

NATIONAL CULINARY REVIEW

EXPLORING CHINESE CUISINE

POST-CONVENTION WRAP UP

ACF's 2025 National Convention in Las Vegas brought together culinary professionals nationwide

ACF CHAPTER CLOSE-UP

Las Vegas chefs continue their legacy of mentorship and community impact

REGIONAL CHINESE CUISINE

Eight distinctive regional styles showcase authentic flavors beyond the familiar

A CONVERSATION WITH MARTIN YAN

Bridging cultures through culinary excellence and authentic Chinese cooking



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PIONEERING REGIONAL CHINESE CUISINE

By Jeffrey Spear

A large number of Americans view Chinese cuisine as one style of cooking, with stir fries, rice, noodles and soy sauce being the dominant elements.

As a matter of clarification, there are more than 5000 dishes that can be included in Chinese cuisine, many falling into distinctive regional styles known as the "Eight Great Traditions" of Chinese cuisine - Cantonese, Sichuan, Hunan, Fujian, Jiangsu, Shandong, Zhejiang, and Anhui. Other cuisines, including Yunnan, Guizhou, Shaanxi, and Xinjiang, are also gaining recognition. While these cuisines may be familiar to people in China, and perhaps a small number of Chinese diaspora in America's larger cities, only Cantonese, Sichuan, and to a lesser degree, Hunan, are reasonably well known.

Considering there are more than 45,000 Chinese restaurants operating across the United States, each with

Sì Yao Chicken, made with fragrant aged soy sauce, by Chef John Liu, Chifa (Los Angeles).



its own ancestry and treasured family recipes, the distinctions between regional Chinese cuisines are frequently blurred, obscured, ignored or lost altogether. Plus, younger generations in Chinese families have not learned to cook, meaning that even more of their culinary heritage is being lost.

In Los Angeles, **Chef John Liu** is the creative force behind Chifa, a restaurant serving quintessential home-cooked Chinese and Peruvian foods, both cuisines being part of his family heritage. "It's easy to lose the thread to traditional foods, techniques and flavors," says Liu. "While experimentation is good, I'm preserving and elevating traditional Cantonese and Taiwanese dishes with better, cleaner ingredients and more efficient cooking techniques." A few of these includes Brulee Char Siu, Si Yao Chicken and Chinese Fries (referencing classic Salt & Pepper Shrimp).



Chef John Liu, Chifa
(Los Angeles)

Wood fired Pork Jowl
Char Siu by Chef John Liu,
Chifa (Los Angeles).



may take some time before these distinctive regional styles find their way into American culinary culture. Plus, some regional cuisines, especially those like Xinjiang on China's western border, have been influenced by proximity to Eastern Europe and travelers along the Silk Road, producing dishes such as braised mutton with cumin, making them difficult to recognize as Chinese cuisine, especially to Americans.

As exposure to regional Chinese cuisines broadens, chefs are discovering elements that align with American culinary preferences for bolder, spicier and more exotic dining experiences. In particular, the sweet and versatile Cantonese char siu barbecue sauce; fiery Sichuan chilies, peppercorns and mala sauce; slightly spicy Fujian shacha; chili crisp from the Guizhou province; and sour flavors derived from fermented ingredients used in several regional cuisines.



Chef Cori Xiong, Mala Sichuan
(Houston)

At Mala Sichuan Bistro in Houston, the emphasis is on Sichuan cuisine. **Chef Cori Xiong** explains, "The way we cook is on the traditional side of Chinese cuisine." When asked about her creativity, she continues "We start with classic Sichuan flavors, then layer in a few special ingredients such as hotbed chives, sauerkraut and bacon in a manner that results in proprietary dishes." A few

of these include Vine Peppercorn Fish Fillet, Green Tea Bacon Fried Rice and Beef Brisket with Mushroom Medley.

When you understand just how massive China is, and that many of its cuisines are separated by challenging terrain and significant distances, it

Beef Brisket with Mushroom
Medley features yellow hotbed
chives, from Chef Cori Xiong,
Mala Sichuan (Houston).



Red Oil Dumplings, slathered
in red chili oil, ground garlic
and sweet and spicy soy
paste, from Chef Cori Xiong,
Mala Sichuan (Houston).





Chef Andrew Hunter, a leading research and development chef with a focus on menu and product development.

They're also experimenting, creating innovative "fusion" dishes that overlook the elements of authentic Chinese cuisine in favor of something altogether new and different. While this level of innovation is prized, **Chef Andrew Hunter**, one of this country's leading research and development chefs, reminds us, "Appropriation has become a sensitive issue. It's important to approach the

development of new, Chinese inspired recipes with integrity, using authentic ingredients and calling out the point of origin whenever possible."

"There's added value from the storytelling opportunity, whether revealed by servers or spelled out on menus, that should not be overlooked."

Chef Andrew Hunter

While Cantonese cuisine has been leading the way for many years, starting with the Gold Rush in the 1920s, and Sichuan has been gaining popularity since the 1970s, there is tremendous opportunity for chefs to lean into the foundations of these other regional cuisines, learn about their ingredients and cooking techniques, and find ways to introduce some of these dishes onto their menus.

Short Rib Scallion Pancake
by Chef Andrew Hunter



Rou Jia Mo

SIDEBAR

Regional Chinese Cuisines of Note

ANHUI - East - Salty, umami flavors. Wild game, river seafoods, herbs, vegetables and mushrooms. Slow cooking, rich braises and stews. Fewer stir-fries than other cuisines.

Dishes: Wenzheng Mountain Bamboo Shoots, Stinky Mandarin Fish, Bagongshan Tofu.

CANTONESE - South - Most popular outside of China. Fresh ingredients, natural flavors and cooking methods that include steaming and stir-frying.

Dishes: Dim Sum, Char Siu (BBQ Pork), Beef Chow Fun.

FUJIAN - Southeast - Coastal and mountainous territories, light, fresh, and umami-rich flavors using seafood, woodland herbs and mushrooms. Excellent soups and broths.



Xiao Long Bao

Dishes: Buddha Jumps Over the Wall, Oyster Omelette, Ginger Duck.

GUIZHOU - Southwest - Bold and distinctive flavors. A balance of tangy and aromatic elements including fermented and pickled vegetables, generous use of chili peppers.

Dishes: Sour Soup Fish, Huaxi Beef Noodles, Zunyi Mutton Noodles.

HUNAN - South Central - Bold, hot and sour flavors using chilies, shallots and garlic, a wide variety of seasonal produce.

Dishes: Dong'an Chicken, Red Braised Pork, Stir-fried Pork with Chilies.

JIANGSU - East Coast - Delicate flavors, fresh ingredients, and emphasis on exquisite presentation. Fresh ingredients, particularly seafood.



Yangzhou Fried Rice

Dishes: Sweet & Sour Squirrel Fish, Lion's Head Meatballs, Young Chow Fried Rice.

SHANDONG - Northern Coast - Influential culinary history. Emphasis on salty, sweet, sour, savory. Fresh seafood and vegetables, flavorful soups.

Dishes: Scallion Braised Sea Cucumber, Dezhou Braised Chicken, Moo Shu Pork.

SHAANXI - North Central - Bold, savory, seasoned with salt, garlic, onion and vinegar. Famous for noodles and lamb dishes.

Dishes: Biang Biang noodles, Rou Jia Mo (Chinese hamburger), Jiaozi (dumplings).

SICHUAN - Southwest - Hot, bold, flavorful and spicy. Chilies, Sichuan peppercorns (mala - numbing and spicy), garlic, ginger, fermented black beans.

Dishes: Mapo Tofu, Dan Dan Noodles, Kung Pao Chicken.



Mapo Tofu

XINJIANG - Northwest - Blend of Central Asian and Chinese. Features lamb, beef, noodles, rice, and spices including cumin, cinnamon, chili peppers and other aromatics.

Dishes: Uyghur Polo (pilaf), Laghman (hand-pulled noodles), Xinjiang Cumin Lamb.

YUNNAN - Southwest - Blend of Han Chinese and ethnic minority cuisines. A wide range of flavors and dishes, fresh, local ingredients. A balance of spice and sourness.

Dishes: Steam Pot Chicken, Yunnan Mushroom Hotpot, Crossing the Bridge Noodles.

ZHEJIANG - East Coast - Prioritizes fish and shellfish from the sea and freshwater rivers. Fresh, seasonal ingredients. Light, focus on natural flavors, no heavy sauces or spices.

Dishes: Dongpo Pork, Jinjua Ham and Beggar's Chicken.