos, disruption, and war." Chinese believe their beliefs and culture are superior and apply the unified concept of "being One" to their land, people, and culture. It is part of the strength that has helped them survive throughout the best and worst times of their long history.

## GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

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China is a land of three "stair-step" plateaus, plains, basins, foothills, and mountains. These rugged areas occupy nearly two-thirds of China and have fostered her varying customs and cuisines. China's highest point (over 13,000 feet) is the western Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, home to the Himalayas, the Kunlunshan range, Qilianshan range, and Hengduan mountain chain. The Himalayan peak Mt. Everest (29,003 feet), Earth's highest mountain, lies on the borders of China, Nepal, and Tibet. Moving east in China, the mountains ease down to large basins and plateaus 3,000 to 6,000 feet high, then give way to broad, fertile plains sprinkled with lower mountains and foothills around 1,500 feet. This last, easternmost stair-step of China is home to North and Northeast China and the Yangtze Plains, which produce abundant crops.

China's diverse and extensive geography, dominated by monsoons and dry periods, leads to large differences in climate. Generally, winters are warmest south of the Yangtze River, with warm, moist winds from the South China Sea, heat and monsoons, and coldest further north where cold, dry winds blow from higher latitudes.

## FARMING AND AGRICULTURE

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China's climate and geography varies widely and, consequently, so do its crops. Western China is rugged, dry, and cold with a short growing season. Crops include wheat, barley, potatoes, cotton, sugar beets, fruit, and melons. Livestock are sheep and yak. Northern and northeastern China is dry with long, cold winters. Millet, wheat, corn, cotton, flax, soybeans, and peanuts are the main crops. Central China, known as the rice bowl, is the richest and most productive region with alluvial soil, mild winters, year-round cultivation, and abundant rainfall. Rice, cotton, tea, oil seed, and much produce grows here. South China lies within the tropics so it has a long growing season, lots of rain with primary crops of rice, sugarcane, mulberries, fruit and vegetables, and freshwater fish raised in rice paddies or ponds.

## CHINESE CUISINE: ECONOMY, HARMONY, AND BALANCE

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Asia's philosophy emphasizing harmony and balance reaches most deeply into food and determines the character of its cuisine. Asians consider food as medicine and a seriously important pleasure. Cooks and doctors alike label foods and cooking techniques either *yin*—dark, cool, watery, and feminine (tofu, watercress, cabbage) or *yang*—light, hot, dense, fatty, and masculine (beef, ginger, mushrooms), though none is purely either. Cooks place complementary pairs in a dish and meal to balance their qualities to create harmony: sweet and sour, soft and crunchy, hot and cold, watery and dense or oily. Doctors prescribe certain dishes to balance or heal certain conditions. All Asian cooks balance the five senses intuitively, weaving together contrasting and complementary colors, textures, flavors, and cooking methods into pleasing meals.

To the Chinese, indeed all of Asia, food is life, health, and a symbol of luck and prosperity. Long, uncut noodles are prized because they mean “long life.” Dishes with words that are spelled similarly or sound like *luck* or *prosperity* are often chosen for celebrations: turnip sounds like “good luck,” fish sounds like “plenty.” Whole chickens and fish symbolize happiness and prosperity. Oranges represent wealth and good fortune because they are China's most plentiful fruit.

Chinese culinary culture is vastly versatile, often quite complex, and adapted to economy. They have always welcomed new ingredients; an old Cantonese aphorism says, “If it has two legs and doesn't talk, and has four legs and isn't a table, you can eat it.” Through war, forced migration, and famine, cooks had to be resourceful. These difficulties and opportunities spawned a delightful blend of flavor, texture, and inventiveness. Preparation is everything: cooks cut foods for eye appeal as well as quick, even cooking to save on expensive fuels. Deceptively simple in method, the chef must be part artist, part technician. Top-of-the-stove cooking rules with boiling, steaming and stir-frying, braising, stewing, deep-frying, roasting, and smoking.

Chinese meals revolve around rice or grain. In Northern China (and Korea) wheat, millet, and barley are important. Vegetables, soybeans, and soybean products (soy sauce and fermented pastes) are important secondary foods, while meat, poultry, and fish are supplementary. Foods fall into two categories: *fan* (rice and grain dishes) and *t'sai* (meat and vegetable dishes). *Fan* and *t'sai* are not mixed together, allowing each to retain its unique characteristics. With a balance between *fan* and *t'sai*, between *yin* and *yang*, and the five elemental tastes, Chinese cooks blend inventiveness, flavor, and economy to create an ideal meal.

## REGIONAL CHINA: FOUR SCHOOLS OF FOOD, FLAVOR, AND TECHNIQUE

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### 1. Northern China Region, Beijing: Robust, Pungent, and Delicate

Beijing, the political, educational, and cultural center of the People's Republic of China, is China's second largest city and its capital. Imperial food traditions mix with great street food and home cooking. Descendants of imperial chefs have preserved recipes and opened small restaurants featuring dishes that were lost for centuries.

China's northern region (with the Great Wall) sees weather extremes, from the Gobi Desert to the Siberian mountains. Hearty, earthy dishes with strong, pungent flavors, and refined imperial dishes with lighter, delicate tastes, form this cuisine. Meats like pork, chicken, lamb, goat, and beef are prized. Northern Chinese cooks favor smoking meat, pickling vegetables, braising, roasting, and boiling.

Unlike in the rest of China, wheat instead of rice predominates as staple food; clever cooks fashion it into flatbreads, steamed yeasted buns, dumplings, and wheat noodles. Garlic chives, leeks, garlic, scallions, onions, vinegars, and bean pastes form the northern seasoning pantry. Famous dishes include Mongolian fire pot, Peking duck, moo shu pork with Peking pancakes, bird's nest soup, beggar's chicken, scallion pancakes, sweet-and-sour dishes, and pork dumplings.

2. **Coastal /Eastern China Region, Shanghai: Refined, Subtle, Cosmopolitan, Creative**  
Shanghai is the largest city in China. Located on China's central eastern coast at the mouth of the Yangtze River, it boasts the world's largest cargo port and the largest center of commerce and finance in Mainland China. Modern, cosmopolitan influences and elegant, discerning touches with seasoning, sauces, and technique (steaming, braising, and clay pot cooking) reveal its refinement. Rice is staple food teamed with salty, saucy fish, shellfish, and vegetable dishes seasoned highly with soy sauce and sugar. The southeastern province of Fujian, south of Shanghai, produces the best soy sauce in China. Famous dishes include soup dumplings, West Lake fish, potstickers, red cooked fish or chicken, drunken shrimp, and scallion pancakes.

3. **Western China or Inland Region, Szechwan, Yunnan, Hunan Spicy, Complex**  
This region lies near the Himalayas and the tropics, giving rise to weather extremes. Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Thailand, Laos, North Vietnam, India, and Pakistan influence this cuisine. Szechwan cooks love heat. A signature ingredient is red chili, fresh, fermented into paste, dried whole or finely ground. Hunan cooking is smokier and more assertive than Szechwan, to which it is often compared.

This region's cuisines arise from mountain basins and alongside tributaries of the Yangtze with spicy barbecued fish, braised pork with star anise and five-spice, chicken with red chili, and lamb with cumin and pepper. Rice, citrus, chilies, bamboo, onions, garlic, ginger, peanuts, and sesame are predominate flavors along with soy sauce, tofu, fermented black beans, bean paste, beef, lamb, smoked duck, and fish. Stir-frying, simmering, steaming, stewing, braising, and pan-frying are common. Famous dishes include *mapo doufu* (spicy, braised tofu), carp with hot bean sauce, chicken with walnuts and chilies, Kung Pao chicken, sweet-sour poultry or seafood, hot and sour soup, scallion pancakes, spicy sesame noodles, and Szechwan duck.

4. **Southern China Region, Canton, Guangzhou, Taiwan: Simple, Light, Innovative**  
Canton, or Guangzhou, is the most populated city in the south and the third largest city in China. Located on the Pearl River, which empties into the South China Sea, Canton is only 75 miles northwest of Hong Kong and north of Macao. China's south has a warm, subtropical climate that produces rice and a lush supply of vegetables and fruits like orange, tangerine, lemon, grapefruit, star fruit, litchi, melons, and peaches.

Rice is at the center of southern meals, and pork the most common meat, used mainly as seasoning. Frog, squab, shrimp, and fish are common. Centering in Guangdong with its history of outside, foreign influences and ingredients, Cantonese cooking may be China's most adventurous. Ginger, rice vinegar, mustard, and soy sauce are big flavorings. Cantonese cooks stir-fry, braise, roast, simmer, and steam. Famous dishes include seafood with black bean sauce, egg rolls, roast pork, egg foo yung, varied dim sum, crabs steamed with ginger, shrimp dumplings, roast meats such as *chaosiu* (pearl-white chicken gently dipped in boiling water), and brilliant green bundles of blanched and dressed, fresh *choisam* (thick-stemmed leafy green).

## DINE AT HOME IN CHINA

In a Chinese home, diners sit at a table. The Chinese saying *chī fàn* or "eat rice" means to have a meal; a large bowl of long-grain rice is central to any meal. The hosts will bring out platters of food, in a pre-chosen order depending on flavors or symbolism, and everything will stay on the table. The meal will be well balanced with, for example, no more than one spicy dish or one beef dish in the meal. There will be texture and taste contrasts: a crisp dish followed by a soft one, a bland dish preceding something spicy.

The meal might begin with an appetizer; fresh salads are rare. Chinese consider soup a beverage so a liquid soup will come with the main meal and might appear once or twice to act as palate cleanser. Diners hold a small bowl of rice under the chin, pick morsels of food from platters and shovel the rice with chopsticks into the mouth. Because familial respect is paramount, the best morsels of food will go first to eldest family members. Tea will come after the meal. Dessert will be fresh fruit, which might also come during the meal.

## COOKING TOOLS

Wok, cleaver, strainer, clay or sand pot, round wood chopping block, long cooking chopsticks



**FIGURE 1.2** The Ulong River near Yangshuo in southern China.

Source: Mikhail Nekrasov/Fotolia.

## TASTES OF CHINA

**Fat:** rapeseed (canola) oil, vegetable, peanut oil, lard, sesame oil, and roasted (Asian) sesame oil

**Sweet:** rock sugar, sugar, maltose, sorghum syrup, honey, sugar cane juice

**Sour/Alcohol:** lemon, rice vinegar, white vinegar, black vinegar, red vinegar, Shaoxing wine

**Salty:** light and dark soy sauce, salt, MSG, mushroom soy sauce

**Spicy-Hot:** ginger, chilies, chili oil, paste, black pepper, hot bean paste, Szechwan peppercorns, fermented red chili paste

**Spice:** star anise, cinnamon, fennel, allspice, nutmeg, clove, anise, licorice

**Aromatic Seasoning Vegetables:** scallions, ginger, garlic, garlic chives, onion, young leek

**Herbs, Seasonings and Condiments:** fermented black beans; hoisin, plum and oyster sauces, bean pastes, black and brown sesame pastes, cilantro, preserved cassia blossoms, dried shrimp, dried tangerine peel, hot mustard

**Other Important Foods:** short- and long-grain rice, bean curd products (soft, medium, and firm tofu, dried bean curd sheets, fermented bean cakes, and much more), tapioca, millet, wheat, barley, nuts (peanuts, almonds, pine nuts), white radish (*lo bak*), red beans, fruit (citrus, Asian pears, apples, peaches, plums, bitter, winter and sweet melons, rambutan, longan, lychee), many leafy greens, *gai lan* (Chinese broccoli), long beans, mushrooms, cloud ear and wood ear mushrooms, *jujube* (small, dried red dates), dried lily buds, bamboo shoots, lotus root, snow peas, straw mushrooms, water chestnuts, wild and domestic meat (pork, duck, chicken, lamb), river and ocean fish and seafood, insects

**Popular Dishes:** bird's nest soup, dim sum, pot-sticker dumplings, soup dumplings, kung pao chicken, claypot seafood, peanut noodles, West Lake fish, hot and sour soup, Cantonese roast duck, dan dan noodles, *congee* (rice gruel with toppings), Szechwan long beans, egg drop soup, *mapo doufu* (spicy tofu stew), Peking duck and Peking pancakes, almond chicken, eggplant with garlic sauce, red cooked pork, scallion pancakes, sweet and sour dishes, tea smoked duck or fish, *law bok gau* (turnip



**FIGURE 1.3** Chinese clay pot.

Source: bonchan/Shutterstock.



**FIGURE 1.4** Chinese strainer.

Source: sunsetman/Shutterstock.



cake), shaved ice dessert, steamed egg custard, moon cakes, sweet red bean soup, mango pudding, almond or sesame pudding, hand-pulled noodles, *dim sum*: chicken feet, dumplings, egg rolls, steamed buns and *nor mai gai* (sticky rice and chicken in lotus leaf) and many more

**Drinks:** various regional black and green teas; chrysanthemum, hibiscus, rose, and jasmine teas; liquor, beer, whiskey, almond milk, soy milk, bubble teas

## CHINESE BOTTLED CONDIMENTS

### Chinese Bean Sauces

There are at least five types of bean sauce made with either soybeans or black beans: **Bean or Brown Bean Sauce** is made from the soybean pulp leftover after brewing. **Sweet Bean Sauce** is the Peking sweetened version. **Hot Bean Sauce** typically has Szechwan chilies and Asian sesame oil added. The black bean sauces are made from puréed or crushed black beans. **Black Bean Garlic Sauce** has garlic added and **Black Bean Chili Sauce** is spicier with chilies.

### Chili Sauce with Garlic

This thick, red, spicy paste is made from salted red chilies, garlic, sugar, rice vinegar and cornstarch. It is used for stir-fries and marinades.

### Hoisin Sauce

This spicy-sweet, thick, reddish-brown sauce is prepared from soybeans, sugar, flour, vinegar, salt, garlic, chili,

and sesame. It's used as a barbecue sauce, marinade, and dipping sauce with Peking duck or moo shu pork and Mandarin pancakes.

### Oyster Sauce

This rich and concentrated thick, brown sauce is made from soy sauce and oyster extract. Its smoky flavor and big, savory flavor that Japanese call *umami*, make it popular in dipping sauces or on stir-fries. Look for the best.

### Plum Sauce (Duck Sauce)

This thick, jammy sauce is made from a type of fruit species related to both plums and apricots, but more closely to the apricot and the Japanese umeboshi plum. The apricot-like plums, sugar, vinegar, salt, ginger, chili, and garlic yield a clear yellow sauce with light, sweet and tart flavor. It is especially good with poultry, spring rolls and egg rolls.

## Traditional Chinese Medicine's Five Flavors and Health

Chinese medicine says that foods' five flavors correspond to health. Many Chinese believe that balanced meals including these five flavors improve internal organ function. They are related to the Five Elements (see Glossary). There are pharmacies with restaurants attached, where a doctor of Chinese medicine diagnoses patients and prescribes meals, which the restaurant prepares.

**Sour** contracts and coalesces, stanches the flow of blood, roughens, and congests.

**Bitter** dries out, depresses, subdues, or damps down.

**Sweet** regulates, evens out, harmonizes, softens, buffers, and supports.

**Pungent or Sharp** opens up, dissolves, and mobilizes active energy (qi).

**Salty** softens, moistens, and purges or purifies.