



Hotpots from Chongqing and Chengdu, in Southwest China, feature fiery chili peppers and Sichuan peppercorns fried up with other spices in plenty of rendered beef fat.

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A sizzling winter meal

Simmering hotpots, filled with a wide range of ingredients, offer the most exhilarating flavors

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The steam rises, warming faces and hands. The table is piled high with raw slices of meat and platters of vegetables. Every diner is cradling a bowl of sauce in front of him, ready to dip the freshly cooked ingredients.

All over China, hotpot is the most popular meal in winter. Although the range of ingredients may differ from east to west and north to south, the concept is generally similar.

Bite-sized pieces of meat and vegetables are cooked at the table in a simmering pot of stock.

Most food historians agree that the hotpot came in with the Mongolians during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). Apparently, the soldiers traveled light, so they boiled water in their helmets and cooked pieces of meat in them.

But it was the Muslim chefs who had settled in the Forbidden City who refined it into an art, with lamb and beef and Silk Road spices such as chili, fennel and cumin, and fermented wild chive flowers from the northern grasslands.

They also introduced the tall copper pots with funnels that have become a Beijing icon.

These early chefs set the template for the hotpots so popular north of the Yangtze River, with their preference for gamey lamb, strong sauces and winter cabbage.



Tall copper pots with funnels have become a Beijing icon.

In the past, there was little or no seafood available, and the fish that were used were freshwater varieties such as carp.

For seafood hotpots, we need to go much farther south to the coastal communities in Fujian, Chaoshan and other parts of Guangdong province.

Here, fresh fish, shellfish and processed products such as fish balls feature prominently in a hotpot meal. There are also lots more greens, with mustard shoots, cabbage hearts and garland chrysanthemum vegetables necessary in every hotpot meal.

The other difference is in the stock.

In Beijing, the stock is clear, almost tasteless. You are expected to flavor it as you cook the meat. No one takes a sip until the meal is halfway through.

There is another northern version where lamb shanks are cooked in a spicy thick broth. This is known as “scorpion bones”, *yangxiezi*.

Tofu, meatballs and other products are dunked in to cook as the broth bubbles away. This hearty hotpot is a grassroots favorite and especially popular in the *hutong* (traditional urban alleyway) restaurants, where regular diners prefer heavily seasoned dishes.

But if you are talking about spicy soup stocks, nothing beats the Chongqing or Chengdu hotpots. Spadefuls of fiery chili peppers and Sichuan peppercorns are fried up with other spices in plenty of rendered beef fat and poured onto a light stock.

This creates a 3-centimeter-thick layer of oil and chili on top of the

stock in a simmering cauldron of spicy lava.

When it comes to trendsetting hotpots, you have to hand it to the Hong Kong foodies.

It first started with humble steamboat stalls that popped up in the winter in back alleys. Each low wooden table had a charcoal burner with a pot of simmering stock, and a metal tray loaded with slices of meat, oysters, clams, chicken wings, vegetables, mushrooms, and fresh and dried tofu.

From these pop-up *daipaidong* (food stalls), the Hong Kong hotpot went upmarket into restaurants offering top-grade well-marbled beef, the *feiniu huoguo*.

Several reincarnations and many decades later, the current craze is for tonic soup hotpots that are full of natural collagen. The stock is usually made of pork hocks or shark cartilage and a secret blend of dried herbs.

In almost every city in China, you can enjoy an excellent hotpot with regional characteristics, from chicken, beef or lamb to very special local ingredients.

In Sanya city of southern Hainan island, they use coconut water and chicken for a tasty hotpot.

Once, on a visit to Jingning county, in Southwest China’s Yunnan province, while visiting Admiral Zhenghe’s hometown, we had a hotpot made with pigs’ trotters flavored by an aromatic but extremely tart suanmugua, a local fruit known as “sour papaya”.

This rustic hotpot was one of the most delicious I had ever eaten.

Regional variations

Beijing mutton hotpot

Stock:

Hot water, a few dried Chinese jujubes, a couple slices ginger.

Sauces:

Fermented beancurd or *jiangdoufu*, sesame paste, pickled wild chive flowers or *jiucaihua*, hot chili oil, soy sauce.

Ingredients:

Thinly sliced mutton and lamb, chicken wings, red sausages, dried tofu puffs, frozen tofu or *dongdoufu*, Napa cabbages, mushrooms, lettuce, radish, lotus root.

Cantonese seafood hotpot

Stock:

Light stock made of chicken or pork bones, sliced radishes, sliced lotus roots.

Sauces:

Light and dark soy sauces, fresh cut chili, chopped spring onions, minced garlic.

The freshly cooked meat may be dipped into a raw beaten egg, both to cool the food and to improve its texture.

Ingredients:

Thinly sliced pork, chicken, fish and chicken wings. A variety of cooked meatballs and fish balls, dumplings and freshly minced prawn and fish paste, dropped into the stock to cook. Fresh prawns and crab are popular as well, along with oysters, clams and cockles.

Tofu — fresh and dried.

Bundles of watercress, water convolvulus, lettuce, cabbages, more lotus root slices and radish chunks, chrysanthemum greens or *tanghao*, dried laver slices and mushrooms.

Spicy Chongqing hotpot

Stock:

Deep-fried chili flakes and whole chili, green and red Sichuan peppercorns, star anise, cinnamon, cumin, fennel, hot bean paste, beef fat and light stock.

Sauces:

Traditionally, the Chongqing hotpot uses just a bowl of sesame oil for a dip.

Ingredients:

Sliced beef is a favorite, but the Chongqing hotpot is known for its exotic ingredients, including beef esophagus, goose intestines, pig’s brains, beef intestines and tripe.

DIY hotpot

It’s very easy to put together a hotpot meal, and it is especially good for an informal evening with friends. Simply choose your stock, sauces and choice of meat. For a tasty starter, drop a bouillon cube into hot water.