

By PAULINE D LOH
paulined@chinadaily.com.cn

October 28 was the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, a day when the elderly are specifically feted. The double ninth, or Chongyang, is when the whole family gathers around the matriarchs and patriarchs of the clan and prays for their longevity.

This special day has been celebrated since as early as the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), before the establishment of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC). As with most traditional festivals, it first started as an ancestral rite.

These days, many families take advantage of the brisk autumn weather and head out to the countryside to enjoy the red and gold colors of the falling leaves. This ritual is known as *shangqiu*, or the appreciation of autumn.

A lot of families climb to higher ground, or *denggao*, so that their prayers and good wishes for the old folks at home can be heard clearly by the deities above.

Most of all, Chongyang is an indication that autumn has well and truly settled throughout the country.

The flower of the season must be one of the most recognizable icons of China, the chrysanthemum.

Chongyang is the time for chrysanthemum wine and chrysanthemum cakes, both enjoyed while appreciating the vast variety of chrysanthemum flowers now blooming in public parks and gardens.

In Beijing, the formal gardens of the Forbidden City will put up grand displays. Farther south in Suzhou and Hangzhou, their famous landscaped gardens will have delicate bonsai and magnificent sculpted pots of blooms.

Yet farther south in Guangzhou, the chrysanthemum is appreciated in a very different way.

As early as in April, chefs plot with their favorite gardeners on how to start cultivating a special variety of white chrysanthemums. These plants must be totally organic, free of any chemical pesticides or fertilizers.

The flowers must be ready around Chongyang, when they are carefully harvested just as they reach full bloom. They are an essential ingredient in an autumn delicacy — snake soup.

To the Cantonese in Guangzhou and Hong Kong, nothing is more representative of the season than a steaming hot bowl of thick, rich snake soup.

This is a dish that has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years, partly due to modern farms that have made the supply of snakes more reliable. In fact, the snakes can be viewed as a pharmaceutical industry byproduct — they are used in the production of serum, essential antidotes for snakebites.

When I first worked in Hong Kong, a local colleague took me sightseeing to Temple Street, the

Golden opportunity for snake soup

One of the best ways to appreciate autumn is a hot bowl of broth speckled with chrysanthemum petals



The broth is a slow simmer of chicken, pork and snake bones with a secret blend of Chinese herbs. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Rich autumn chicken broth (snake optional)

- 1 whole chicken, steamed
- 500g pork soup bones, blanched
- 1 large piece *chenpi* (aged citrus peel)
- 3 slices of ginger
- 4-6 dried shiitake or Chinese mushrooms, soaked
- 3-4 pieces black wood ear fungus, soaked
- 3-4 kaffir lime leaves
- 1 large white chrysanthemum, soaked in lightly salted water
- Salt and lots of white pepper
- 1 large snake, steamed and skinned (optional)

Remove the meat from the chicken carcass. Shred the meat.

(Remove the meat from the snake.) Place chicken carcass, pork soup bones (and snake bones) into a large pot of water with the citrus peel and ginger slices and bring to a boil. Boil rapidly for 15 minutes, then reduce to a simmer while preparing the rest of the ingredients.

Finely shred the mushrooms and fungus. Roll up and cut the kaffir lime leaves into very fine slivers.

Remove the petals from the chrysanthemum and rinse again

in salted water. Drain and dry.

By now, your bone stock should be full of flavor. Remove the bones and add salt and pepper to taste. Add a spoonful of sugar to increase the sweetness.

Add the shredded meat and mushrooms to the pot and allow to come back to a boil. Ladle into soup bowls and garnish with kaffir lime leaves and chrysanthemum petals.

Serve with more white pepper and very finely shredded ginger.

Skip the snake and you still get a very flavorful chicken broth that will warm you up in the cool autumn evenings.

famous night market that is an essential draw for tourists. As we wandered through to the end of the alley, we crossed the road to some street stalls under a sprawling banyan tree and sat down.

The stall owner set a fragrant bowl of broth before me, its golden surface speckled with a shower of white chrysanthemum petals. This was the infamous snake soup.

The rich redolent fragrance overwhelmed any reservations.

There were shreds of chicken and snake, shreds of mushrooms and black fungus, delicate strands of aged citrus peel and slivers of kaffir lime leaves. The broth was amazingly savory.

That was my first bowl of autumnal snake soup, 30 years ago.

A couple of years ago, my husband and I visited a friend working for a major television news channel with its headquarters in the New Territories town of Tai Po, in Hong Kong. He invited us for lunch at Tai Po Market, and the main course was snake soup.

My spouse was hesitant, since the most exotic meat in his diet so far had been Inner Mongolian lamb. But he was game for the experiment.

There was space for maybe four tiny tables in the shop, and almost half the space was taken up by a cooking station with a huge bubbling basin of broth.

Next to the stove was a counter piled high with chicken carcasses and skinned snakes.

As we watched, fascinated, the lady boss stripped the snakes of meat with a nimble flicking motion that soon built up a pile of creamy white shreds. The chicken was being shredded by another equally dexterous auntie.

I edged closer and started asking questions.

The broth is a slow simmer of chicken, pork and snake bones with a secret blend of Chinese herbs — there is always a secret blend of Chinese herbs. It is simmered overnight and the result is a rich broth full of collagen that comes from the snake skin. Every mouthful makes your lips stick together.

The snake meat, chicken and shredded mushrooms are mixed into the broth just before serving, then garnished with kaffir lime leaves, more aged citrus peel and white chrysanthemum petals.

It is a masterly combination.

You really can't tell the difference — for once, snake meat really does taste like chicken, only the texture is softer. There is no gamey taste at all, only a fresh sweet aftertaste.

A lot of it is because of the citrus peel and the kaffir lime leaves, which refresh the palate after the richness of the meats. The chrysanthemum is both a visual and aural attraction.

It is indeed a seasonal broth because, once winter arrives, the snakes go into hibernation and slowly use up their fat as they sleep. In spring and summer, the dish is considered too rich for the body and the snakes are left alone to fatten, until next autumn.