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FOOD: THE WAY WE EAT

Hunan Resources

By FUCHSIA DUNLOP

General Tso's (or Zuo's) chicken is the most famous Hunanese dish in the world. A delectable concoction of lightly battered chicken in a chili-laced sweet-sour sauce, it appears on restaurant menus across the globe, but especially in the Eastern United States, where it seems to have become the epitome of Hunanese cuisine. Despite its international reputation, however, the dish is virtually unknown in the Chinese province of Hunan itself. When I went to live there four years ago, I scoured restaurant menus for it in vain, and no one I met had ever heard of it. And as I deepened my understanding of Hunanese food, I began to realize that General Tso's chicken was somewhat alien to the local palate because Hunanese people have little interest in dishes that combine sweet and savory tastes. So how on earth did this strange, foreign concoction come to be recognized abroad as the culinary classic of Hunan?

General Tso's chicken is named for Tso Tsung-t'ang (now usually transliterated as Zuo Zongtang), a formidable 19th-century general who is said to have enjoyed eating it. The Hunanese have a strong military tradition, and Tso is one of their best-known historical figures. But although many Chinese dishes are named after famous personages, there is no record of any dish named after Tso.

The real roots of the recipe lie in the chaotic aftermath of the Chinese civil war, when the leadership of the defeated Nationalist Party fled to the island of Taiwan. They took with them many talented people, including a number of notable chefs, and foremost among them was Peng Chang-kuei. Born in 1919 into a poverty-stricken household in the Hunanese capital, Changsha, Peng was the apprentice to Cao Jingchen, one of the most outstanding cooks of his generation. By the end of World War II, Peng was in charge of Nationalist government banquets, and when the party met its humiliating defeat at the hands of [Mao Zedong's](#) Communists in 1949, he fled with them to Taiwan. There, he continued to cater for official functions, inventing many new dishes.

When I met Peng Chang-kuei, a tall, dignified man in his 80s, during a visit to Taipei in 2004, he could no longer remember exactly when he first cooked General Tso's chicken, although he says it was sometime in the 1950s. "Originally the flavors of the dish were typically Hunanese — heavy, sour, hot and salty," he said.

In 1973, Peng went to New York, where he opened his first eponymous restaurant on 44th Street. At that time, Hunanese food was unknown in the United States, and it wasn't until his cooking attracted the attention of officials at the nearby [United Nations](#), and especially of the American secretary of state, [Henry Kissinger](#), that he began to make his reputation. "Kissinger visited us every time he was in New York," Peng said, "and we became great friends. It was he who brought Hunanese food to public notice." In his office in Taipei, Peng still displays a photograph of Kissinger and himself raising wineglasses at the restaurant.

Faced with new circumstances and new customers, Peng invented dishes and adapted old ones. "The original General Tso's chicken was Hunanese in taste and made without sugar," he said. "But when I began cooking for non-Hunanese people in the United States, I altered the recipe." (Though others have since laid claim to it.) In the late 1980s, having made his fortune, he sold out and returned to Taipei. His New York venture was to have enormous impact on the cooking of the Chinese diaspora. Not only General Tso's chicken but also other dishes that he invented have been widely imitated, and his apprentices have helped to disseminate his style of cooking.

The final twist in the tale is that General Tso's chicken is now being adopted as a "traditional" dish by some influential chefs and food writers in Hunan. In 1990, Peng returned to Changsha, where he opened a restaurant that included the creation on its menu. The restaurant did not last long, and the dish was never popular ("too sweet," one local chef told me), but some leading figures in the culinary establishment learned how to make it. And when they began to travel abroad to give cooking demonstrations, it seems quite likely that their overseas audiences would have expected them to produce that famous "Hunanese" recipe. Perhaps it would have seemed senseless to refuse to acknowledge a dish upon which the international reputation of Hunanese cuisine was largely based. Maybe it would have been embarrassing to admit that the dish was a product of the exiled Nationalist society of Taiwan. Whatever their motivations, they began to include General Tso's chicken in publications about Hunanese cooking, especially those aimed at a Taiwanese readership.

But even if General Tso's chicken is an invented tradition, it has to be seen as a part of the story of Hunanese cuisine. After all, it embodies a narrative of the old Chinese apprentice system and the golden age of Hunanese cookery, the tragedy of civil war and exile, the struggle of the Chinese diaspora to adapt to American society and in the end the opening up of China and the re-establishment of links between Taiwan and the mainland.

And because the dish has, through the vagaries of history, become known as the Hunanese dish par excellence, how could I even think of omitting it from my book on recipes from Hunan Province? So please cook it and savor it and dream as you do so of the Hunanese past and the invention of new mythologies in the cultural melting pots of the modern world.

General Tso's Chicken

(In this Taiwanese version, the dish is hot and sour and lacks the sweetness of its Americanized counterpart.)

For the sauce:

1 tablespoon double-concentrate tomato paste, mixed with 1 tablespoon water

½ teaspoon potato flour

½ teaspoon dark soy sauce

1½ teaspoons light soy sauce

1 tablespoon rice vinegar

3 tablespoons chicken stock or water

For the chicken:

12 ounces (about 4 to 5) skinless, boneless chicken thighs

½ teaspoon dark soy sauce

2 teaspoons light soy sauce

1 egg yolk

2 tablespoons potato flour

1 quart peanut oil, more as needed

6 to 10 dried red chilies

2 teaspoons finely chopped ginger

2 teaspoons minced garlic

2 teaspoons sesame oil

Scallions, thinly sliced, for garnish.

1. Make the sauce by combining all the ingredients in a small bowl. Set aside.

2. To prepare the chicken, unfold the chicken thighs and lay them on a cutting board. Remove as much of the sinew as possible. (If some parts are very thick, cut them in half horizontally.) Slice a few shallow crosshatches into the meat. Cut each thigh into roughly ¼ -inch slices and place in a large bowl. Add the soy sauces and egg yolk and mix well. Stir in the potato flour and 2 teaspoons peanut oil and set aside. Using scissors, snip the chilies into ¾ -inch pieces, discarding the seeds. Set aside.

3. Pour 3½ cups peanut oil into a large wok, or enough oil to rise 1½ inches from the bottom. Set over high heat until the oil reaches 350 to 400 degrees. Add half the chicken and fry until crisp and deep gold, 3 to 4 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the chicken to a plate. Repeat with the second batch. Pour the oil into a heatproof container and wipe the wok clean.

4. Place the wok over high heat. Add 2 tablespoons peanut oil. When hot, add the chilies and stir-fry for a few seconds, until they just start to change color. Add the ginger and garlic and stir-fry for a few seconds longer, until fragrant. Add the sauce, stirring as it thickens. Return the chicken to the wok and stir vigorously to coat. Remove from the heat, stir in the sesame oil and top with scallions. Serve with rice. Serves 2 to 3. Adapted from "The Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook," by Fuchsia Dunlop.

Fuchsia Dunlop writes for Gourmet and Saveur. Her "Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook" (W. W. Norton), from which this is adapted, will be published later this month.

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