

Chinese Cookery: Is it Healthy?

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Americanized Chinese food establishments are very popular, especially those with buffets. They are present in large numbers in our communities and generally offer a wide variety of food selections at relatively low cost. The “all you can eat” offerings, in particular, appeal to the American way of thinking that “more for the dollar” spent are a good bargain.

Is Chinese cookery healthy? In China, the diet has been perfected since ancient times on a food-science theory of the yin and yang – that is, a balance in the diet is a great regulator for life and good health. In this system, all foods are divided into three groups: the yin is for the “cooling foods,” the yang is for the “heating foods,” and the yin-yang is for the neutral foods. Servings within these food groups need to be kept in balance.

Unlike the practice in America, a true Chinese meal is low in fat. Perhaps as much as three-fourths of the volume of food consumed might be rice or other grains, complimented mostly by well-seasoned vegetables. Relative to the large population, most of the farmland in China is utilized to grow food that will be consumed by humans, not as fodder or forage for animals.

Thus, in the true Chinese diet, beef is not common. For like reasons, the products of cows are sparse, such as milk, cheeses and butter. Most of the dietary protein might come from vegetable bean curd, not animal meat. Because the coastline is long, and because lakes and rivers are fairly numerous, seafood or fresh water fish are plentiful. Since there is little room for waste, chickens and pigs, which are scavengers of uneaten food sources, provide additional protein to the diet in poultry and pork dishes.

Depending upon how you individually make selections, an Americanized Chinese meal may provide as many as 65 percent or more of its caloric delivery as fat. This is in stark contrast to the low dietary fat consumption in China. The primary culprits in this country are the many selections of batter-dipped deep fried foods. In addition, fried rice and most forms of lo mien contribute an even additional dietary fat burden because they are cooked with fat.

To reduce your consumption of too many calories, especially as dietary fat, choose steamed white rice over fried rice and steamed vegetables over batter-coated deep fried meats that are covered with sugary or fat-rich sauces.

Many people in America indulge in consuming large servings or portions of the many different selections offered at Chinese buffets, often returning for two or three platefuls, only to feel hungry an hour or so later. This phenomenon is so common that it has been given the name “Chinese food hunger.” For a long time, this entity was blamed on MSG.

MSG, or monosodium glutamate, was first isolated at the University of Tokyo in 1908. For centuries, the Japanese had used seaweed broth, which is rich in MSG, to flavor their dishes. Actually, MSG is not a flavorant, but rather a flavor enhancer that stimulates the “umami” glutamate receptors on the tongue. Foods that are sweet, sour, bitter or salty (the four basic human tastes) are “more so” in the presence of MSG. MSG has been widely employed in the past in Americanized Chinese cookery, but is used much less frequently today.

A very small proportion of the general population are “reactors” to MSG, experiencing headache, dizziness, flushing, sweating and even chest pains or other symptoms. The “Chinese food hunger,” however, is probably not due to MSG. Rather, it is most likely due to the high glycemic index of most Chinese cookery. A high glycemic index is the result of certain carbohydrates that stimulate the body to secrete extra insulin in order to digest them. This, in turn, causes the circulating blood sugar levels to fall excessively low, reactively leading to a sense of hunger an hour or two after eating.

For thousands of years, the Chinese have treated food as a medicine. The concept that an illness should be treated with food first is ancient. In this approach, medicines should be prescribed only when food fails. There is far more merit to that theorem than most who practice western medicine would probably accept.

The concept of food as medicine, though, means much more than utilizing herbs as pharmacological equivalents. Several of the mainstays of the Chinese diet have properties that promote good health and longevity.

Soy, for instance, is almost a “wonder food.” It delivers quality protein and is a good source of dietary fiber. Its primary benefit is probably due, however, to its rich delivery of isoflavones, or “plant hormones.” A diet high in soy reduces cancer risk, especially breast cancer. Soy also reduces the magnitude of menopausal symptoms,

reduces coronary artery disease and heart attacks, and helps prevent osteoporosis, or bone loss.

The Chinese diet is often accompanied by green tea, another miracle-like food. Green tea is rich in catechin polyphenols (especially EGCG or epigallocatechin gallate), which are powerful antioxidants. Like oolong and black teas, green teas are made from the leaves of the *Camellia sinensis* plant. To make green tea, the leaves are steamed, rather than fermented, as is the process for oolong and black teas. Steaming preserves the antioxidant properties, which are destroyed by fermentation.

Green tea reduces the risks for cancer, cardiovascular diseases, high cholesterol, rheumatoid arthritis and infection. It also stimulates the immune system.

So, is Chinese food healthy? The answer, like beauty, rests much in the eye (or the practice) of the consumer. If food selections follow those of traditional Chinese cookery, Chinese food is very healthy. Only when we “Americanize” it too much does it become unhealthy. The same is true for most other Oriental cookeries consumed in this country.