

# Foods in China—Past and Present in the Capital City of Beijing

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**Chinese cuisine is usually classified into four broad categories: Beijing cuisine (Mandarin cuisine) in the north, Shanghai cuisine in the east, Sichuan cuisine in the west, and Cantonese cuisine in the south. Each has an individually developed food culture. This article focuses on Beijing cuisine, which is known for flavorful cooking techniques that use oil, such as *bao* (stir frying with a large amount of oil at high heat), *zha* (deep frying) and *chao* (stir frying with a small amount of oil at high heat). Famous Beijing dishes include Beijing roast duck (Peking duck) and *shuan yang rou* (a mutton hotpot). After observing Beijing for 40 years, I have seen many changes that have taken place in real Beijing cuisine.**

## Introduction — The Historical Position of Beijing

It was during the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) when Beijing first became the capital of all China, and its splendor was



*Hutong* (alley) tour by bicycle rickshaw in Beijing. Some tour options offer the chance to experience dumpling making.

described for the outside world by Marco Polo. Since then, except for the period of 1368–1421 when the capital was moved to Nanjing, Beijing has maintained its status as

capital of China through to the present day. While Beijing is referred to as an old city with more than 700 years of history, it is still relatively young when compared to the 4,000-year history of China. Despite its status, Beijing does not have the ancient pedigree of Suzhou and Shaoxing, two cities that prospered as the capital of the State of Wu and the State of Yue during the Spring & Autumn and Warring States periods (770–221 BC), or the cultural city of Changan (present-day Xian), which was the capital during the Tang Dynasty (618–907).

The Chinese characters for Beijing literally mean “northern

capital,” referring to its location in the northern Hebei province. One of Beijing’s most popular tourist attractions is the portion of the Great Wall of China that runs through Badaling. The wall marks the northernmost part of China when the present-day Three Northeast Provinces (Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang) were still the entirely separate country of Manchuria. In Beijing, we often come across names that use the Chinese character for “yan” or “yen,” such as Yenching University and the Yan Mountains. This is because this area was once known as Yan. Located far from the lower reaches of the Yellow River basin, where ancient Chinese civilizations were born, Yan was where the Chinese confronted the northern forces of the Manchus and the Mongols to protect the Central Plain region from their incursions. At the same time, its location made it the point of exchange and trade with these same northern nomadic tribes in less troublesome periods.

In simplified Chinese, Beijing cuisine is written as simply “capital cuisine.” However, Beijing cuisine goes well beyond just being elegant or sophisticated, as befits a capital city. The city falls under the northern boreal climate zone, with a dry, cold winter. As the local climate is unfit for rice production, foods made of wheat are staples in the area. Millet and beans are heavily consumed. Dishes tend to have a rather salty flavor, with the frequent use of soy paste, soy sauce and other seasonings produced by fermenting beans and cereal grains. A variety of meats, including pork, mutton, duck and chicken, as well as scallions, garlic, garlic chives and other flavorful herbs and vegetables, along with fat and oil to help warm the body, are regularly used.

It is difficult to briefly describe the features of Beijing cuisine because of its many diverse elements. While there are the lightly-flavored elegant dishes of imperial court cuisine, there are also the foods that common people eat, such as offal dishes served at street stalls, as well as flour-based dim sum and other casual snacks, including *bing* (unleavened buns) and *jiaozi* dumplings. The rulers of the Yuan and Qing dynasties that made Beijing the capital were from northern nomadic tribes, the Mongols and Manchus respectively. The influence of these northern tribes can be tasted in the many rustic and zesty dishes that are still served in Beijing. They

are the remnants of days when the area was often a battlefield, and was governed by foreign tribes.

## Laozihao Restaurants in Beijing

Time-honored brands are called “*laozihao*” in Chinese. Beijing has several *laozihao* restaurants that were established at the end of the Qing Dynasty, and these restaurants are recognized nationwide. My first visit to China was 37 or 38 years ago, shortly after normalization of Japan-China diplomatic relations in 1972. The Cultural Revolution was still in effect, and visitors were not allowed to choose restaurants for themselves. Still, we were pleased as we were taken to Quanjude, famous for its Beijing roast duck, although the restaurant’s sign simply read “Wang-fujing Street Duck Shop.” Obviously, during the Cultural Revolution, time-honored brands and long-cherished traditions were ignored. Yet, we noticed that this restaurant prepared the ducks and roasted them in an oven using Chinese date fuel, and was meticulous and authentic in their methods.



Beijing roast duck. After being prepared, the ducks are hung in line to be roasted.

I have a 1983 guidebook called the “Beijing Guide,” which contains a list of leading restaurants in Beijing. Although I had assumed that Beijing roast duck would be a signature dish of Beijing, some restaurants that were famous for that dish, such as Quanjude and Bianyifang, were labeled as Shandong-style restaurants. In addition, top restaurants such as Fengzeyuan and Tongheju were also classified as Shandong cuisine.

This exposes a distinctive characteristic of Beijing’s culinary scene, and helps explain why the typical dishes of



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Beijing are said to be the *xiaochi* (snacks or refreshments) that are popular among the working class. Shandong is Hebei’s neighboring province to the east. It is a coastal province, blessed with a temperate climate and an abundance of food products, with a cultural heritage that pre-dates Beijing’s.

While Beijing has long been the seat of the government, the Shandong style constitutes the mainstay of Beijing food culture. Historically, in fact, chefs in Beijing have tended to come from Shandong.

Though Beijing cuisine is generally thought of as representing northern Chinese cuisine, the orthodox and authentic dishes served in Beijing actually derive from Shandong cuisine. The culinary features of Beijing cuisine, including the ingredients, seasonings and high heat stirfry



Deep fried scorpions, a traditional Shandong dish, are crispy and delicious, and used for Chinese food therapy.



*Shaguo bairou* is a specialty pork dish of Shaguo Ju, a time-honored restaurant that dates back to the Qing Dynasty.

techniques, are obviously those of Shandong cuisine. Beijing residents are well aware of the inseparable ties between Beijing foods and Shandong cuisine.

So then, which of the *laozihao* restaurants are truly Beijing style restaurants? There are a few obvious choices. Any list would have to include Duyichu. It is said that Emperor Qianlong, who ruled from 1735–1796 as the sixth emperor of the Qing Dynasty, went out to find a restaurant on one New Year’s Eve, and Duyichi, then simply a small pub with no name, was the only shop that was open. He was so delighted with the *shaomai* that he proclaimed the restaurant to be the best in the entire capital, and gave it the name of Duyichi. Another restaurant, Shaguoju, specializes in clay hot pot dishes, which started when they were given a whole pig by a Qing Dynasty noble house. The pork was plain boiled and sliced, and cooked in a clay pot. Other purely Beijing-style restaurants include Donglaishun, famous for its mutton hotpot, and Kaorouji, renowned for its grilled mutton. Many of the restaurants that specialize in mutton dishes were founded by Muslims near the end of the Qing Dynasty.

One very special restaurant in Beijing is the Fangshan Restaurant, located in a hall that was originally a detached palace within Beihai Park. The restaurant offers imperial



court flavors, including dishes associated with the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), and many famous snacks. “*Fangshan*” is a Chinese word that means “imitating the imperial cuisine served to emperors.” Several years after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, chefs who had worked in the imperial court kitchens were collected to open this restaurant. The napkins and tableware are all yellow, the color of emperors, and the small cakes loved by the Empress Dowager Cixi are particularly famous.

Also notable in the Beijing restaurant list are the many famous restaurants representing other provinces. Before any restaurants existed, high officials in Beijing and officials from other provinces who were stationed in Beijing invited one another to banquets held at their residences, and entertained the guests with dishes prepared by their own chefs. These restaurants from other regions are suggestive of this old social tradition.

Beijing and Tokyo seem to share a common feature in food service establishments. Tokyo has very few Tokyo cuisine restaurants. Although there are many restaurants that serve Kansai and other regional cuisines, as well as international cuisines, we hardly ever see Tokyo cuisine except for some foods that were originally snacks, such as Edo-style sushi. Whether or not this is typical of capital cities, it is a part of the complexity of foods in Beijing.

## Hotels

After the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), China became a communist country. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a time when Beijing was filled with slogans, wall-posted newspapers and Mao suits. When it finally ended, tourists from overseas gradually started to arrive and the food service industry began to prosper. As president of an association of researchers and enthusiasts who study Chinese food culture and cuisine first hand, I have been witness to great changes every year in Beijing food.

Early on, we experienced many inconveniences due to sparse tourist accommodations. Although there were many visitors from overseas, including government officials and other VIPs, Beijing had only a few hotels. As the number of foreign tourists increased with China’s growth and modernization, international 5-star hotels became a common sight. At that time, Hong Kong was a gourmet destination for global tourists seeking to sample exquisite Hong Kong Chinese dishes. That may be why the first major hotels in Beijing invited chefs from Hong Kong, and served Cantonese cuisine in their standard fare. In those days, many Beijing visitors never had the chance to try Beijing foods before they left.

When filming a documentary series called “The Food Culture of China” (produced by Kikkoman and Iwanami

Productions, Inc.), I accompanied the crew in China for several months through 1983 and 1984. In the capital, we stayed at the Beijing Hotel, where the main dining room then served Sichuan cuisine. Thanks to the graciousness of their famous chef, Mr. Huang Shiyun, it was at this hotel that I first



The kitchen at the Beijing Hotel when we filmed “The Food Culture of China”

came to learn of authentic *dandan mian*, the spicy noodle dish from Sichuan. In those days the most popular cuisine in Beijing was Sichuan, even in the best hotels. Again, this may have been because there were not many strictly Beijing dishes that were seen as being suitable for formal dining.

The Beijing Hotel has since undergone changes, and its main dining room is now home to the Tanjia Restaurant, which serves *Tanjiacai* (Tan Family) cuisine. During the Qing Dynasty, when high officials in Beijing invited one another to their residences for banquets, the dishes served by the Tan family from Guangdong were reputed to be among the best in the city. After the Xinhai Revolution (Chinese Revolution of 1911–1912), the Tanjiacai Restaurant opened, and was later relocated to the Beijing Hotel. Though the cuisine was Cantonese, it has undergone many modifications over the years to appeal to Beijing residents. Tanjia is known as one of the best restaurants in Beijing, and its famous dishes include braised shark fin.

## Xiaochi – Old Beijingers’ Favorite Snacks

Near the end of the ‘80s, American fast foods began to gradually appear in China. The people of Beijing naturally enjoy eating out, and since most families are dual-income households, people commonly eat breakfast at street stalls on their way to work. In this sense, Beijing was already accustomed to the concept of fast foods, and they accepted American fast foods with little resistance, despite the relatively high price. The presence of quintessential Beijing foods started giving way to western foods and Cantonese foods. This decline at least partly came about because the accomplished chefs who were active when we filmed the documentary had mostly retired. These circumstances evoked a sense of crisis among the locals that Beijing foods, the foods so closely attached to the lives of the populace, might be lost. A movement to reverse the declining presence of Beijing cuisine arose around the end of 1990.

Those who have been living in Beijing for many years are

called “*lao* (old) Beijingers,” and *lao* Beijingers’ favorite *xiaochi* are simple yet unique snacks whose major ingredients are grains and beans. These *xiaochi* include *doufu nao* (unmolded soft tofu scooped out while it is still hot and covered

with a sauce), *dou jiang* (soy milk), *youtiao* (deep-fried, twisted bread sticks), *baozi* (steamed buns with various fillings), *zhima shaobing* (hard buns with



Yiwanju is a thriving restaurant serving popular Beijing dishes.

sesame), *chao ma doufu* (the scum left after mung bean milk is made is extracted and stir-fried in lard—it is a gray colored food that tastes like a vegetarian foie gras, and is hard to find these days) and *douzhi* (supernatant of fermented mung bean milk; tastes and smells sour). These snacks used to be very common *lao*-Beijing dishes, and could be easily found almost anywhere in the capital before the war. Today, you may still find them being served in the retro themed restaurants that have recently become very popular.

Currently, there are several such restaurants that offer old Beijing tastes, including *xiaochi* dishes, *zha jiang mian* (noodles topped with a mixture of ground meat fried with fermented soybean paste), stir-fried dishes, and soups. Typical of these restaurants is Yiwanju, which has several locations in Beijing. In 2006, an organization called the Old Beijing Traditional Snack Association established a food court called Jiumen Xiaochi in the western district of the city. Jiumen Xiaochi houses several small stalls that each serves a particular kind of *xiaochi* dish. Sadly though, children and young customers appear to be more attracted to the hamburgers and Western-style fried chicken.

## After the Olympics

As foreigners, we may seek out old China when we visit as tourists. However, times are changing, and it is becoming more difficult to find remnants of the past. When preparations for the 2008 Beijing Olympics got started, modernization and globalization accelerated, and strikingly unconventional restaurants began to emerge. It is a mistake for foreigners to make assumptions about how things should be in China, or how authentically “Chinese” something is. Since this is an age when many foreigners visit China and many Chinese travel abroad, China has naturally gone beyond the clichéd images held by outsiders. In 2006 and 2008, I organized a discussion at the Beijing Hotel, and invited Mr. Bian Jiang, a restaurant industry journalist in Beijing. He told us that he was not worried about this trend in unconventionality, and indeed saw it as a positive change. He suggested that conventional dining,



Time-honored brand tea shop, Zhangyiyuan. The old Qianmen and Dazhalan streets have recently been restored to capture the appearance of a previous era.

where a large number of guests are seated around a large table, and each guest fills their plate from large communal platters on a carousel in the center of the table, only works when there are enough guests. Moreover, using one’s own chopsticks to take food from communal platters is an unsanitary practice. The Chinese word *gongkuai* means communal chopsticks, and Mr. Bian Jiang said he was pleased that *gongkuai* were becoming more common.



We listened to Mr. Bian Jiang, a restaurant industry journalist & critic, regarding the current status of restaurants in Beijing. (Mr. Bian is 2nd from the left, seated.)

At Chinese restaurants in Japan, no communal platter comes without communal chopsticks. It is also common in Japan for each guest to be served their portions on individual plates. Often, after showing foods arranged on a large platter to the guests, the waiter divides the servings onto individual plates for each customer. A similar trend is gradually taking hold in China as well. So far as plate design, the trend has shifted to plain white plates, which better highlight the appearance of the food. While the conventional serving style of Chinese cuisine is good for a large group of people dining together, it is less suitable for a couple or a few people having a quiet meal. It is inevitable that the serving style of Chinese cuisine will change with the times.

## New Style Restaurants – Reality in China

The Chinese love of novelty can be astounding. At one restaurant in Sanlitun (a neighborhood of embassies), with lavender colored lights and toilets, we were flabbergasted at the dishes being served. They looked like avant-garde flower arrangements. This was about six years ago. Another experience was at a celebrity restaurant in central Beijing recommended by Mr. Bian. We had to feel our way forward in complete darkness throughout the hallway from the



entrance, and when we pushed open some velvet curtains, we suddenly saw a bright room in front of us. The Italian-designed interior resembled an opera stage. Food arrangements were also innovative. One dish used a small pole on the center of the plate over which thin slices of meat were neatly draped for a stunning 3-dimensional effect. Another restaurant we visited near Sanlitun is popular with Western customers. It has glass walls and a bright open-



Moli (jasmine) is a modern restaurant in Sanlitun with many international customers. It exemplifies the new style, with art deco walls, white tablecloths and plates, and Western table settings.

ceiling to enable a clear view of the scenery outside. The tableware was Western style, and the food was light and flavorful. Compared with the two restaurants just described, this restaurant had a subdued atmosphere. At this point, we were becoming less concerned with discerning whether a restaurant was Western style or Chinese style.

For alcoholic beverages in particular, we cannot help but feel similar changes. Few tourists order strong distilled liquors (*baijiu*). Most of them ask for a Qingdao beer or Shaoxing rice wine to go with their meal. Recently, many restaurants in China feature a wide variety of domestic wines. Until recently, wines made in China were not very impressive. That has changed, and now there are several nice varieties of Chinese wines that taste crisp and refreshing. It has become quite common to serve wine with Chinese dishes, particularly in the larger cities. At least where food and drink are concerned, borders are disappearing without effort.

So, do our assumptions about Chinese style have any basis in reality? For better or worse, dining etiquette changes according to dining style, and according to how the tableware is set and the seating is arranged. Conventional table manners in China placed a great importance on the relationships between people who were gathered to dine, and the seating arrangements specifically reflected those relationships. Now it is becoming a simple matter of just sitting down and letting the waiters handle things. While that brings relief from what could be a point of stress when dining, we still feel as though something has been lost.

China's economy, of course, has significantly changed over recent years. This rapid progress of modernization and

globalization in China became especially noticeable around the time of the Beijing Olympics, and in some places prices have soared. In the past, we used to reserve the finest items on the menu, and often felt slightly uncomfortable that we were flaunting our wealth in front of the locals. Nowadays, however, Japanese tourists take a back seat to wealthy Chinese customers, and restaurants no longer rely on the patronage of "rich" tourists.

Still, there is a huge gap between urban and rural areas in China, and trends described here do not necessarily apply everywhere in China. It also is true that things are completely different between international metropolises, such as Beijing and Shanghai, and smaller provincial cities. In provincial cities, meals and accommodations are considerably cheaper than in the largest cities, and dining and food serving styles have not changed all that much. Foods are still served on communal platters with small, individual serving plates for each diner.

We may hold a certain image of Chinese dining, which partly reflects our nostalgia for dining as a large family. However, the one-child policy came into force a long time ago in China. In Beijing and Shanghai, single-family detached homes have been rapidly cleared to make way for condominiums or other types of multi-unit housing. Chinese families have become even smaller than Japanese families, and normally consist of two working parents and a child. It is no surprise that the dining style of families has changed, particularly in urban areas. Today, with many visitors from overseas and many Chinese traveling abroad, access to information is expanding, and food imports are increasing. The reality of China is changing. In more than a few ways, China is becoming more advanced than Japan.

Beijing has restaurants that represent diverse concepts. There are the time-honored brands with their long tradition, which include restaurants that serve imperial court cuisine and cuisine from other regions, as well as various new types of restaurants, such as those that serve a "healthier" Beijing roast duck with 30% less fat. Other restaurants use new twists to create different dipping sauces for hotpot dishes, a variety of medium-class restaurants respond to the needs of locals, upscale restaurants present radically innovative styles that attract a celebrity clientele, and restaurants that feature *xiaochi* dishes maintain the flavors of times past.

Impressions can be very different. Yet, it is all the reality of Beijing. (Photos: Courtesy of Haruko Kimura)