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# Contents

**5**

**Exploring the Ancient  
Capital's Flavours**

**10**

**Beijing Copper Pot  
Instant-Boiled Meat**

**18**

**Beijing Roast Duck:  
Enduring Culinary  
Delicacy**

**24**

**Memories of a City's  
Fresh Flavours**

**30**

**Savouring the Capital  
City's Exotic Foods**

**36**

**Beijing's Dim Sum:  
Flavours of Gratitude  
and Affection**

**42**

**The Aroma of Fruit  
Permeates the  
Ancient Capital  
in Golden Autumn**

**48**

**Culture Express**



# Exploring the Ancient Capital's Flavours

Text by Ma Kai Photo by Mark

As the ginkgo leaves of Dajue Temple curl into delicate, golden foil in the crisp autumn breeze, and the withered lotus flowers of Shichahai fold their reflections into the subtle gradients of a traditional Chinese ink-wash scroll painting, Beijing's autumn, bearing its treasure box adorned with seasonal delicacies, announces its arrival amongst the houses of blue brick and grey tile. Autumn in this ancient capital unfolds as a profoundly three-dimensional poem, using heaven and earth as its paper and the entire landscape as its ink. It is a season accompanied by an irresistible symphony of culinary offerings: the fragrant steam rising from a bubbling copper pot, the sweet, glistening crackle of *tanghulu* (the traditional hawthorn skewered and coated in a brittle sugar shell) and the mouth-watering, crisp-skinned perfection of a roast duck fresh from the oven. Beneath the intricate interplay of light and shadow cast by traditional restaurant lintels, and reflected in the vast, contemporary glass facades of modern eateries, countless taste memories intermingle and weave themselves into a single, flowing metropolitan banquet. This grand culinary symphony, as it were, boils the very soul of the entire city into a concentrated, golden and transparent autumnal broth, thereby rendering the unique autumnal flavour of Beijing its most vibrant and distinctive urban intellectual property.







▲ Diners savour instant-boiled meat in a copper pot during the Start of Autumn (*Liqiu*)

## The Philosophy of Life in the Vibrant Autumn

During Beijing's autumn, individuals can finally bid a welcome farewell to summer's oppressive heat, experiencing a profound sense of physical and mental rejuvenation. It is precisely now that the time-honoured dietary tradition of "*tieqiubiao*"—the practice of "fleshing out in autumn" to prepare for winter's harsh cold—officially commences, marking the beginning of a grand celebration dedicated to the city's uniquely delectable autumnal cuisine.

*Tieqiubiao*, though a simple term, encapsulates the profound life philosophy of Beijingers. In days gone by, summer heat was often unbearable, leading to a widespread loss of appetite. Following the "Start of Autumn," one of China's 24 solar terms, the weather gradually cools, invigorating people's desire for food. It thus became essential for people to increase their meat intake to replenish vital calories and prepare adequately for the approaching winter. This practice, born of necessity, has gradually evolved into a cherished tradition.

What appears to be a straightforward act of fulfilling a basic human appetite is, in essence, a demonstration of a life philosophy characterised by a harmonious conformity to nature's rhythms and a respectful adherence to the turning seasons.

For Beijingers honouring the tradition of *tieqiubiao*, instant-boiled mutton is the paramount choice. Whether found in deep hutongs (traditional alleys in Beijing) or in the bustling restaurants along main streets, a steaming serving of this dish becomes the star of the table. The scene is defined by a copper pot with a clear soup base simmering over a charcoal fire, accompanied by plates of mutton sliced as thin as paper and meticulously arranged. Diners select a few delicate slices, immersing them gently into the boiling broth. As the clear soup bubbles, the mutton instantly changes colour, becoming coated in a fresh, fragrant broth. Dipped into a rich sesame paste seasoning, it offers an immediate sensation of satisfaction upon entering the mouth, leaving behind a lingering and memorable aftertaste.

Aside from instant-boiled mutton, *zhizi* grilled meat offers another

excellent choice for Beijingers observing the *tieqiubiao* tradition. This dish represents a distinctive grilling method unique to Beijing's culinary landscape. Its name derives from the "*zhizi*" itself: a circular iron grill crafted from closely-set iron bars. Once the grill is searingly hot, marinated beef and mutton are spread across its surface and swiftly turned with long, specially-designed chopsticks. As the succulent fat renders out, the rich aroma of the meat permeates the air, creating an irresistible fragrance that immediately stimulates the appetite. Enjoying this sizzling grilled meat, accompanied by an ice-cold bottle of Beibingyang (Arctic Ocean) soda or a small measure of fiery Erguotou (a celebrated Beijing liquor), allows people to fully appreciate the simple, inherent beauty of life within the vibrant atmosphere.

Indeed, the tradition of *tieqiubiao* is incomplete without the quintessential Beijing Roast Duck. Within time-honoured establishments such as Quanjude and Bianyifang, rows of ducks, their skins a striking crimson with a lustrous sheen of oil, immediately captivate diners. The practice

is to wrap a slice of crispy-skinned, succulent meat, along with fresh scallions, cucumber and a smear of sweet soybean paste, within a thin pancake. The first bite is a revelation: the crisp skin gives way to tender meat, perfectly complemented by the refreshing vegetables and the rich, savoury-sweet paste. This culinary act instantly awakens the palate, creating a profound sense of delight that is the very essence of a Beijing autumn.

## The Colourful Flavours of Autumnal Fruits

Autumn is unmistakably a season of bountiful harvest. The city's expansive lands generously yield a variety of fruits, which become an indispensable source of fresh flavour within the seasonal cuisine enjoyed by its residents.

As the autumn breeze begins to blow, the persimmon trees in Beijing's suburban areas are laden with ripe fruit. A fully matured persimmon has a peel as delicate as paper. With a gentle tear, its orange-red, luminous, soft and sweet flesh is revealed. A single bite releases an immediate burst of juice, leaving a rich, sweet aroma to linger on the tongue. This is, without doubt,



▲ Chestnuts

essence of autumn's sweetest flavour. In addition to eating them fresh, Beijingers also uphold the tradition of preparing dried persimmons. The process involves peeling persimmons, sun-drying them and then kneading them. Under the sun's rays, the persimmons gradually shrink, and a delicate layer of white, natural sugar crystals forms on their surface. The result is soft and intensely sweet, retaining the fruit's inherent flavour while developing a unique chewiness—a truly distinctive autumn delicacy.

Hawthorn is another fruit highly

favoured during the autumn. In Beijing, the most iconic way to enjoy it is as *tanghulu*. The crystal-clear, hard sugar coating encases the vibrant red fruit, creating an alluring lustre in the sunlight. Hawthorn cake is another delicacy deeply cherished by locals. It is prepared by boiling the fruit into a smooth purée, which is then set into a cake and cut into bite-sized pieces. Characterised by a soft, slightly glutinous texture and a perfect balance of sweet and sour flavours, this traditional snack is both appetite-stimulating and effective at cutting through rich, greasy foods.

The pear is another favoured autumn fruit among Beijingers, serving as a potent ally in their efforts to combat seasonal dryness. Among the common varieties found in the Beijing market are the Jingbai pear, the

▼ Hawthorns



▼ Pear soup







▲ Hairtail

Ya pear and the Xuehua pear. These can be enjoyed in their natural state after peeling, or they can be stewed into a soothing soup. This preparation involves adding rock sugar, white fungus, wolfberries and other complementary ingredients, which are then simmered gently over a low heat. The process continues until the pear flesh becomes wonderfully tender and the broth thickens richly. Consuming a spoonful provides a deeply comforting sensation of warmth and nourishment that pervades the entire body.

As autumn sets in, roasted chestnuts become a beloved seasonal treat for Beijingers. Queues often form at street stalls offering this delicacy, with eager patrons patiently waiting for their share. The air quickly fills with the wonderfully sweet aroma of freshly roasted chestnuts, a scent that drifts enticingly through the streets. With a gentle squeeze, the once-firm shell yields, revealing the tender, golden flesh within. Place a piece in the mouth, and a comforting warmth, rich sweetness and nutty fragrance envelop the senses—a moment of pure delight.

## Autumn Waters Offer a Unique Freshness

During autumn, the dining tables of Beijingers are also graced with the distinctive and delightful flavours introduced by an array of seafood and river food.

Autumn marks the season when river crabs reach their peak, brimming with rich, delicious meat. In Beijing's markets, crabs sourced from Tianjin are particularly sought after. Once steamed, their shells turn a vibrant red. Opening the shell reveals golden crab roe, resembling congealed fat, which emanates a deeply tempting aroma. A gentle bite allows the roe to melt on the tongue, its rich and mellow flavour intoxicating the palate with pure freshness. Next, people should savour the tender, sweet and succulent crab meat. A light dip in ginger and vinegar sauce not only neutralises any residual fishiness but also intensifies the natural sweetness. Each mouthful is like savouring a precious gift bestowed by the autumn waters.

Among the array of seafood,

Beijingers exhibit a particular fondness for hairtail during the autumn season. Whether prepared by braising or frying, this fish offers a unique and delightful flavour. Braised hairtail, renowned for its savoury taste and the inherent tenderness of its flesh, presents an excellent accompaniment to rice. Fried hairtail, on the other hand, boasts a satisfying crispiness on the exterior while remaining remarkably tender inside. Whether served as a simple snack or as part of a larger meal, its appeal is simply irresistible.

The meat of the mantis shrimp is also particularly plump and delicious during the autumn months. Following a simple process of boiling, diners can readily savour its fresh and delicate flavour. Once the shell is peeled away, the crystal-clear meat is revealed, possessing a firm yet delightfully chewy texture. When dipped in a specially prepared seasoning sauce, the meat's inherent sweetness and freshness spread throughout the mouth, creating an unforgettable and deeply satisfying taste experience.

## Memories of the Ancient City Bestowed by Autumn's Charm

During autumn in Beijing, the culinary scene is graced with a splendid variety of seasonal pastries. These creations not only embody time-honoured culinary techniques but also deliver a delightful sweetness and profound comfort to the palate.

*Zilaihong*, a quintessential Beijing-style mooncake, is an indispensable element of the Mid-Autumn Festival in old Beijing. Its appearance is distinctive, characterised by a prominent red circle stamped on the surface. The most classic filling is a blend of five different nuts and seeds. The small cake is generously packed with crushed melon seeds, walnut kernels and almonds, all perfectly complemented by a fine red bean paste. The resulting taste is richly sweet and satisfying, yet notably not greasy.

*Lüdagunr* ("donkey roll") is a popular snack made of glutinous rice rolls generously stuffed with a sweet red bean paste filling, finished with a fine dusting of soybean flour. Its name derives from its resemblance to a donkey rolling on loess ground, thus covered in dust. The treat boasts a wonderfully soft and glutinous texture. Inside, the sweetness of the red bean paste and the distinct aroma of the soybean flour meld together harmoniously, creating a truly unique and beloved flavour.

*Wandouhuang*, also known as pea-flour cake, is a prominent highlight among Beijingers' cherished autumn snacks. After indulging in the season's richer dishes, a bite of this fresh, delicately sweet cake offers a welcome respite, allowing the palate to relax. Its light texture and subtle flavour make it the perfect choice for a refreshing autumn afternoon tea.

## A Diverse Range of Culinary Experiences

Through the passage of time and the ongoing exchange and mutual learning between civilisations, Western cuisine has gracefully become part of Beijing's autumn culinary scene. It now presents a diverse and

intriguing fusion of flavours, bringing a novel and complementary experience to the dining tables of Beijingers throughout the season.

For older generations of Beijingers, their earliest recollections of Western cuisine are invariably linked to the Moscow Restaurant. This was a place adorned with chandeliers casting an amber glow and furnished with red velvet seating that exuded warmth, where waitresses in gowns served rich, thick pot-stewed beef. The experience of scooping up potatoes and carrots with a silver spoon, their aroma redolent with meat and an authentic Russian character, represented a true mark of prestige at banquets during that era.

In contemporary Beijing, Western food has transcended its former status as a mere symbol of an exotic atmosphere; it now represents a simple pleasure within the fabric of everyday life. Within the towering skyscrapers of the CBD, a Teppanyaki chef in an open kitchen showcases his accomplished skills; the rising flames artfully mirror diners clad in suits, their wine glasses lifted in a toast. Behind the sleek glass curtain walls of Sanlitun, an Italian chef meticulously arranges fresh basil leaves into a jade-like tower. The moment the olive oil sizzles over high heat, the entire restaurant seems bathed in the glow of the Tuscan sun. Even old courtyards in traditional hutongs have been transformed into eateries where Chinese and Western traditions are artfully

combined. Here, chefs craft classic fusion dishes by combining local ingredients with Western techniques.

Western restaurants in Beijing are like scattered pearls, each emitting a distinct lustre across the ancient capital. Some embody the charm of old villas, and others embrace a postmodern avant-garde spirit, while many strike a balance between tradition and modernity. In hutong eateries, spaghetti Bolognese might be served in a small cloisonné pot, accompanied by cocktails made with Erguotou. When diners raise their goblets, what shimmers within is not only Burgundy wine but also the city's profoundly inclusive spirit.

Autumn in Beijing is a love letter penned by heaven and earth, and its most heartfelt signature is undoubtedly its delectable cuisine. When an office worker carries home a box of snacks from Daoxiangcun, when roasted chestnut pots in hutongs across the city begin their seasonal sizzle once more and when a chef lifts the cover from a roast duck oven fuelled by jujube wood, the flavour of the entire city culminates in a tangible warmth felt in the palm of the hand. Accompanied by the melody of "Big Bowl Tea Featuring Qianmen Sentiment," which has resonated for decades, Beijingers can taste their own deep autumn memory in a single line of its lyrics: "My grandpa often played here when he was young."

▼ Steak and veggies







# Beijing Copper Pot Instant-Boiled Meat

Text by Zhang Jian

Native Beijingers often remark: “Once autumn arrives, a dozen servings of instant-boiled mutton from a copper pot are all but inevitable.” As the chill sets in, nothing soothes the body and spirit more than gathering with loved ones around a copper pot heated by charcoal, watching thin slices of mutton swirl gently in the simmering broth. Each bite fills the mouth with its fresh, aromatic flavour.

For native Beijingers, instant-boiled mutton in a copper pot is more than just a delicacy; it carries a treasured sentiment woven deeply into the fabric of daily life.

## Enjoying Mutton in the Perfect Way

In Beijing, “hot pot” is synonymous with “instant-boiled meat.” Many time-honoured restaurants display “*shuanrou*” (“instant-boiled meat”) on their signs, underscoring its place as the city’s most quintessential flavour.

The meticulous attention to detail that characterises native Beijingers is vividly apparent in every facet of their culinary practices. It extends from the naming of restaurants, which often carry a sense of heritage, to the thoughtful selection of seasonal ingredients that reflect the rhythm of the year. It includes the sourcing of raw materials, the precise choice of edible portions and the refined cutting techniques employed in preparation. Even the tableware is carefully considered, while rules of seating at the dining table and the art of eating itself are treated as part of the ritual. Beijingers have passed down these elaborate customs with great care, preserving both the unwritten rules of the imperial city and the enduring folk traditions established through generations.

Beijing’s instant-boiled mutton epitomises all these careful considerations. Among Beijingers, when people speak of instant-boiled meat without specifying a type, it is universally understood to mean mutton.

The quality of hot pot begins with the quality of the meat itself. Most of Beijing’s instant-boiled meat restaurants source their sheep from regions such as Gansu and Ningxia in the west of Beijing collectively known in Chinese as “Xikou.” To the north, Zhangjiakou, Zhangbei and Kulun provide another major source, referred to as “Beikou.” The Xikou sheep, raised along the banks of the Yellow River, are also called “riparian zone sheep.” The largest typically weigh around 30 kilograms (kg), with slender frames, lean meat of a delicate pink hue and distinctly white fat. Their flesh is tender, succulent and free of any overpowering odour. Beikou sheep still produce high-quality meat regarded as second only to that of their Xikou counterparts.

Before the development of cold chain transportation, sheep merchants would

drive their flocks to Madian, located in the southern area of today’s remnants of Yuan Dadu’s northern city wall, just outside Deshengmen. In the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), Madian originally served as a main centre for horse trading in Beijing. Later, when horse trading was moved to Guanxiang, also beyond Deshengmen, Madian was gradually transformed into a vital distribution hub for the live sheep trade. Once chosen, however, the sheep were not slaughtered immediately. Instead, the animals were given time to rest, to recover their strength and regain vitality. Only after this recuperation would they yield meat of the finest taste and texture.

The refined standard of mutton in Beijing has consistently been indebted to this crucial stage.

Although mutton possesses an inherent deliciousness, not every part of the sheep is suitable for cooking, and in fact only a limited number of cuts are considered appropriate for culinary preparation. Take *huangguatiao*, for example, a small strip of lean meat taken from the sheep’s hindlegs. This piece is tender and flavourful, and has long been regarded as a prime selection for gourmands. The shanks, covered in a thin membrane and laced with sinew, display a firm resilience and distinctive grain. From each sheep, no more than 150 grams (g)

## TIPS

### Beijing’s Copper Pot Instant-Boiled Meat and the Hot Pots of Sichuan and Chongqing

The precise origins of Beijing’s instant-boiled mutton in a copper pot are somewhat unclear. Legend has it that during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the imperial family once held a lavish banquet to honour more than 1,000 elderly people. At this grand feast, instant-boiled mutton in a copper pot was the highlight, described as both impressive and full of vitality. At that time, however, it remained a delicacy reserved for the imperial court. Only towards the end of the Qing Dynasty did it begin to spread to ordinary households, gradually becoming one of Beijing’s most treasured winter culinary traditions.

Unlike the fiery hot pots of Sichuan and Chongqing, Beijing’s instant-boiled mutton offers a subtler experience. The Sichuan style emphasises bold, stir-fried seasonings and the penetrating heat of pepper oil, while Beijing’s version relies on a clear broth, lightly enhanced with scallions, ginger and wolfberries. This approach honours the mutton’s natural flavour, allowing its quality to speak for itself.







▲ Mutton rolls

of this meat is considered suitable for instant-boiling preparation. Once cooked, however, the shank offers a crisp, tender and satisfyingly chewy texture that many consider irresistible. Another distinctive cut is the meat found behind the sheep's neck, referred to in Chinese as *shangnao*, owing to its proximity to the head. Experienced diners can identify it instantly, as the streaks of fat within the lean tissue form marbled patterns. Once boiled, this fat develops a light, crisp texture, entirely without greasiness, giving the meat a unique and memorable flavour. The tenderloin, a slim, elongated strip, lies close to the spine. With its fine muscle fibres and relatively lean texture, it is not suited for extended boiling but is best enjoyed once its colour has just begun to change, delivering a fresh and delicate taste. The ligaments within the sheep's trotters constitute yet another delicacy, recognised as two of the crispest components available. With about 50 percent fat, they are both succulent and extraordinarily delicious. The meat taken from the rump, known in Chinese as *modang*, is soft in texture but, being close to the tail, carries the strongest odour. Containing around 20 percent fat, it yields a flavour that is rich yet tender. The entire section of meat at the upper part of the hindlegs forms a "Y" shape, known as *sancha*. Many restaurants

call the front leg portion *xiaosancha* ("small Y") and the hindleg cut *dasancha* ("large Y"). The latter, with its higher fat content of roughly 50 percent, is generally considered more tender and delicious than the former. On the outside of the thigh lies another cut with more lean meat than the *dasancha*, exceptionally tender in quality and highly valued by diners. It is fair to say that Beijingers have elevated the appreciation of mutton to its very pinnacle.

In Beijing, restaurants that serve instant-boiled meat and can showcase these prized cuts of mutton do so with a clear sense of pride.

## Outstanding Cutting Techniques

For native Beijingers, authentic instant-boiled mutton is defined by the principle of "one clear and two whites." The "clear" refers to the transparent broth, while the "two whites" indicate the spotless porcelain plates. Freshly sliced mutton, regardless of the cut, must be neatly arranged, and the slices should cling to the plate even when the plate is held upright, proving they contain enough natural mucus to guarantee freshness. When

placed into the pot, the absence of blood foam—known as "scalding the plate"—further demonstrates this freshness. This condition, described as a "dry plate," ensures the plate itself remains pristine throughout the process.

Achieving the finest results depends on the seemingly simple yet vital process of meat pressing. In earlier times, sheep purchased from Madian were fattened further before being slaughtered. Each part was then carefully pressed: ice cubes were first laid down and covered with matting, mutton were placed on top, followed by a layer of oilcloth and finally another covering of ice. This pressing, maintained for a full day and night, expelled residual blood and strong odours, leaving the meat firmer, cleaner in taste and perfectly suited for precise slicing. Through this patient method, the mutton's quality was secured, ensuring both consistency and superior flavour for instant-boiled preparation.

A skilled cutter approaches mutton with the same meticulous care that a painter devotes to a pristine sheet of traditional Chinese rice paper. With the rhythmic rise

and fall of the blade, each stroke must follow the natural grain of the meat to produce uniformly thin slices. The most accomplished cutters achieve such precision that their slices can almost be measured by a ruler: 13.33 centimetres (cm) in length, 3.33 cm in width and no more than 0.9 millimetres in thickness. Cuts of this standard are considered perfectly proportioned, designed to provide a single mouthful that is balanced in every way—neither too much nor too little, but exactly right.

Beijingers often remark that cutting skills are the true facade of instant-boiled meat. In a distinguished restaurant, mutton displayed on white porcelain plates frequently resembles a still life painting. The *dasancha* slices, composed of both fat and lean, form a striking scene, half cloud and half evening glow. The *xiaosancha* and *modang* slices are admired for their delicate, rosy colouring, subtle yet appealing. Each piece of *huangguatiao* shows a natural gradient of colour, shading from deep tones to lighter hues, like a traditional Chinese painting rendered with graceful brushwork.

To master such intricate cutting skills, a cutter must have personally processed at least 500 kg of mutton. Though this figure may sound like an exaggeration, it is entirely accurate. True proficiency is built only through patient, daily repetition.

When it comes to cutting skills, no discussion is complete without mentioning Donglaishun, the time-honoured brand famed across Beijing for its instant-boiled meat.

The origins of this century-old brand are strikingly humble. In 1903, Ding Deshan used borrowed silver dollars to set up a small noodle stall in Dong'an Market, Wangfujing. With only a bench, a cart and a wooden table, he began his first efforts to make a living. His endeavours culminated in the founding of the Donglaishun Mutton Restaurant in 1914.

The shift from a noodle stall to a mutton restaurant marked a leap in both offerings and cutting expertise. Ding understood that masterful knife work was essential to distinguish instant-boiled meat. He befriended a leading cutter from Zhengyanglou, then regarded as the city's

finest restaurant, and hired him at a generous wage for Donglaishun. This collaboration produced mutton slices that became famous across the capital, praised as "as thin as paper, as uniform as a ruler's marking, as neat as a line, and as elegant as flowers."

Donglaishun's renowned cutting skills earned acclaim from every quarter. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the restaurant was chosen to host diplomatic banquets. At a banquet for US President Richard Nixon (1913–1994) hosted by Premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976), Nixon praised the mutton slices, so thin they resembled cicada wings. Henry Kissinger (1923–2023) and his wife marvelled at the artistic, sunflower-like arrangements

of the meat. Later, when Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) entertained US President Gerald Rudolph Ford (1913–2006), Donglaishun presented *shangnao* meat carved into 40 perfectly uniform slices—an achievement celebrated as a true culinary masterpiece.

In the past, Donglaishun's cutters endured great hardship to refine their craft. Years of wielding knives left their hands deformed, and relentless labour brought on rheumatism. Those gnarled hands stood as proof of their devotion, and it was with these hands that they produced cicada-wing-thin mutton slices that testified to unwavering persistence.

By the 1970s, growing demand revealed the limits of manual cutting. Even the most

▼ Mutton's natural mucus causes the meat to stick to the plate, a sign of freshness





skilled cutter could only process a dozen kg a day, while customer queues continued to lengthen. As a result, Donglaishun began exploring the use of machines to replace hand-cutting.

Since 1975, meat cutting has been largely automated by machines, producing slices of uniform thickness and dramatically improving efficiency. Diners no longer wait in long queues, able instead to enjoy instant-boiled meat with ease. The memory of master cutters crafting exquisite slices has gradually

▼ A cloisonné-decorated copper pot



faded from the minds of Beijingers.

Today, machine-cut mutton has become commonplace. However, for native Beijingers, hand-sliced meat still represents the true soul of instant-boiled mutton—a flavourful experience infused with the spirit of the cutters' focus, patience, perseverance and tradition.

## A Complete Instant-Boiled Meat Experience

Beijing's distinctive instant-boiled mutton in a copper pot is celebrated not only for its tender meat and refined cutting skills but also for the entire meticulous process. A purple copper pot is matched with elegant porcelain bowls for seasonings and accompanied by a jar of well-marinated sugar garlic.

The copper pot is crafted with an upright central tube that serves as a chimney for charcoal smoke. Bright red flames rise within the tube, heating the charcoal, boiling the water and releasing clouds of steam. Even today, many native Beijingers remain fond of this traditional

method, drawn to the fierce intensity of the charcoal fire. When slices of meat are slipped into the pot and briefly scalded, their fresh, tender aroma instantly fills the air. For this reason, the copper pot used for boiling meat has never been regarded as a casual vessel.

Native Beijingers maintain that the pot should be made of purple copper and the heat source must be charcoal. Copper's excellent heat conductivity, combined with the fierce charcoal fire, ensures the broth reaches boiling point quickly. This vigorously boiling broth is essential for instant-boiled mutton, as the method requires the meat to be cooked instantly after being placed in the pot. It is then swiftly removed and enjoyed, preserving its natural freshness and flavour.

The design of the copper pot also reflects ingenuity. Its chimney structure, broad at the base and narrow at the top, holds more charcoal while improving ventilation. The broth vessel, by contrast, is wide at the top and narrow at the bottom, ensuring that meat slices sink quickly and can be retrieved with ease. For native Beijingers, this clever shape means a single pair of chopsticks is all that's needed to enjoy instant-boiled mutton.

The history of the copper pot can be traced back to the Qing Dynasty's imperial court. During the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1735–1796), cloisonné-decorated copper pots were used within the palace. Filled with delicacies and adorned with gilded, colourful motifs, they radiated a sense of unmatched splendour and luxury. Such exquisite vessels were far beyond the reach of ordinary people at that time. Today, in time-honoured establishments such as Donglaishun, the accompanying bowls and plates are crafted fine blue-and-white porcelain from Jingdezhen, a renowned centre for porcelain production in China. The intricate patterns, set against the rosy tones of sliced mutton, create a visual feast before the first bite. Diners gathered around the copper pot are left with an impression of added opulence.

Even today, while the base remains a clear broth, some restaurants traditionally add chopped scallions and slices of ginger. Establishments with a keener eye for detail



▲ Clear broth for Beijing copper pot instant-boiled meat

may include dried shrimps, wolfberries and mushroom stock, making the broth both more nourishing and flavourful. Enthusiasts often begin by scalding sheep tails to enrich the broth, the rendered oil greatly enhancing the taste of the meat. In the past, a distinctive accompaniment to alcoholic drinks in instant-boiled restaurants was a dish called braised chicken soup jelly. This consisted largely of jelly with only a small amount of chicken. The jelly was meant to enrich the flavour of the pot, while the meat complemented the alcohol. Together, instant-boiled mutton and chicken soup jelly created a truly unique and memorable taste.

Fresh, high-quality mutton is essential for instant-boiled success, but the flavour ultimately depends on a carefully prepared seasoning sauce. Sesame paste is central: its rich, mellow taste neutralises any strong odour while enhancing the meat's deliciousness. Sesame paste and leek flowers are a perfect pairing, akin to salt and pepper in Western cuisine.

This modest bowl of seasoning is the closely guarded secret of each restaurant. Common additions include pickled tofu, chilli oil, rice vinegar, coriander, scallions, ginger and garlic. There is a specific order for combining the seven seasonings in one bowl: first mix cooking wine, shrimp oil, soy sauce and leek flowers thoroughly, and then add pickled tofu and sesame paste. Chilli oil may be added for spice. Mixing clockwise prevents spills and symbolises smooth sailing. In time-honoured restaurants, the seasonings are prepared in-house and served at the table. Even with the same broth, the flavour differs, and discerning diners can recognise a restaurant's style with a single dip of their chopsticks.

Pickled sugar garlic, an essential accompaniment, is made from large green-sprouted garlic bulbs weighing over 50 g, with full, plump cloves. Dug up three days before the Summer Solstice and transported without cleaning off the soil, the garlic is preserved at peak freshness.

Over more than 100 days and through more than 10 steps—including salting, marinating, rinsing, drying, rolling jars and degassing—it is transformed into a pickle that is sweet, sour, crisp and refreshing. Eating two cloves alongside mutton helps cut through any greasiness and restores the appetite with a satisfying crunch.

All are welcome to enjoy this leisurely feast—an enduring culinary tradition born of Beijing's instant-boiled meat.

## Colourful Instant-Boiled Meat Restaurants

Beijing's instant-boiled meat is more than a dish; it is a cultural cornerstone and a treasured city memory. Dating back to the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China period (1912–1949), dozens of mutton restaurants thrived. With the arrival of autumn breezes, the city's streets were famously lined with “*shuan*” signs, signalling this beloved delicacy. Today, from time-



honoured establishments to modern chains, Beijing offers countless ways to enjoy this authentic tradition. For visitors, trying one of these restaurants is an experience not to be missed.

Since 1994, Nanmen Shuanrou has been a benchmark for Beijing food lovers. Affectionately known as “South Gate Instant-Boiled Meat” for its location near the south gate of the Temple of Heaven Park, the restaurant sources lambs from its own ranch in Hebei, where standardised breeding ensures exceptionally tender and flavourful mutton. Signature dishes include hand-cut mutton, fresh tripe and *shangnao*, each offering a distinct taste that complements the others. A particular highlight is the founder’s special condiment, blending coriander, scallions, sesame paste, leek flowers, pickled tofu and marinated shrimp oil. This aromatic mixture, with its lingering aftertaste, captures the authentic essence of traditional Beijing instant-boiled meat—a harmonious balance of fragrance, freshness and flavour.

Jubaoyuan in Niujie delivers a classic instant-boiled meat experience, where copper pots, rising steam and rich aromas create a lively, bustling scene. Long queues form, especially during festivals, as diners wait for authentic charcoal-fired copper pot mutton. The restaurant carefully sources premium beef and mutton from Hebei and Inner Mongolia, ensuring freshness and full flavour. Hand-cut mutton slices are tender and enhanced by a signature seasoning sauce. A standout feature is the freshly baked, crisp pancake, whose sesame paste and juicy mutton combine to create an aromatic, satisfying bite that leaves diners thoroughly content.

Though perhaps less renowned than the previous two, Manhengji Hot Pot has built a loyal following of regular patrons. The restaurant maintains its own supply base in Inner Mongolia, guaranteeing high-quality, pollution-free lamb. In addition to a wide range of instant-boiled meats, it also serves pea flour cakes, sesame tofu and sesame paste sugar cakes—dishes that stir fond memories for native Beijingers.

Yitiaolong Restaurant on Qianmen



▲ Coriander

▲ Sesame pancakes

▲ Fermented tofu

▲ Sesame paste

▶ Sugar garlic



▲ Instant-boiled mutton

Street is a notable representative of Beijing’s halal instant-boiled meat establishments. Founded in 1785, the 50th year of Emperor Qianlong’s reign, it began as Nanhengshun Mutton Restaurant. According to legend, an incognito visit by Emperor Guangxu (reign: 1875–1908) later inspired its popular nickname, “One Dragon.” Officially renamed “One Dragon Mutton Restaurant” in 1921, it was designated as a time-honoured Chinese brand in 2006. The restaurant carefully selects ingredients for its copper pot halal mutton, ensuring authentic flavour. Paper-thin, hand-cut slices cook quickly, yielding a tender yet chewy texture. Paired with sesame paste, sugar garlic and sesame pancakes, Yitiaolong’s instant-boiled meat delivers a distinct and authentic taste of old Beijing.

Beiping Three Brothers is dedicated to preserving the authentic flavour of instant-boiled meat, offering only five premium cuts of mutton: *shangnao*, *modang*, tenderloin, shanks and *huanguatiao*. This careful selection ensures a balanced taste with a lean-to-fat ratio of 7:3. All mutton is hand-cut on-site, following the respected “dry plate”

and “upright plate” standards that mark the highest quality of sliced meat. When briefly scalded in the broth of a purple copper pot fuelled by charcoal, the slices turn exquisitely tender, almost melting in the mouth. To highlight the meat’s natural flavour and preserve its original character, the broth is simply seasoned with scallions and ginger.

Yangfang Shengli Instant-Boiled Mutton has surged in popularity. Its roomy dining hall, traditional charcoal-fired copper pots, meticulously hand-cut mutton, crisp vegetables and distinctive pancakes make it an excellent spot for gatherings with friends. Yangdaye Instant-Boiled Meat draws the eye with a striking red cloisonné pot and a customisable seasoning sauce. Paper-thin mutton arrives on a wooden tray alongside appetising cold dishes. Notably, the sheep head meat and sheep liver are expertly prepared, entirely free from any strong odour. The broth is thoughtfully built with scallions, ginger, mushrooms and dried shrimps, giving a clean, layered depth. For extra authenticity, a plate of rendered mutton tail oil on the side adds a mellow

richness to the broth, enhancing the umami of every slice of mutton dipped in it.

Every restaurant serving instant-boiled meat in a copper pot carries its own history and distinctive flavour. As paper-thin slices of mutton dance in the rolling broth, diners are enveloped in the aroma of sesame paste and seasonings. Around the simmering pot, conversation flows easily, turning the meal into more than just a feast for the palate. It becomes a shared experience, rich with emotion and a deep connection to Beijing’s enduring culinary culture.

From century-old brands to modern eateries, Beijing’s instant-boiled meat embodies a profound culinary pleasure. One might savour a piece of *shangnao* in a historic restaurant on Qianmen Street, or gather with friends in a hutong eatery to enjoy slices lifted fresh from the boiling broth. In these moments, history and the present intertwine, tradition merges with daily life and the rich, authentic flavours of Beijing reveal themselves in every satisfying mouthful.



# Beijing Roast Duck: Enduring Culinary Delicacy

Text by Ma Kai   Photos by Zhang Xin, Zhao Shuhua, Shi Jiaxing

As dusk descends, the traditional Beijing buildings along Qianmen Street, with their blue bricks and grey tiles, are enveloped in a soft amber glow. Before the neon lights flicker to life, the traditional Chinese lanterns hanging outside the long-established restaurants are gradually lit, their warm yellow light mingling with the faint fragrance of roasting ducks. Inside a treasured local restaurant, a seasoned cook stands on tiptoe, carefully suspending plump white ducks into an oven to roast over fruitwood flames. The jujube wood crackles amid the flames, sending sparks twirling gracefully along the oven's interior. In this vivid contrast of cool and warm tones, a flavour appears to transcend six centuries of history, spilling from the glass frontage of the roast duck restaurant and resonating with the enduring soul of the city.



▲ Quanjudu Roast Duck Restaurant on Qianmen Street, Beijing

## The Evolution of Roast Duck

To delve into the history of Beijing roast duck is to trace a three-dimensional evolution of culinary culture. The earliest recorded reference to roast duck appears in *History of the Ming Palace*, part of the *Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature*. During the Yongle period (1403–1424) of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), when Zhu Di, later known as Emperor Yongle, moved the capital from Nanjing to Beijing, the cured duck chefs from Jinling (present-day Nanjing) carried their treasured secret recipes northward. Amid the lively trade along the Grand Canal, these recipes quietly fused with the established northern method of roasting duck over fruitwood.

By the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), roast duck had gradually distinguished itself from the multitude of delectable dishes in Beijing. In the later years of

the Qing Dynasty, it rose to become one of the most esteemed delicacies on the dining tables of the city's residents, intertwining deeply with the charm of this ancient capital. At the time, people had already developed distinct and creative methods for preparing duck. They would first clean and prepare the ducks before roasting them over an open flame. During the process, seasonings such as Sichuan pepper and scallions were placed inside the cavity, allowing the duck to absorb their unique fragrances as it cooked, producing a richer and more refined flavour.

When exploring the origins of Beijing roast duck, there is one ancient establishment that must not be overlooked—Bianyifang, a time-honoured brand whose legacy stretches back more than four centuries. Founded during the Jiajing period (1522–1566) of the Ming Dynasty, it proudly claims to be the very first restaurant in Beijing dedicated to roast

duck. Its original premises were located in Mishi Hutong, just outside Xuanwu Gate. In its earliest days, the restaurant gained widespread fame for its distinctive method of roasting duck, known as the *menlu* technique. Unlike the more familiar open-flame roasting, this method relied on heating the inner walls of the oven until they were fully aglow, after which the carefully prepared ducks were suspended within the sealed chamber. The ducks were slowly roasted in this confined space, drawing heat from the radiating warmth of the oven walls rather than direct fire. As a result, the skin of the duck emerged crisp, golden and wonderfully aromatic, while the meat inside remained extraordinarily tender, juicy and flavourful. Despite the duck's thick layers of flesh, it never left a greasy aftertaste.

The cost of this particular roast duck was also rather noteworthy in earlier times. During the Qianlong period (1736–1796) of the Qing Dynasty, for instance, purchasing a single roast duck from Bianyifang cost more than one tael of silver—a sum that would have been sufficient to procure approximately 25 kilograms of flour. Despite its high price, this did not discourage officials and nobles from indulging their fondness for it. The sight of their sedan chairs lined up outside Bianyifang served as a vivid testament to its immense popularity during that era.

However, the world abounds with countless delicacies, and the lasting prestige of Beijing roast duck, both within China and around the world, is largely owed to the influence of imperial court culture. According to legend, Emperor Qianlong once came across a particularly distinctive eight treasure duck outside the palace. After returning to the palace, he instructed an imperial chef to contemplate how its key qualities might be incorporated into the preparation of roast duck. Following careful experimentation and refinement, a new roasting method was developed, later known as *gualu*. In this technique, the duck was roasted over an open flame within the oven. The choice of fuel was quite exacting, with fruitwood





▲ Slicing Beijing roast duck

▲ Wrapping roast duck and its accompaniments in a thin pancake

considered ideal and jujube wood especially favoured. Ducks roasted in this way absorbed the delicate aroma of the fruitwood, enhancing their overall flavour to a superior level. The finished dish presented an inviting appearance, with crisp skin, tender meat, a full shape and a bright reddish colour. The taste was exquisite, almost melting in the mouth.

Over time, *gualu* roast duck, once reserved exclusively for the imperial court, gradually found its way to the dining tables of the general populace, though the precise moment of this transition remains unrecorded. In 1864, the third year of Emperor Tongzhi's reign (1861–1875) during the Qing Dynasty, the Quanjude Chicken and Duck Restaurant opened outside Qianmen, specialising in *gualu* roast duck. Its innovative roasting method and distinctive flavour soon captured the attention of the public within the capital. The now-customary practice of wrapping roast duck slices in delicate pancakes is said to have originated at Quanjude. Diners could further enrich their experience by adding condiments such as thinly sliced scallions, strips of cucumber and sweet bean sauce, tailoring each bite to their own taste before rolling the duck into the soft pancakes. Through this interactive way of eating, patrons not only savoured the exquisite flavour but also enjoyed the engaging process itself. Thanks to these unique qualities, Quanjude distinguished itself among the many roast duck establishments and gradually developed into one of the city's most celebrated and enduring culinary brands.

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the fame of Beijing roast duck grew rapidly and spread far beyond the nation's borders. Its reputation extended overseas and drew admiration from many national leaders. For instance, when Premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) hosted foreign dignitaries, he would warmly recommend Beijing roast duck—a dish imbued with distinctive Chinese characteristics—inviting them to experience the depth and refinement of Chinese food culture through this celebrated delicacy.

In the present day, amidst the rapid pace of modern life,

roast duck continues to be presented in innovative ways. Some restaurants now serve thin pancakes reimagined as brightly coloured vegetable pancakes, while others feature the inventive “liquid nitrogen duck skin,” created through advanced molecular gastronomy techniques. However, regardless of how cooking styles evolve with the changing times, the dish's traditional charm remains firmly intact. Time-honoured establishments such as Bianyifang and Quanjude continue to innovate while remaining true to their heritage. In addition to the classic roast duck, they make full use of every part of the bird to craft an impressive selection of both hot and cold dishes, combining them into the colourful “Whole Duck Feast,” which provides diners with a richer and more varied gastronomic experience that honours tradition while embracing creativity.

## ■ Meticulous Cooking Techniques

Beijing roast duck encapsulates the capital city's distinctive and composed charm. It retains the refined precision of imperial cuisine while embracing the lively energy found within the city's hutongs. In this sense, it mirrors Beijing itself, balancing the grandeur of its dynastic legacy with the intricate rhythms of its residents' everyday lives. With its rich, layered flavours and enduring appeal, Beijing roast duck has become a symbolic emblem of the city's culinary heritage.

From the very selection of the duck, the preparation of Beijing roast duck follows strict and exacting standards. A specially bred duck variety, raised under carefully controlled conditions, develops a balanced fat content and meat that is both tender and firm. Only ducks of this quality can produce the perfect combination of crisp skin and juicy flesh after roasting. Even the feeding process is regarded as a refined art. The ducks are given a specially formulated diet, provided at precise times and in measured amounts, while being allowed sufficient space to move freely. With a regimen consisting of 30 percent feeding and 70 percent



Accompaniments for Beijing roast duck

Crisp-skinned duck meat slices, arranged in the shape of a blooming peony

Thin pancakes for wrapping roast duck

Slices of roast duck meat with crisp skin



attentive care, the ducks are nurtured to their ideal state, ensuring the finest results when finally cooked.

The roasting process is crucial to the distinctive flavour of Beijing roast duck, with the oven serving as an indispensable instrument. The traditional *gualu* and *menlu* roasting methods are still practised today, preserving centuries of craftsmanship. The *menlu* oven, used at Bianyifang, resembles a large, solid earthenware pot. Within its enclosed chamber, the duck is slowly cooked by radiant heat and steam—much like aged Pu'er tea gently steeping in a purple clay teapot—producing a mellow and refined aroma. By contrast, the *gualu* oven used at Quanjude is spacious and open, more akin to a grand stage. Inside, jujube and pear wood crackle brightly, their flames imparting a delightful fragrance as they roast the duck to a golden, translucent crispness. The fruity aroma seeps through the duck's pores, enriching the meat with a subtle sweetness and depth.

Prior to roasting, a uniform coating of maltose syrup is carefully brushed over the entire body of the duck. This glossy layer not only lends the skin its rich, lustrous colour but also forms a protective barrier under high heat, helping to seal in the meat's natural juices. The subsequent drying process is among the most demanding steps. The duck must be hung upright in an environment with precisely controlled temperature and humidity for about 12 hours, allowing the sugar to fully penetrate and tighten the skin. Once the ducks are placed into the oven, the cook must closely monitor the internal temperature, as excessive heat will burn the skin while insufficient heat will leave the meat tough. Drawing upon years of experience, the cook skilfully adjusts the iron hooks from which the ducks hang, ensuring that every surface receives even exposure to the fire.

The artistry of roast duck is further revealed in the stage of slicing. Although each cutter has their own distinctive technique, all follow the same guiding principle of being “pleasing to the eye, generous in portion and consistent in

flavour.” Some cutters excel at producing “willow leaf strips,” where every piece of duck skin is attached to a small amount of meat, forming thin slices that resemble graceful willow leaves with perfectly even edges. Others are known for “skin and meat slices,” carefully separating the skin from the meat so that diners can enjoy the crispness of the skin on its own, while also savouring the tenderness of the meat. A true master carver, wielding a silver knife, can, with a gentle turn of the wrist, make the meat unfurl layer by layer like the blossoming of petals. Within just a few minutes, 108 uniform slices of duck can be precisely carved, each equal in size and thickness. This act is not merely about cutting food but serves as a genuine display of artistry and skill. In certain time-honoured establishments, carvers are even capable of slicing nine pieces of duck skin and arranging them individually on a plate. When tasted, the duck skin is wonderfully crisp, but if the duck has not been perfectly roasted, the skin becomes too tough to bite through—an unmistakable sign of quality. Sliced roast duck is always best enjoyed hot, for once it cools, the skin loses its crispness, the fat begins to congeal and the

flavour is greatly diminished.

Although the accompanying ingredients may appear ordinary, they play an essential role in shaping the distinctive flavour of roast duck. The thin pancake must be freshly baked and served immediately. It is as thin as a cicada's wing yet retains a pleasant elasticity. When lifted, diners can almost see the pattern of the plate beneath. Despite its delicate appearance, the pancake is surprisingly resilient, able to hold the duck skin, meat and various condiments without tearing. The sweet bean sauce is prepared from time-honoured recipes, striking a perfect balance between saltiness and sweetness while giving off a rich, mellow aroma that is neither overpowering nor acrid. It offsets the richness of the duck skin while preserving the meat's natural flavour. The shredded scallions, cut from fresh local produce, are carefully sliced



▼ Creative Beijing roast duck set meal

to a uniform thickness, crisp yet tender, and free from any harsh spiciness, adding a bright, refreshing note. The cucumber strips are prepared just before serving to ensure their crunch and moisture, offering a pleasing contrast to the duck's crisp skin and tender flesh.

Autumn stands out as the perfect seasonal companion for savouring roast duck. During this period, the weather is characterised by its clarity and refreshing coolness, creating temperature and humidity conditions that are most favourable for preparing roast duck. Moreover, ducks in the autumn months tend to be notably plumper, their meat firm yet tender, and their skin well suited to turning perfectly crisp. The enjoyment of roast duck is a refined experience, offering several distinct methods of consumption.

The first method involves evenly spreading sweet bean sauce onto a thin pancake, then adding fresh scallion strips for a sharp, crunchy contrast. Pairing it with refreshing cucumber and crisp radish strips is also highly recommended, as they add a clean note and a pleasing crunch. After this, place the sliced roast duck meat atop these ingredients, gently roll up the thin pancake and place it in your mouth. The resulting taste is, quite simply, marvellous, and this method of eating remains the most prevalent. The second approach to relishing roast duck is to dip the meat in garlic purée and soy sauce, which may also be accompanied by side dishes such as radish strips. Garlic purée possesses an exceptional ability to counteract greasiness. When sliced roast duck is dipped in garlic purée and soy sauce, layered over its naturally fresh and fragrant essence, a subtle yet perfectly balanced spiciness is introduced, lending the overall flavour a unique and captivating charm. It is precisely for this quality that many diners express a particular fondness for this method, especially those who favour a slightly bolder profile. The third method of enjoyment involves dipping the duck skin in white sugar. Some diners find the pungent flavour of scallions disagreeable, while others are less keen on the aroma



## TIPS

### The Creativity of a Time-Honoured Restaurant

At Quanjude's Haoyahaoyafang, a cultural and creative space, visitors will find themselves transported to an old shop from a century ago. Plush signboards, miniature carts for slicing duck meat and ovens heated by jujube wood instantly imbue the atmosphere. A fun-filled series of cultural and creative products ingeniously combines Quanjude's roast duck culture with modern design. Intangible cultural heritage skills are fused into trendy gifts, and the old Beijing flavour is transformed into charming keepsakes in the hands of visitors. Take a memento home after enjoying roast duck and turn the century-old Beijing taste into a portable delight.

of garlic. Thus, they prefer to dip the crisp, golden duck skin in a light dusting of fine sugar before eating. This approach produces a pleasantly sweet and crunchy sensation, and is especially well-suited for ladies and children.

Exploring these diverse methods offers a unique experience in appreciating Beijing roast duck, embodying the wisdom of making the most of every element in life. Beyond the classic way of eating it with pancakes, the remaining duck bones can be meticulously simmered to produce a rich, milky-white soup. When ingredients such as Chinese cabbage and tofu are added and the mixture is allowed to cook slowly over a gentle flame, the resulting broth becomes both deeply flavourful and highly nourishing. Afterwards, the duck bones may also be seasoned with salt,

pepper and chilli powder, and then deep-fried at a high temperature. This creates skin that is exquisitely crisp and meat that remains tender and juicy, making it a popular accompaniment to alcoholic drinks among diners.

Throughout the streets and alleys of the capital, the lively atmosphere surrounding roast duck restaurants endures all year round. The daily scenes within these establishments form a vivid reflection of life in Beijing itself. They preserve the culinary memories of generations of Beijingers while bearing witness to the city's continual transformation. Despite the passage of time, these restaurants have steadfastly upheld the distinctive flavours and techniques that belong uniquely to the capital, ensuring that the authentic taste of Beijing roast duck remains unchanged.



# Memories of a City's Fresh Flavours

Text by Zhang Jian, Zhang Yan Photo by Shi Jiaxing

As dusk falls, the air along the aged hutongs often fills with the aroma of pan-fried hairtail, a scent that sends children running home. After sunset, Guijie, a celebrated hub for food lovers in Beijing, bursts into a dazzling sea of lights. Diners eagerly form lengthy lines, enticed by the irresistible aroma of spicy crayfish. In the golden autumn, Beijingers savour the distinct pleasure of crab meat, complemented by a dipping sauce of vinegar and ginger.

In the past, limited preservation and transport made river and sea delicacies such as prawns and fish costly luxuries for Beijingers, reserved only for festivals. Today, advancements in cold-chain technology and preservation methods have brought an abundance of these fresh ingredients from across the country to the capital. Once rare treats, these delicacies are now a daily presence on Beijing dining tables.



▲ Dry-braised yellow croaker

of all generations. Interestingly, this dish, so loved by Beijingers, traces its origins to Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, where it is also a celebrated delicacy. For those seeking the most authentic taste, Tongchunyuan, a restaurant renowned for its mastery of Jiangsu cuisine, is the destination of choice.

Established in 1930, Tongchunyuan was among Beijing's eight renowned restaurants whose names featured the character "*chun*," meaning "spring." Upon opening, it quickly gained fame for its signature sweet and sour mandarin fish.

Tongchunyuan has elevated this signature dish to an exceptional standard, making it a near-essential choice for almost every diner. The meticulous preparation begins with the chef's deft knife work, ensuring the fish achieves a tender texture through precise heating. Its exterior emerges crisp and golden, while the flesh inside remains moist and delicate. The sauce, masterfully balancing sweet and sour flavours, completes the experience. Yet beyond its exquisite flavour, the presentation captivates the senses: the fish, fried to a lustrous golden hue, stands elegantly on the plate, its form resembling a poised squirrel with a bowed head, as the vivid orange-red sauce is poured over with a satisfying "sizzle."

Similar to Tongchunyuan, Yuhuatai Restaurant enjoys wide acclaim across the capital for its superb fish dishes. This renowned establishment was chosen to cater the "Banquet for the Founding of the People's Republic of China," held at the Beijing Hotel on October 1, 1949. The banquet, showcasing the refined artistry of Huaiyang cuisine, earned praise from both Chinese and international guests. Within Huaiyang gastronomy, Yuhuatai stands as an undisputed leader. The restaurant preserves the authentic flavours of traditional dishes such as pan-seared eel tails and braised pork balls in brown sauce, each prepared with great care and precision. Its most celebrated creation, however, is the dry-braised yellow croaker. Beijingers' lasting fondness for yellow croaker lies in its tender, white flesh, which neatly separates like cloves of garlic. This delicate texture, together with its fresh flavour and minimal bones, gives it a melt-in-the-mouth richness. At Yuhuatai, only the freshest croakers are selected, resulting in meat that is both firm and supple,



▲ Sweet and sour mandarin fish

## No Feast without Fish

Fish holds a special place in the hearts of Beijingers. For centuries, it has been believed that no celebratory feast is complete without it. Many of the capital's time-honoured restaurants feature an impressive range of fish dishes, each with its own signature creation. These diverse culinary techniques and imaginative interpretations together form a rich and colourful gastronomic landscape.

Among Beijing's many culinary favourites, the sweet and sour mandarin fish holds a particularly cherished place. Its appeal lies in the perfect balance of sweetness and tartness, paired with a strikingly elegant presentation that delights diners





Sliced fish in rice wine sauce

with a smooth, silky sheen. When lifted by chopsticks, the glistening white flesh separates cleanly into even sections, each infused with savoury depth, gently balanced by subtle notes of sweetness and spice. Beyond the beautifully balanced seasoning, the dish is enhanced by an array of finely prepared side ingredients that contribute texture and colour. Small cubes of pork, red and green peppers, bamboo shoots and mushrooms—all diced into precise, uniform squares only a millimetre or two wide—are incorporated.

Among many fish dishes, sliced fish in rice wine sauce stands out for departing from the conventional whole-fish presentation. This exquisite delicacy can still be enjoyed at several traditional Beijing-style restaurants, including well-known establishments such as Dongxinglou, Taifenglou and Zhimeilou.

The preparation of sliced fish in rice wine sauce relies on meticulous ingredient selection and precise technique. A live carp is carefully chosen, then sliced evenly and thinly to ensure uniform texture. Each slice is coated in a mixture of egg white and starch before being lightly slipped into hot oil to prevent sticking. The fish is then soaked in Shaoxing rice wine lees, allowing the flavours to develop fully, before being swiftly stir-fried over a high flame. When served, the slices gleam with a lustrous whiteness reminiscent of polished jade, exuding the delicate aroma of rice wine. Their texture is tender and smooth, carrying a subtle balance between the mellow fragrance of the wine and the natural flavour of the fish itself.

Fish has long been a familiar presence on Beijingers' dining tables, with hairtail standing out as one of the most beloved and widely enjoyed varieties. Many locals fondly recall childhood evenings filled with the distinctive aroma of this fish wafting through the air. Actually, fish wasn't always a staple in the capital's cuisine. In the 1950s and 1960s, due to limited logistics and refrigeration, markets mainly offered freshwater species such as carp, while saltwater fish remained rare. It wasn't until the 1970s and 1980s, with the improvement of cold-chain transport, that hairtail became a common sight in ordinary Beijing households. Over time, braising,



▲ Fried hairtail

deep-frying and stewing have become the traditional methods by which Beijingers prepare and enjoy this cherished fish.

Braised hairtail is a common dish of everyday Beijing cuisine. Medium-sized pieces are first fried to a crisp golden brown, then simmered with soy sauce, cooking wine and sugar until the sauce thickens. The dish is often even tastier the next day, as the fish absorbs the savoury, slightly sweet flavours, becoming softer and more aromatic. Fried hairtail, a childhood favourite, is prepared by coating fish segments in dry flour before frying. The result is golden and crisp on the outside, tender within, releasing a fragrant aroma with every bite. A particularly cherished version involves wrapping the fish in a freshly made pancake. Here, the hairtail is fried and then stewed until its bones turn meltingly soft. Enveloped in a warm pancake, the rich, savoury sauce of the fish mingles with the wheat fragrance, creating a simple yet deeply satisfying taste experience.

## Gourmet Comes from Freshness

When it comes to the fresh flavours of aquatic products, sea cucumber stands supreme, with braised sea cucumber with scallions being a perennial favourite. Many Beijingers regard Fengzeyuan—the first of the “eight leading grand restaurants”—as offering the finest rendition of this

dish. In 1983, at the First National Culinary Competition, Fengzeyuan's chef Wang Yijun won a gold medal for his mastery of it, cementing the dish's enduring fame across the nation.

The dish's composition is deceptively simple, consisting only of sea cucumbers and scallions. Yet these seemingly basic ingredients demand the utmost precision in preparation. The sea cucumbers must first be





▲ Braised prawns

carefully rehydrated from their dried form, a process that determines the dish's ultimate success. Perfectly restored sea cucumbers should be plump, smooth and resilient, springing back instantly when bent in half. This supple texture is essential to achieving the ideal tenderness and richness. Equally crucial are the scallions. At Fengzeyuan, only scallions from Zhangqiu, Shandong Province are used for this dish. They are subjected to an initial frying process, then combined with a specially prepared seasoning sauce and steamed thoroughly, ensuring the optimal infusion of flavour.

The cooking technique behind this dish skilfully transforms the sea cucumber's naturally rubbery texture and strong odour into a delicacy of refined taste and elegance. This method has come to represent the quintessential way of preparing this prized marine ingredient. The rehydrated sea cucumbers, combined with a rich, specially blended seasoning sauce, the fragrant oil rendered from freshly fried scallions and the steamed scallions themselves, create a dish of deep, lustrous colour and remarkable depth of flavour. The result is a perfect balance of colour, aroma, taste and presentation. For this reason, braised sea cucumber with scallion has long been regarded as a distinguished finale to a banquet, often served by Beijingers when entertaining distinguished guests.

Beijingers' deep affection for

prawns has given rise to numerous beloved dishes, including *pipa*-shaped and braised prawns—all of which have become classics of traditional Beijing dishes. Historically, however, prawns were a rarity in the city. On occasion, stir-fried freshwater prawns, noted for their delicate and refreshing taste, appeared on the menus of major restaurants and often served as centrepieces at formal banquets. For the general populace, however, prawns remained a luxury reserved for festive occasions.

Beijingers have mastered the art of tailoring prawn dishes to suit the size of the crustaceans, creating a diverse and delightful array of flavours and textures. Larger prawns are often transformed into a crispy fried delicacy by first flattening and seasoning them, then coating them in a mixture of egg white and breadcrumbs before frying to a golden perfection. The result is a beautifully crisp shell encasing a tender, juicy interior that releases a fresh, mouthwatering aroma. Smaller prawns, on the other hand, are finely minced to form a savoury filling, which is then wrapped in delicate dough. The thin, soft pastry contrasts pleasingly with the rich, juicy interior, and each bite bursts with flavour, leaving a lingering fragrance and an unforgettable impression on the palate.

With the advancements in cold-chain transport, Beijing's seafood markets now offer a rich variety of prawns sourced from across the country. This increased availability has naturally broadened the ways in which Beijingers enjoy the shellfish. Consequently, spicy crayfish and garlic crayfish have risen to prominence, becoming new culinary favourites and capturing the city's ever-evolving taste for seafood delights.

Guijie is a true paradise for crayfish lovers. As evening falls, the street comes alive in a dazzling display of lights and energy. Among the bustling crowds are visitors from near and far, their varied accents blending with the chatter of local youth gathered to unwind after work. Drawn by the irresistible promise of perfectly cooked crayfish, diners are willing to queue patiently—sometimes for hours.

▼ Spicy crayfish



The widespread appeal of crayfish on Guijie owes much to the dedication of its restaurateurs, who insist on serving only live specimens. In summer, the crustaceans are sourced from Xuyi, Jiangsu Province, while in winter they come from Qianjiang, Hubei Province. Each crayfish undergoes strict selection before being transformed into a delicacy for eager diners. The culinary craftsmanship displayed across Guijie's eateries is remarkable. Take the spicy crayfish, for example—a masterful fusion of Sichuan pepper's numbing zest, chilli's fiery heat and the natural sweetness of the meat, creating a flavour that has enchanted countless palates. For those seeking a milder taste, chilled crayfish, with its gentle spice and satisfyingly firm texture, pairs perfectly with a cold beer on a sultry summer night. Other popular varieties include salted egg yolk, drunken and golden soup garlic crayfish, each offering a distinctive take on freshness and flavour. Even the broth deserves praise—many diners, unable to resist its rich, savoury aroma, end their meal by ordering a bowl of hand-rolled noodles to soak up the last of the delicious sauce.

When autumn arrives, the most eagerly anticipated delicacy for Beijingers is undoubtedly crab. In local tradition, male crabs are enjoyed during the seventh lunar month, while the eighth month is reserved for females. This distinction arises from their differing textures and flavours: the male's rich, golden paste is prized for its intensity, while the female's roe is cherished for its smooth, creamy tenderness.

In the past, Beijingers had a traditional preference for river crabs, especially those from the marshlands of Shengfang Town in Tianjin.

In the past, Zhengyanglou, located outside Qianmen, was regarded as the premier destination for crab connoisseurs. Though it lacked the signature dishes of the "eight grand restaurants" of the time, it was celebrated for its exquisite crab offerings in late autumn and early winter—a reputation widely acknowledged among food enthusiasts. To enhance their flavour, the Shengfang crabs chosen by

Zhengyanglou were fed sesame seeds for seven days before cooking. Once steamed, diners were presented with a special set of eight utensils: anvil, hammer, pincers, spike, fork, scraper, scissors and shovel. The scene of guests delicately tapping claws, sipping rice wine and engaging in lively conversation evoked the refined pleasures of autumn dining in old Beijing.

While ordinary families were less particular, they too would purchase a few crabs from the market during the golden autumn. After being thoroughly cleaned, the crabs were steamed whole and served with a dipping sauce made from Zhenjiang vinegar and finely chopped ginger, sometimes sweetened slightly to soften the sharpness. The combination of ginger, vinegar and rich crab roe created a deeply satisfying harmony of flavours. Children would watch eagerly as the adults deftly cracked open the shells, each hoping for a morsel to dip into the fragrant sauce.

Crab consumption in Beijing has undergone a remarkable transformation. Today, Yangcheng Lake hairy crabs from Jiangsu Province dominate the market, made easily accessible through advances in cold-chain logistics and express

delivery. These plump, flavourful crabs from Jiangnan's water towns can now be enjoyed without leaving the city. The ways of preparing them have also diversified beyond simple steaming, giving rise to creative dishes such as crab meat balls and stewed tofu with crab roe. Even Western influences have found their place, with crab meat pasta offering a contemporary interpretation of this cherished seasonal delicacy. Despite changing times, crabs continue to embody the spirit of autumn for Beijingers.

Today, queues still wind outside Guijie's crayfish restaurants, a vivid testament to their lasting popularity. The sliced fish in rice wine sauce, once cherished by earlier generations, still infuses Beijing-style restaurants with its distinctive aroma. Likewise, the familiar taste of hairtail, often found on ordinary family tables, continues to evoke warm memories of childhood for Beijingers. Though modern conveniences have made ingredients easier to obtain and cooking methods more varied, the city's enduring devotion to fresh flavours remains evident in every prawn, every slice of fish and every morsel of crab roe.

▼ Steamed hairy crabs





# Savouring the Capital City's Exotic Foods

Text by Zhang Yan Photos by Zhang Xin, Cao Bing and courtesy of Beijing Dadi Western Restaurant

Beijing's introduction to Western cuisine has mirrored the city's path to modernisation. Half a century ago, dining at venues like Moscow Restaurant or Xinqiao Hotel was an enviable experience, offering a taste of the novel and refined. These establishments were more than dining venues; they stood as symbols of progress and sophistication, exuding a distinct exotic allure.

Today, Beijing's Western dining landscape reaches far beyond those early establishments. In the embassy districts, a variety of contemporary eateries now showcase international flavours.



1. Exterior of the Moscow Restaurant in Beijing  
2. Russian song performance at the Moscow restaurant  
3. Beijing Xinqiao Hotel  
4. Beijing Dadi Western Restaurant

## Moscow Restaurant: A Culinary Landmark in Beijing

For Beijingers, the Moscow Restaurant, situated by the Beijing Zoo, has long transcended its role as a mere dining venue—it has become a cultural landmark deeply embedded in the city's collective memory, virtually a household name. For some native Beijingers in particular, this restaurant, which offered their first introduction to Western cuisine, holds a particularly cherished place in their hearts. Affectionately known as “Lao Mo” (meaning “Old Moscow”), it was once a symbol of prestige and modernity, an exotic destination that countless people aspired to visit. Even today, that affection remains undiminished, with each visit serving as a nostalgic return to a bygone era.

The chance to enjoy a Western meal at the restaurant was not only a treat for

native Beijingers' palates but also a source of spiritual satisfaction and social prestige. This sentiment has often been captured in films and television series created by directors hailing from Beijing. The two memorable dining scenes in the film *In the Heat of the Sun*, featuring Ma Xiaojun and his friends raising glasses and laughing together in the restaurant, remain iconic moments for movie lovers. Beyond that, the venue has frequently appeared in other film and television dramas such as *Romantic Life*, *A Place Where the Dream Begins* and *Bloom of Youth*.

The restaurant's architectural design exudes quintessential Russian charm, with its elegant curves, lavish details and grand, expansive layout reflecting a distinctly national character. Its style draws inspiration from Moscow Baroque, also known as Naryshkin Baroque, which flourished in the picturesque city of Moscow. This architectural form conveys both grandeur and majesty while

carrying an alluring sense of mystery. The restaurant faithfully captures these qualities, its ornate decorations revealing a quiet refinement and delicate artistry. Inside the spacious hall, the towering pillars seem to echo with the splendour and passion once found in the rhythms of traditional Russian music.

Even by modern aesthetic standards, the restaurant's decor remains both elegant and timeless. However, six decades ago, it would have appeared even more magnificent. Entering through the iconic revolving doors and ascending the steps, diners would feel as if stepping into a palace. The soaring seven-metre ceiling highlights a grand dome from which magnificent crystal chandeliers hang, illuminating the interior with dazzling brilliance. At the centre stand four massive bronze pillars, upholding the restaurant's majestic atmosphere in every detail.

The restaurant's grandeur and refinement were evident not only in its



architecture and decor but also in every meticulous detail. When it opened in 1954, all tableware was made of silver. The waitresses, strikingly beautiful Russian women, wore elegant skirts and greeted guests with smiles, embodying an unmistakable exotic charm. Even the lavatories were thoughtfully stocked with cosmetics, allowing diners to maintain their grace.

A key reason for the restaurant's lasting appeal among native Beijingers lies in the unwavering consistency of its culinary offerings.

Borscht is a must-try dish at the restaurant, serving not only as its defining signature but also as a mainstay on the menus of Russian state banquets. Its vivid, ruby-red colour comes from the beetroots simmered slowly to perfection. The beetroots used here are specially imported from Russia to Beijing, as only they can impart the soup's authentic, earthy flavour. To this foundation, the chefs add tomatoes, complemented by slow-cooked quality beef and rich sour cream. The resulting taste is a delightful balance of sweet and tart. Each mouthful, a deep satisfaction, is assured when a slice of Russian rye bread is dipped into the warming soup.

Another signature dish at the restaurant is the Russian-style braised beef, traditionally prepared in a porcelain pot. Choice cuts of beef are combined with onions, carrots and mushrooms, then seasoned with tomato sauce, bay leaves, brandy and wine before being slow-cooked for several hours. The result is tender, flavourful meat immersed in a rich, velvety broth. Each serving reflects the depth of authentic Russian culinary expertise. As the lid of the pot is lifted, fragrant steam rises, filling the air with an irresistible aroma that instantly captivates the senses.

Among the restaurant's most celebrated dishes in Beijing's Russian dining scene are its baked fish in cream sauce and baked assorted meats in cream sauce. The baked fish, made with tender cod, is paired with mushrooms, lemon and

vanilla. The baked assorted meat offers even more variety, blending traditional ham with Chinese-style sausages, seafood, potatoes, onions and mushrooms. Both dishes are united by their base—the quintessential Russian white sauce. Each is then topped with mozzarella cheese and roasted at high heat until the surface turns golden and crisp. When tapped, it gives a gentle crackle, and once the spoon breaks through, fragrant steam rises, filling the air with irresistible warmth and comfort.

Over the decades, the restaurant has become a beloved fixture in Beijing, standing as a cherished Western dining

destination for generations of residents. In November 2019, the Beijing Time-honoured Brand Association formally recognised the restaurant as a Beijing Time-honoured Brand—an official honour that reflects its transformation from a foreign-inspired restaurant into a deeply rooted local landmark.

## Western Dining and Aromatic Bread in the City's South

At the height of the Moscow Restaurant's popularity, the Western

▼ Signature vegetable and fruit salad at Beijing Xinqiao Sapporo Restaurant



▲ Freshly baked bread at Beijing Xinqiao Sapporo Restaurant

Restaurant at the Xinqiao Hotel, located in the southern part of Beijing, enjoyed an equally distinguished reputation. Each of these two renowned Western restaurants had its own unique charm. Over time, this gave rise to the well-known saying, "Lao Mo in the north and Xinqiao in the south."

Since its establishment, the Western Restaurant at the Xinqiao Hotel has attracted a large and loyal clientele. At that time, its head chef came from Kiessling in Tianjin, long regarded as China's finest Western restaurant. The current culinary team continues this proud legacy, having inherited the authentic techniques and training passed down from that original chef. The restaurant's menu remains dedicated to preserving genuine flavours, with signature dishes such as sweet and sour braised sausage with potatoes, the hearty pot-braised selections, baked assorted meats in cream sauce and tender, delicately pan-fried fish.

After renovations in 1980, the restaurant was renamed the Xinqiao Sapporo Restaurant. Unlike the opulent interior of the Moscow Restaurant, Xinqiao Sapporo embraced a subtler, more understated aesthetic. Dining tables were dressed with simple yet refined tablecloths, each adorned with a vase of fresh roses. From the choice of tableware to the careful attention paid to every decorative detail, the atmosphere exuded quiet elegance, creating a dining experience that felt both graceful and sophisticated.

In the same year, the hotel opened an auxiliary shop for the restaurant, which was later renamed Xinqiao Sapporo Bakery in 1985. In the 1980s, the city had far fewer bakeries and pastry shops than it does today, making Xinqiao Sapporo Bakery one of the city's earliest self-service bakeries. It was also the first to feature a front-facing shop with a production facility at the back, where all bread was freshly baked on site. At that time, dining at Xinqiao Sapporo Restaurant and purchasing bread from Sapporo Bakery was regarded by native Beijingers as a mark of fashionable urban living.

During the 1990s, at the height of its success, the bakery achieved daily sales exceeding 100,000 yuan. Its compact premises were frequently thronged with customers lining up to purchase a variety of bread. Even today, the rich aroma of freshly baked bread wafting from the doorway continues to entice pedestrians, compelling many to stop and step inside. Among its many delights, the croissants remain particularly beloved, offered in both cream and chocolate versions. Each slice of bread is made using the traditional hop fermentation process, ensuring a perfect balance between chewiness and gentle sweetness. The cream filling deserves special praise: rather than using ordinary fresh cream that melts too quickly, the bakery uses colostrum butter. As it touches the tongue, its buttery

► Beijing Dadi Western Restaurant's baked assorted meat with cream sauce



▲ Dadi Western Restaurant's borscht



▲ Dadi Western Restaurant's stewed beef in casserole



fragrance and mellow dairy flavour spread instantly, delivering a deep, lingering sense of satisfaction. When enjoying it, patrons often find themselves savouring it slowly, reluctant to take large bites.

Though modest in appearance, the bean paste bread is one of the bakery's best-selling items, often selling out quickly. At times, customers even hurry to buy it before it's gone. Its popularity lies in the freshly made bean paste filling, prepared each day in a large copper pot.

## Affordable Western Food

Today, Beijing boasts numerous excellent and affordable Western restaurants, among which Dadi Western Restaurant in Xisi holds a special place.

Dadi is one of Beijing's earliest Western restaurants. Founded in 1945, it was originally located on West Chang'an Avenue, once a bustling hub fondly known as the city's "Street of Restaurants." Amidst this concentration of time-honoured establishments, the restaurant distinguished itself from its Chinese counterparts by specialising in Western cuisine, establishing a distinctive and memorable presence on the avenue during that period.

Upon its opening, the restaurant was filled to capacity every day, thanks

to its prime location and reasonable prices. Situated next to the Chang'an Theatre, it became a popular meeting spot for leading Peking Opera performers, who often gathered there after shows. Despite its fame, the restaurant remained known for its affordability, making it a favourite destination for Beijingers eager to enjoy authentic Western cuisine at accessible prices.

In 1989, the restaurant moved to its current location on Xisi South Street, next to Shaguoju, and later opened a new branch inside the Beijing Urban and Rural Shopping Centre in Gongzhufen, Haidian District. Decades on, it continues to stand out for its consistently delicious dishes and fair prices, remaining a beloved Western dining choice among Beijingers.

Despite its affordability, the restaurant's cuisine is exceptional in every sense. Each dish is vibrant in colour, rich in flavour and carefully balanced between sweet, sour and salty notes. Over the years, the chefs have refined and perfected a series of distinctive signature dishes. The refreshing salad, free from greasiness, perfectly combines

crisp, tender vegetables with a sweet dressing. Butter-fried prawns delight the palate with their golden, crunchy coating and juicy, aromatic centres, the buttery scent heightening the prawns' freshness. Stir-fried mixed vegetables in butter offer a lively blend of textures and flavours, while Teppanyaki assorted meats arrive sizzling hot, their rising steam releasing an irresistible aroma. The baked macaroni and cheese is equally popular, with soft pasta thoroughly coated in a creamy, flavourful sauce. Inside, murals depicting Russian culture adorn the walls, and diners enjoy soothing melodies such as "Red River Valley."

Among the restaurant's desserts, the chestnut flour with cream enjoys enduring popularity and high praise. In his culinary essay collection *Yashe Tanchi*, Liang Shiqiu (1903–1987) wrote of this Western treat: "Like peanut powder, chestnut flour features dry, fluffy and generously topped with cream. It boasts an incredibly delicious taste when savoured with a small spoon." Each spoonful perfectly blends the light sweetness of the cream with the soft, fine texture of the chestnut flour.

▼ A set meal of Japanese cuisine



## Global Gourmet in Beijing

New Western dining establishments in Beijing now provide residents with culinary experiences that are more intricate, diverse, imaginative and distinctly international than those offered by traditional time-honoured brands. In the city's embassy districts, where diplomatic staff from around the world reside, clusters of residences, duty-free shops and a wide range of global restaurants have naturally formed, catering to the varied tastes and needs of their international clientele.

From Italian, French, Spanish and American to German and Japanese, nearly every international cuisine can be found within Beijing's embassy districts. These international restaurants operate much like cultural ambassadors, offering not only each country's most iconic dishes but also faithfully preserving their authentic flavours. For international residents, they provide comforting tastes of home, while for Beijingers, they offer the opportunity to embark on a global culinary journey without ever leaving the city.

French cuisine is widely regarded as the epitome of elegance and refinement, epitomised by classic dishes such as steak, seafood and snails. Among its highlights, duck liver mousse stands out as a favourite. Silky and smooth, it is encased in puff pastry, drizzled with caramel and topped with freeze-dried strawberry pieces, creating a remarkable balance of sweet, sour and salty flavours. French desserts are equally famed for their artistry and intricate taste profiles. Authentic mille-feuille uses puff pastry baked fresh each day, with each layer perfectly crisp and distinct, paired with a delicately sweet custard sauce. Numerous authentic, small French restaurants can be found near the French Embassy. These establishments attract both embassy

staff and food lovers who have lived in France, keen to rediscover the country's culinary elegance and distinctive charm. Beijing is home to many renowned German restaurants. A signature favourite, roast pork knuckles, are first boiled and then roasted to perfection,



▲ Chicken fricassee

resulting in a crisp, golden skin that is rich in flavour yet never greasy. The dish pairs beautifully with smooth mashed potatoes and tangy sauerkraut. Equally popular is the sausage platter—a veritable "family portrait" of assorted meats—best enjoyed with pickled cucumbers that balance the richness with refreshing acidity. A table filled with these dishes captures the essence of German cooking. No meal would be complete without the country's signature dark beer, boasting a smooth, slightly sweet profile ideal for pairing with these robust dishes.

For those craving Japanese flavours, Beijing offers a delightful experience. The pinnacle of this cuisine is *kaiseki*

*ryouri*, a chef's tasting menu without fixed dishes. Each day's selection serves as a "culinary blind box," guided by the freshest seasonal fish and ingredients, offering diners a journey filled with anticipation and delight. Seating at the counter allows guests to observe the chef's artistry up close, engage in conversation and hear the stories behind each creation. Lucky patrons may even be treated to rare, off-menu specialties. Every course unfolds with elegant precision—the fish is fresh and sweet, the wagyu beef tender and succulent, and the ginkgo leaves provide a refreshing interlude, before the meal closes with the lush sweetness of Shizuoka melon. The meal concludes and the palate is refreshed. Diners depart having experienced a true feast for the senses.

In Beijing, Western cuisine is far more than an imported novelty—it has become an integral part of everyday life, rich with personal significance. For older generations, it evokes cherished memories of youth, while for younger diners, it represents a gateway to global flavours. This ancient Eastern capital continues to welcome the world with open arms, nurturing a vibrant blend of cultures and ensuring that international cuisines remain a lasting and celebrated presence within the city.

▼ German roast pork knuckles





# Beijing's Dim Sum: Flavours of Gratitude and Affection

Text by Gao Yuan   Photos by Tong Tianyi, Zhang Xin, Shi Jiaying

In the memories of Beijingers, dim sum (literally “light refreshments”), including pastries, cakes and desserts, is often associated with festive occasions. When visiting relatives or friends, people often bring an exquisitely crafted box of dim sum as a gift, expressing their warmth, respect and affection. Within each box of delicate pastries and cakes lies people’s gratitude for family and friendship. These treats have long been woven into the sweet memories of the city’s elderly residents.

## The Evolution and Continuation of Dim Sum

The term “*dianxin*” (dim sum) first appeared during the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907), when it referred to breakfast. During the Song Dynasty (AD 960–1279), the meaning evolved to denote snacks such as pastries and cakes. Over time, dim sum developed into a wide range of varieties and was divided into northern and southern styles. Chinese writer Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967) once noted that the distinction between northern and southern dim sum lay in their names: “The dim sum from northern China is called ‘*guanlichashi*’ (official ceremonial tea snacks), while that from southern China is known as ‘*jiahuxidian*’ (refined delicacies from Jiaying and Huzhou).”

During the Liao (AD 916–1125) and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties, Beijing’s dim sum industry began to take shape, and dim sum was then known as “*chashi*” (tea snacks). As the name implies, *chashi* were enjoyed as light snacks while drinking tea. From that time on, the sweet flavour of official ceremonial tea snacks became ingrained in Beijing’s historical memory.

From *dianxin* and *chashi* to *bobo* (steamed buns), Chinese dim sum underwent several name changes, each marking its continual enrichment. During the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, Beijing became a national centre of politics and culture, attracting scholars, artists and merchants from all over the country. The city thrived with bustling markets and growing demand, a prosperity driven by its lively population and commercial vitality. During the Yuan Dynasty, the Mongols introduced milk cakes to the city; during the Ming Dynasty, when the capital moved from Nanjing to Beijing, southern fruits and cakes followed; and during the Qing Dynasty, Manchu *bobo* became popular. Embracing this diversity, Beijing absorbed the distinct flavours, varieties and techniques of northern and southern pastries, eventually shaping its own Beijing-

style confections—renowned for their rich assortment of savoury, vegetarian, sweet, salty, flaky and honey-glazed delights.

These time-honoured pastries, cakes and sweets, passed down through generations, have become an integral part of Beijingers’ lives, offering delightful treats to enjoy after meals or to satisfy a craving. They also serve as heartfelt tokens for expressing affection and goodwill.

## Manchu-Han Bobo, Northern and Southern Delicacies

Beijing is home to many renowned dim sum shops. In the past, these establishments were known as Manchu and Han Bobo Shops. The terms “Manchu” and “Han” reflected the fusion of Manchu and Han flavours, while *bobo* was the name Beijingers used collectively for pastries, cakes and desserts. If one were to write a chronicle of Chinese-style dim sum, it would show that *bobo* may not have a long

history, yet it has played a significant role in the evolution of dim sum.

The term “*bobo*” originates from the Manchu language, referring to dim sum made from broomcorn millet, glutinous millet and glutinous sorghum. Manchu flour-based foods are remarkably diverse and intricately crafted, giving rise to the saying in Chinese culinary history: “Manchu dim sum, Han dishes.” Manchu dim sum often includes cream, honey and dried fruits, with some featuring flaky crusts and sweet fillings. After the Qing Dynasty established its capital in Beijing, *bobo* shops began to appear across the city, first selling traditional Manchu-style *bobo* and later adding Han-style dim sum. Many of these shops proudly displayed banners reading: “Manchu-Han Bobo, Northern and Southern Delicacies.”

At that time, people bought pastries and cakes not only for eating but also for folk customs and ceremonial purposes. Whether to honour Buddha and ancestors, visit relatives and friends, or celebrate



▲ Traditional Chinese dim sum from Beijing Fu Hua Zhai





▲ Beijing-style snacks

weddings and birthdays, they would almost always visit *bobo* shops to find the right treats. Old Beijing's *bobo* shops were known for their distinctive decor, with tasselled banners hanging above the entrances, red balustrades and brightly painted murals in a variety of colours, all exuding a refined and nostalgic charm.

*Bobo* shops were not only adorned with lavish decorations but also famed for their rich assortment of pastries and cakes, which included eight main varieties and eight minor types. Cakes featured oily and sponge varieties, while flaky pastries included crumbly cookies, *zhuangyuan bing* (scholar cakes) and jujube paste pastries. Seasonal confections encompassed Chinese wisteria cakes, mooncakes, Double Ninth cakes and glutinous rice balls. In addition, desserts and snacks such as glutinous rice sticks, tea treats, fried foods and egg rolls were also offered. These shops created different pastries and cakes to suit each season and festival. Even Mid-Autumn mooncakes alone came in numerous forms—*tijiang* (syrup-crust), *fanmao* (flaky), *zilaihong* (red mooncakes), *zilaibai* (white

mooncakes) as well as Cantonese, Suzhou and Anhui styles. Before the Double Ninth Festival, flower-patterned cakes made from sugar and flour and filled with a mix of fine dried fruits were sold, symbolising the festival's tradition of mountain climbing and autumnal celebration.

▼ Beijing-style dim sum



*Sachima* is one of the quintessential pastries of old Beijing, classified among fried confections. In *Qingwen Jian* (a Qing Dynasty Manchu-Chinese dictionary), it is defined as “*gou naizi tang zhan*” (literally “sugar-coated dog’s nipple”). “*Tang zhan*” refers to the preparation method: dough made from eggs, fat and flour is cut into thin sticks, deep-fried, then thoroughly coated in maltose syrup and honey—hence called “sugar-coated.” As for “*gou naizi*” (literally “dog’s nipple”), Qi Gong (1912–2005), a scholar of Qing Dynasty culture, traced its origin to a wild berry native to Northeast China, named for its resemblance to a dog’s teat. This berry was originally used as a topping on *sachima*, but after the pastry spread to Beijing, it was gradually replaced with raisins, melon seeds and other ingredients, causing the original “*gou naizi*” berry to fade from memory.

In the past, *sachima* was typically sold in autumn and winter and came in two main varieties based on its key ingredients: cream and osmanthus. Today, these two have been combined. Traditional *sachima* is lined on the bottom with toasted sesame seeds to prevent the pieces from sticking together during storage, while the top is generously sprinkled with golden *jingao* (hawthorn cake) strips, raisins and candied orange and melon threads, giving

it a rich, layered appearance. Each bite offers a soft yet flaky texture, infused with the fragrant sweetness of egg and honey. Today, *sachima* has travelled far beyond Beijing, spreading its sweet aroma across China and becoming a beloved treat enjoyed nationwide.

## Imperial Dim Sum, Intricately and Carefully Crafted

In ancient times, *bobo* was an essential part of the diets of imperial and noble households. As the dynastic era came to an end, these once-exclusive imperial delicacies gradually entered ordinary homes, becoming beloved treats on everyday dining tables.

For a taste of authentic imperial dim sum, Fangshan Restaurant is a must-visit. Established in 1925 by former chefs of the Qing Dynasty’s imperial kitchen, it opened in Yilan Hall at Beihai Park, specialising in recreating the lavish banquets and snacks once enjoyed by the imperial court. Among its famed delicacies are *wandou huang* (sweet pea pudding), *yundou juan* (mashed kidney bean rolls), *xiao wotou* (mini cornmeal buns) and *roumo shaobing* (minced-meat flatbreads), all said to be favourites of Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908). These exquisite treats remain beloved today, crafted from the finest ingredients with meticulous care, reflecting the restaurant’s enduring dedication to the refined artistry of traditional imperial cuisine.

In 2024, Fangshan Restaurant opened a dedicated venue on the north bank of Beihai Park, introducing the elegant Fangshan Tea House within it. This new establishment faithfully reproduces late-Qing imperial pastries, preserving classic flavours such as milk *bobo* and rose cakes, while also reinterpreting traditional favourites like hawthorn cake, almond tofu and dried fruit compote. At the same time, innovative creations including walnut cookies, persimmon cookies and pomegranate buns have captivated younger diners, combining exquisite



▲ Zilaihong (red mooncakes)

craftsmanship, refined taste and striking visual appeal to bring imperial delicacies into the modern era.

Fu Hua Zhai on Huguosi Street is a palace-style *bobo* shop that has gained great popularity in recent years. Its vibrant vermilion facade gleams beneath a grand signboard inscribed with gold-plated characters that evoke an air of imperial splendour. Stepping inside, visitors are greeted by rows of meticulously arranged pastries—mashed kidney bean rolls as smooth and lustrous as white jade, Sunni Efen white cakes rich with creamy fragrance and beloved Beijing staples like ox-tongue pastry and *zilaihong*. With great passion and artistry, Fu Hua Zhai continues to revive and preserve traditional confections that embody Beijing’s enduring culinary memory and folk charm.

Fu Hua Zhai was founded by Wang Xifu, whose family has deep culinary roots. His maternal grandfather served as a chef in the Qing Dynasty’s imperial kitchen, his father was a celebrated chef at the renowned restaurant Zhimeilou during the Republic of China period (1912–1949) and his uncle and two elder brothers all once headed kitchens at Beijing’s most famous catering establishments. After retirement, unwilling to remain idle, Wang drew

upon his childhood memories and family traditions to faithfully recreate imperial dim sum—once exclusive to imperial banquets—and bring these delicacies back to the dining tables of ordinary people.

Every pastry at Fu Hua Zhai is handmade according to time-honoured recipes and meticulous traditional methods. Among them, the Sunni Efen white cake stands out—a nearly lost Manchu pastry documented in Qing Dynasty imperial kitchen records. Its signature flavour depends on an exact balance between dairy richness and sweetness, achieving a harmony that defines its delicate charm. Visually, it is just as refined, with bright red hawthorn and green plum arranged into dainty blossoms, creating an elegant and eye-catching display. Another of Fu Hua Zhai’s masterpieces is the Rose Chestnut Paste Pastry, filled with roses from Beijing’s Miaofeng Mountain—a variety cultivated for more than a thousand years. From harvesting the petals to



preparing the preserved filling, the process takes no less than a full year. The shop has also revived Beijing's celebrated Fanmao Mooncake, renowned for its snow-white, feather-light crust that shatters like goose down at the lightest touch. A bite reveals a texture that is neither sticky nor tough but perfectly balanced—fragrant, soft and delicately chewy. This exquisite flavour continues to enchant visitors today. Another exclusive delight is the Qixing Dianzi Cake, distinguished by seven tiny air holes on its surface. Look closer, and the “seven stars” form the exact pattern of the Big Dipper—a meticulous recreation of an ancient technique once cherished in imperial kitchens.

## Traditional Flavours Enjoy Wide Popularity

When it comes to Beijing pastries, the century-old brand Daoxiangcun is truly indispensable. For generations of Beijingers, its confections have been an essential part of childhood memories. Whether it's the jujube flower pastry, ox-tongue pastry, or the classic hawthorn *guokui* (crispy stuffed flatbread), these timeless Beijing-style treats have long delighted young palates, offering flavours that capture the city's warmth, nostalgia and enduring sweetness.

Daoxiangcun's most iconic offerings are

▼ Sweet baked wheaten cakes



the “Jing Ba Jian” (“Beijing Eight Pieces”). When visiting relatives or welcoming guests, old Beijingers would often bring a brightly decorated pastry box filled with these eight symbolic treats, each carrying its own auspicious meaning.

“Jing Ba Jian” was not originally the name of a specific set of pastries but rather an arrangement. Pastries stamped with auspicious Chinese characters or phrases such as *fu* (fortune), *lu* (prosperity), *shou* (longevity), *xi* (happiness) and *shi shi ru yi* (may everything go as you wish) were artfully arranged in eight trays to create decorative patterns, hence the name “Beijing Eight Pieces.” Over time, this tradition evolved into three categories: “Da Ba Jian” (“Eight Big Pieces”), “Xiao Ba Jian” (“Eight Small Pieces”) and “Xi Ba Jian” (“Eight Fine Pieces”).

The “Eight Big Pieces” include

▼ Butterfly cookies



pastries such as the *fu*-character cake symbolising happiness, the *taishi* cake representing high rank and prosperity, the peach-shaped cake denoting longevity and the silver-ingot-shaped cake signifying wealth. The “Eight Small Pieces,” inspired by traditional Beijing folk pastries, draw on Western baking techniques, making them smaller and more delicate than the “Eight Big Pieces.” The “Eight Fine Pieces” are crafted with even more refined ingredients and meticulous skill. Their shapes—peaches, ingots, palace lanterns and *ruyi* sceptres—carry auspicious meanings, expressing heartfelt wishes of fortune, longevity and happiness.

*Zilaihong* and *zilaibai* are iconic representatives of Beijing-style mooncakes and classic specialities of Daoxiangcun. *Zilaihong* is prepared with scalded flour mixed with vegetable oil, and its filling combines assorted nuts, candied orange and melon threads, and crystalline rock sugar. Once baked, the pastry takes on a deeper hue, and a red circle is stamped on its surface with tiny holes pricked within—signifying “*zilaihong*” (literally “naturally red”). Legend has it that in the past, when Daoxiangcun mooncakes were placed on a porcelain plate, a fragrant layer of oil would appear within a day, proof of their rich ingredients and authentic quality.

By contrast, *zilaibai* is made from dough mixed with cold water and lard, filled with sweet pastes such as jujube, red bean, pea, hawthorn and sugar. Its crust remains pale after baking and is marked with a small red stamp indicating “*zilaibai*” (literally “naturally white”). As it contains lard—a non-vegetarian ingredient—*zilaibai* has traditionally been regarded as a “meat” pastry and thus unsuitable as an offering to the moon. Even so, both *zilaihong* and *zilaibai* endure today as beloved Beijing delicacies, treasured as festive gifts shared among family and friends during the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Beijingers have long upheld the custom of eating *huagao* (literally “flower cakes”) during the Double Ninth Festival. Each autumn, Daoxiangcun's seasonal

Double Ninth Flower Cake stands out among festive pastries for its beauty and authentic flavour. Every bite reveals a delightful harmony of osmanthus, green plum, jujube paste, walnut kernels, peach preserves, hawthorn cake and more.

In recent years, embracing the rise of the “*guochao*” (China-chic) trend, Daoxiangcun introduced its No. 0 Shop—a boutique store centred on immersive experiences. Departing from the traditional image of a time-honoured brand, it quickly captured public attention with its distinctly Beijing-style “freshly baked, on-site sales” concept. The shop has since become a popular destination for young visitors, breathing vibrant contemporary energy into the century-old Daoxiangcun legacy and blending tradition with modern innovation.

Beijing is also home to another time-honoured halal pastry shop, Dashunzhai, known across the city for its *tanghuoshao* (sweet baked wheaten cakes)—

a treasured delicacy with a history spanning several centuries.

According to legend, in 1637, the 10th year of the Chongzhen era (1628–1644) of the Ming Dynasty, a Hui peddler named Liu Dashun travelled from Nanjing to Tongzhou, Beijing, aboard a grain boat along the Grand Canal. Discovering Tongzhou to be a thriving hub of water and land trade bustling with merchants, Liu decided it was the ideal place to settle and make a living. He opened a small shop named Dashunzhai, specialising in *tanghuoshao*. By the Qianlong era (1736–1795) of the Qing Dynasty, business was flourishing, and the Liu family expanded, opening a storefront at the west entrance of Huimin Hutong (today the new site of Xiaolou Restaurant in Tongzhou District). There, they offered more than 10 types of southern-style halal pastries and cakes, including *tanghuoshao*, *baiguodun bobo* (white fruit flatbreads), *jiangsi paicha* (crispy fritter twists with ginger threads), sweet

ears (a fried sugar cake of Islamic origin) and *mi mahua* (honey-glazed twisted dough sticks).

To preserve its traditional essence, Dashunzhai upholds rigorous standards in both ingredient selection and production. For generations, it has insisted on sourcing each ingredient from its original, time-honoured place of origin. Its craftsmanship remains precise and uncompromising, faithfully adhering to traditional methods without the slightest deviation. Today, Dashunzhai's *tanghuoshao*, together with Xiaolou Restaurant's braised catfish and Xianyuan fermented tofu, is celebrated as one of the “Three Treasures of Tongzhou.”

Today, Beijing's dim sum has found its place on the global stage, with the city's beloved “leisure snacks” now infused with flavours from around the world. This fusion has further enriched the taste of everyday life, while the enduring sweetness of these treats continues to nurture warmth, connection and shared joy among people.

▼ Mooncakes







# The Aroma of Fruit Permeates the Ancient Capital in Golden Autumn

Text by Gao Yuan

The saying “the cool weather does not make people feel cold” is well-suited to describe Beijing at this moment. In the golden autumn season, the weather grows cool but does not yet turn cold. Across the city, markets are filled with ripe fruits, from fresh and juicy varieties to sweet ones and also tender nuts. At the same time, many seasonal snacks and dishes for autumn and winter are offered in the city. Strolling through the streets, people are immersed in the fragrance of fruit, as if the whole city is steeped in a sweet feast.

## The Fragrance of Beijing's Fruits Remains as it Always Was

Beijing has a long history of fruit tree cultivation. Centuries of accumulated horticultural practices and experiences have laid a firm foundation for the region's flourishing fruit industry. Flanked by the Yanshan Mountains in the northeast and the Taihang foothills in the northwest, the city is encircled by mountain ranges that serve as a natural barrier, preserving the lush vitality of this land. With favourable landforms, fertile soil and a mild, humid climate, Beijing provides an ideal setting for fruit growing and farming. This unique interplay of land and water has fostered and sustained the vigorous development of the city's fruit and forestry sectors. The city offers people a beautiful scene of harvesting produce in the fragrance of fruits in four seasons.

In his book *North and South Views*, Chinese writer Tang Lusun (1908–1985) fondly recalled the abundance of Beijing's autumn fruits in the 1930s and 1940s: “The Mid-Autumn Festival in the eighth lunar month was truly a grand celebration in Beiping (present-day

Beijing). The harvest had just ended, the weather was pleasantly mild and all kinds of fruit—apples, pomegranates, peaches, Chinese white pears, large and small white pears, Chinese crabapples, *hulache* (a popular Beijing fruit, similar to but smaller than the apple and very tasty), white apricots, Shaying grapes, Muscat grapes, jujubes, lotus seeds, lotus roots and even fox nuts—flooded the markets. Their hues—bright light yellow, purple, pale red and greenish yellow—created a dazzling multicoloured spectacle, each fruit uniquely exquisite. Just looking at them was a delight, even before tasting. In Beiping, Mid-Autumn was also referred to as the Fruit Festival—a name truly well deserved.” His affectionate account brings to life the bustling streets lined with fruit stalls, where the air of the old city was filled with the fragrance of fresh produce, evoking the enduring vitality and timeless charm of ancient Beijing.

Even more intriguing, some Mid-Autumn fruits are creatively customised with symbolic designs. While still unripe, farmers carefully press paper cut-outs bearing auspicious Chinese characters such as *fu* (happiness), *shou* (longevity), *ji* (auspiciousness) or *xiang* (good luck) onto the sun-facing side of the fruit. As



### TIPS

#### Beijing's Autumn Pear Paste

Beijing's autumn pear paste, made from the city's unique pears, is valued for soothing coughs and supporting health.

Pears have long been used in traditional Chinese medicine. When simmered into pear paste, they can help relieve coughs. Historical records trace the practice back to the Zhenguan era (AD 627–649) of the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907). Li Shizhen's *Compendium of Materia Medica* from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) also records methods of preparing pear paste.

Beijing is renowned as a place of origin for pears, and autumn pear paste is a time-honoured traditional health drink. Made primarily from pears and simmered with honey, together with medicinal-food ingredients such as China root (a wood-decaying fungus) and fritillaries, it takes on a bright, translucent amber colour and is valued for soothing the lungs and calming coughs. It remains a familiar autumn–winter wellness staple in Beijing households.

▼ Pear slices





the fruit ripens, the paper is removed, leaving behind a clear imprint of the characters. These unique fruits, carrying both beauty and meaning, became especially prized as gifts for family and friends. They are the popular festive gifts among Beijing residents for their families and friends on holidays, reflecting people's good wishes for their relatives.

When it comes to Beijing's autumn fruits, the pear undoubtedly takes centre stage. Since ancient times, the city has provided a favourable home for pear trees to flourish. Blessed with ample sunshine and distinct seasons, this region produces pears with tender, fine-textured flesh and abundant juice. Each bite of pears delivers a refreshingly sweet taste, like sipping a cup of nectar.

The flourishing of Beijing pears lies not only in their excellent quality but also in their rich variety: the Jingbai pear from Dongshan Village in Mentougou District, golden in colour and as large as a fist; the yellow Ya pear with golden stems from Lihua Village in Daxing District, gourd-shaped, crisp and pleasantly sweet with a touch of sourness; and the Hongxiao pear (also known as the Beijing red pear) from Hefangkou Village in Huairou District, the birthplace of red pears, prized for its juicy crunch and bright red skin. Each autumn, these pears reach the markets in succession, creating a genuine pear feast. As a speciality fruit, Beijing's pears are also popular among tourists, who often buy some as souvenirs for their friends.

Among Beijing's pears, the Jingbai pear, or the Beijing white pear, is the most celebrated. It is the only local fruit variety to carry the "Jing" (Beijing) prefix. In its birthplace, Dongshan Village in Junzhuang Town, Mentougou District, more than 300 pear trees still stand that are over 200 years old. The Jingbai pear is prized for its thin skin, delicate flesh, abundant juice and rich fragrance. When first harvested, however, it is green and firm; only after several days of ripening, as the skin turns white and the flesh softens, does it develop its best flavour. This delayed

sweetness is what makes the Jingbai pear truly distinctive. Additionally, this pear variety, one of China's geographical identification products, is well-known in the country and widely welcomed by pear enthusiasts nationwide.

Even more remarkably, Beijingers never let nature's bounty go to waste, and their ways of enjoying its flavours are wonderfully varied: simmered into autumn pear paste—a soothing remedy for dry coughs and a cherished taste for children in hutongs during the colder months; fermented into pear wine, crisp yet mellow, a refined gift for loved ones during festivals; or sun-dried into pear slices and candied pears, preserving sweetness to savour throughout winter. Even pears of lesser appearance are turned into juice, pear vinegar or canned preserves, capturing the freshness of autumn. This spirit of making full use of every part reflects both the practical wisdom of Beijingers and the generous gifts of their land.

Persimmons are another iconic fruit of Beijing in autumn and winter. The city has cultivated persimmon trees since the Ming Dynasty, with the Mopan persimmon from Fangshan District being the most celebrated—so prized that it was presented as tribute to the imperial court during the Ming era. Its fruit is flat and round, with a distinctive constriction at the centre dividing it into upper and lower halves, resembling an old-fashioned millstone, hence the name "Mopan" (millstone) persimmon.

Beijingers have a special fondness for persimmons. The celebrated writer Lao She (1899–1966) once planted two persimmon trees in the courtyard of his home and named it "Dan Shi Xiao Yuan" (Small Courtyard of Crimson Persimmons). At his former residence, located at 19 Fengfu Hutong in Dongcheng District, these two trees—now more than 50 years old—still bear clusters of bright red fruit each late autumn, creating a scene of poetic charm and picturesque beauty.

Persimmons can be enjoyed not



only fresh but also in many other forms: dried persimmons, thin slices or even persimmon jam. Some are fermented into persimmon wine. Each preparation offers a distinct and memorable flavour. Especially prized are dried persimmons made through traditional methods—peeling, hanging and sun-drying—creating a seasonal delicacy that graces Beijing tables throughout autumn and winter. Dried persimmons taste delightfully smooth and tender, with a sweet, refreshing flavour that lingers pleasantly on the palate.

An old Beijing saying goes: "Canopies, fish tanks and pomegranate trees," describing the quintessential scene of a traditional Beijing *siheyuan* (courtyard residence). In earlier times, many grand courtyard homes featured pomegranate trees with fish tanks placed artfully among them. Though seemingly ordinary, these elements were essential parts of the *siheyuan*. Elderly Beijingers often kept pomegranate trees and goldfish: the pomegranate, with its abundant seeds, symbolised fertility and blessings, while goldfish represented "abundance year after year" and "prosperity in surplus." In midsummer, canopies erected in courtyards are covered with climbing vines, shielding residents from the scorching sun. In autumn, when the pomegranates ripen, families and friends gather in courtyards to drink fragrant tea, savour fresh fruit, watch the goldfish and admire the ruby-red fruit hanging from the trees—a moment of pure, unhurried contentment.

In autumn, Beijingers enjoy another cherished pastime: visiting the city's fruit markets. Beijing is not only abundant in local produce but also a gathering hub for the finest seasonal fruits from across the country. With fresh harvests from both north and south arriving in the capital, strolling through the markets has long been one of Beijing's most favoured autumn pleasures.

In his essay "The Fragrance of Fruit Markets in the Breeze," Chinese writer Zhang Henshui (1895–1967) fondly



▲ Roasted chestnuts

recalled the relaxed joy of strolling with his family through fruit markets during the Mid-Autumn Festival, vividly portraying Beijing's autumn abundance: "Green-tinged Ya pears, pale and plump, are piled high like mountains on vendors' stalls. Crimson jujubes, deep-purple Muscat grapes and pale-green mare's teat grapes fill baskets and crates that line the streets. Apples, regarded as slightly more luxurious, resemble chubby baby cheeks dusted with rouge, arranged in artful displays atop tables draped in blue cloth. Pomegranates ripen to bursting, revealing crystal-like seeds, and are heaped in generous mounds. Elsewhere, *hulache* (a popular Beijing fruit, similar to but smaller than the apple and very tasty), hawthorns and crabapples are stacked in winnowing fans and baskets, spread along the roadside for nearly 500 metres (m)." Through Zhang's words, the vibrant and fragrant bustle of old Beijing's fruit markets springs to life.

## Tempting Flavours in Crisp and Cool Autumn

The scent of chestnuts signals the arrival of autumn in the capital, and for Beijingers, the crisp air of the golden

season feels incomplete without the sweet, toasty fragrance of roasted chestnuts. This fragrant, glutinous, and sweet flavour is also a seasonal speciality exclusive to autumn in the ancient capital.

Chestnut is among the earliest fruit tree species cultivated in Beijing, with a history stretching back thousands of years. *Records of the Grand Historian* notes, "There are 1,000 chestnut trees in the Yan (present-day Beijing) and Qin (in today's Gansu and Shaanxi provinces) regions." This suggests that more than 2,000 years ago, when Beijing was part of the ancient Yan state (11th century–222 BC), chestnut cultivation had already begun in the region.

Huairou District is known as the "Hometown of Chinese Chestnuts." Across the district, nearly 1,000 ancient chestnut trees, locally called "Da Ming Li" (Great Ming Chestnuts), are more than 500 years old. Among them, over 80 stand in the Ming Dynasty chestnut orchard of Xishuiyu Village, Jiuduhe Town, and more than 30 grow in the Ming–Qing-era (1368–1911) grove in Bohai Town. Together, these orchards form the largest ancient chestnut clusters in North China, still flourishing today with lush foliage and abundant harvests. In Fang'eryu



Village, Miyun District, there is also an ancient tree known as the “King of Chestnut Trees.” Estimated to be 800 years old, it measures about 6 m in girth and rises 15.6 m high—a living fossil and a testament to Beijing’s enduring chestnut heritage.

When the autumn breeze begins to stir, the rich, sweet aroma of roasted chestnuts once again drifts through Beijing’s streets and alleys. With a bag of freshly roasted, steaming chestnuts in hand, one cracks open the glossy shells to reveal golden kernels—sweet, fragrant and utterly delicious, leaving behind a taste that lingers long after.

If you ask which shop sells the best roasted chestnuts, there are simply too many to name. Qiuli Xiang near Di’anmen, Old Wang’s Roasted Nuts at Yuting Bridge, Jinli Sheng at Dongsi, Limanqiu in Zuojiashuang, Xiaojie Chestnuts at Chaoyangmen, Chestnut Yu at Andingmen, Lao Yang’s Dried Goods in Hepingli, Xiangbalao Chestnuts at Changchun Street—and in recent years the ever-popular chain Xue Ji Roasted Goods—all enjoy devoted followings. From the Autumn Equinox through to the following summer, this cherished treat can always be found in Beijing whenever the craving strikes.

Walnut trees are also among the earliest cultivated fruit trees in Beijing, with records showing that intentional planting began more than 2,000 years ago during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220). By the Ming and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, walnut farming had

already flourished in areas such as Pinggu, which remains the city’s largest walnut-producing region today. Over centuries of cultivation, Beijing’s farmers accumulated deep expertise and developed high-quality local varieties known for their large size, thin shells, plump kernels and rich flavour. Walnuts from Lingshui Village in Mentougou District and Fenzhuang Village in Miyun District are particularly favoured for their unique quality. In Yanjiatai Village, Mentougou, a famed “Walnut King” still stands—a towering tree already 300 years old.

Every autumn, as the forests blaze with colour, clusters of round hawthorn berries hang from the branches, their cheerful crimson glow adding brightness to the harvest season. China is the world’s largest producer of hawthorns, and those from Beijing are noted not only for their fine quality but also for their abundant yield, ranking among the country’s best. Across the hills and woodlands on the city’s outskirts, hawthorn trees can be seen in great numbers.

Every autumn, clusters of hawthorns hang like red agates from the branches—resembling dabs of rouge scattered across hills and valleys. These hawthorns shine as brilliantly as clouds at sunset.

Hawthorn is also known as *shanlihong*, or red fruit, though some distinguish between them—smaller ones are regarded as true hawthorns, while the larger variety is specifically called *shanlihong*.

When it comes to the most beloved hawthorn treat, nothing surpasses *tanghulu*—the traditional hawthorn skewered and coated in a brittle sugar shell. Fresh berries are dipped into bubbling syrup made from melted rock sugar, then left to cool until the coating hardens into a glossy, translucent crust. One bite delivers a crisp “crack,” followed by the perfect harmony of tart, sweet and sticky—a quintessential autumn–winter delight cherished by children across northern China.

*Tanghulu* made with hawthorns is considered Beijing’s most iconic snack. It not only strings together sweet memories for generations of Beijingers but also serves as a window through which international visitors come to know

and fall in love with the ancient city. From the alleyways of the ancient city to bustling commercial districts, stalls of glistening, crystal-clear sugar-coated hawthorn skewers are not only the most noticeable sight of autumn and winter but also a Beijing snack visitors should not miss.

Ma’s Tanghulu, tucked inside a halal supermarket on Niujie Street, enjoys a wide acclaim. Its signature remains the traditional hawthorn skewer, with a glassy, ultra-crisp sugar shell encasing soft, mealy red berries that strike a perfect balance of sweet and sour.

Alongside this classic, the shop offers more than a dozen creative variations, including yam, walnut, glutinous rice filling, red bean paste and fruit flavours such as orange, grape and strawberry. Each delivers fresh, juicy sweetness. Sugar-coated hawthorns stuffed with glutinous rice fillings are also very popular. From a distance, the snow-white rice filling sandwiched between two halves of a bright red hawthorn looks incredibly mouth-watering. These inventive mixtures preserve the beloved crunch and tang of traditional *tanghulu* while adding modern, layered textures

and flavours, making every bite richly complex and deeply satisfying. For these reasons, many food enthusiasts are happy to wait patiently in line at these *tanghulu* stalls—just for a bite of that quintessential Beijing sweetness.

*Tanghulu* is undoubtedly a cherished taste of autumn and winter, yet the culinary uses of hawthorns in Beijing extend far beyond sugar-coated hawthorns. Take *chaohongguo* (stir-fried hawthorns), for instance—a traditional Beijing snack with a somewhat misleading name. In fact, no stir-frying is involved. As essayist Zhou Zuoren (1885–1966) noted, “the hawthorns were boiled until soft, peeled and stoned, then simmered again with sugar”—never stir-fried, yet still called *chaohongguo*. Another classic is hawthorn cake. To prepare it, hawthorns are stoned and cooked until soft, then strained through a fine sieve to remove the skins, producing a smooth fruit purée. Sugar or osmanthus flowers are added for flavour, and once cooled, the mixture sets into a glossy, ruby-red confection—slightly elastic, tangy, sweet and refreshingly aromatic. Locally known as Jinggao (Beijing Cake) or Jingao (Gold Cake), it is often served with crisp pear strips in the dish “Jingao with Pear Shreds,” long treasured in Beijing-style restaurants for its bright flavour and refreshing texture.

It’s no secret that Beijingers cherish the tradition of “savouring the season’s first taste.” A plate of fresh fruit, a cup of clear tea and unhurried conversation in the shade—this is life’s simplest yet most genuine pleasure. Eating autumn fruits to moisten dryness and nourish the body in harmony with the season reflects wisdom passed down from ancient times. Pomegranates, with their abundance of seeds, symbolise a house filled with descendants; persimmons, echoing the phrase “*shi shi ru yi*” (“everything as desired”), signify smooth progress in all endeavours; and jujubes, homophonous with *zao* (early), express the wish for good fortune to arrive soon. Each sweet bite carries heartfelt hopes for a beautiful life.

▼ Hawthorn cakes



Tanghulu (the traditional hawthorn skewered and coated in a brittle sugar shell)





## 舞剧《青衣》

2025年11月1-2日国家大剧院·戏剧场上演王亚彬导演、编舞、主演的舞剧《青衣》，该剧改编自毕飞宇同名小说，围绕上世纪80年代当京剧演员筱燕秋的梦人生展开。全剧用80多分钟的西方当代舞语言，讲述了一个纯粹的中国故事。舞剧通过极简的舞台空间与克制的身体语言，将筱燕秋对艺术的爱与奉献外化为肢体表达。舞台呈现融合戏曲写意与现代舞，运用投影幕分割时空及镜子元素延伸内心世界，并打破第四堵墙设计。该剧较原著更多了“残酷”与“悲悯”。

## The Dance Drama The Moon Opera

From November 1 to 2, 2025, the National Centre for the Performing Arts will present *The Moon Opera*, a dance drama directed and choreographed by Wang Yabin, who also performs the lead role. Adapted from Bi Feiyu's novel, it explores the artistic dreams of Xiao Yanqiu, a celebrated Peking Opera actress of the 1980s. The production employs over 80 minutes of Western contemporary dance to tell a distinctly Chinese story. Xiao's devotion to her art is conveyed through a minimalist stage design and precise movement. It fuses the essence of traditional Chinese opera with the language of modern dance. Projection screens divide time and space, while mirrors extend Xiao's inner world, breaking the fourth wall. Compared with the novel, the play delivers a heightened sense of both "cruelty" and "compassion."



## 音乐剧《剧院魅影》(英文原版)

音乐剧《剧院魅影》(英文原版)于2025年11月11日-30日在天桥艺术中心·大剧场上演。剧目改编自加斯顿·勒鲁的小说，讲述了在巴黎歌剧院的华丽帷幕下，一段令人屏息的爱情故事。本次将原汁原味呈现由卡梅隆·麦金托什与英国真正好集团出品、自1986年延续至今的传奇经典版本。该版本完整保留了哈洛德·普林斯的导演构思，吉莉安·琳恩的场面调度与编舞，玛丽亚·伯约森设计的华美服装与恢宏布景。每场演出汇聚逾130名演职人员和现场乐队乐手，呈现230余套精美绝伦的戏服及22次令人惊叹的场景转换。

## The Musical *Phantom of the Opera* (English Original)

The musical *The Phantom of the Opera* (original English version) is set to tour China, appearing at the Tianqiao Performing Arts Centre's Grand Theatre from November 11 to 30, 2025. Audiences will experience the authentic, legendary production by Cameron Mackintosh and The Really Useful Theatre Company Limited—a masterpiece that has captivated the world since its 1986 debut. Adapted from Gaston Leroux's classic novel, the musical tells a haunting love story set in the grand Palais Garnier. This staging faithfully preserves Harold Prince's original direction, Gillian Lynne's choreography and scenic design, and Maria Bjornson's iconic costumes and sets. Each performance features a cast and a live orchestra of over 130 members, with more than 230 stunning costumes and 22 seamless scenic transitions transporting audiences into the story.