



Golden fishes made of glutinous rice flour.
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Cooking up good luck

Sweet sticky *niangao* is high on list of auspicious dishes and snacks made for Chinese New Year

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In the weeks before Spring Festival, the busiest room in the Chinese household is always the kitchen. There must be an abundance of food in the larder and on the table to welcome the new year.

This is the biggest festival on the calendar, and the one time in the year when family members scattered in the big cities return home for the annual reunion. It is also often the only time when migrant workers of all strata can relax at home, catch up with family and friends, rest and make merry.

You cannot make merry without good food and drinks, and no one knows that better than the Chinese cook.

There is a long list of dishes and snacks to prepare, all with suitably auspicious names or meanings to make sure every bit of luck is captured.

Take the making of sweet and savory cakes, or *gao*, the name of which is homophonous with "high" or "heights" and symbolic of the ambi-



Taro cake is a very popular snack during Chinese New Year.

tions for the next 12 months.

One of the best known is *niangao*, the sweet sticky glutinous rice flour cakes that are a must for the celebrations.

Made with red or brown sugar, these sticky cakes will be offered to the Kitchen God a week before New Year's Eve, just as he returns to Heaven to make his annual report to the Jade Emperor.

The crafty housewives hope that his jaws will be so busy chewing on the sweet cakes that he won't have time to file a bad report.

Of course, humans enjoy *niangao* just as much, and they have developed many different variations, ranging from red raw sugar cakes in the shape of the golden carp, to coconut milk flavored cakes dotted with sweet red beans, to plain white and brown ones that will be sliced and coated with an egg batter and fried.

There are also *niangao* scented with osmanthus, and plain white, unsweetened *niangao*.

In the eastern provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang, and including Shanghai, steamed glutinous rice is laboriously pounded until it becomes a smooth sticky dough, which is molded into ingots and stamped with red for good luck. These are then dried.

When the time comes to cook these, they are sliced and fried with pork and cabbage for the first feasts of spring.

Where there is sweet, there will be savory, and no one prepares the savory cakes for New Year better than the Cantonese, using fat white Chinese radishes, large purple yams and golden pumpkins.

A traditional New Year greeting in the south is *bubu gaosheng* - "may your every step bring you to higher ground" - often uttered while encouraging guests to have additional helpings of *luobogao*, *yutougao* or *jingguagao*.

Radish, yam or pumpkin are really variations on the same theme. The base is always a slurry of rice flour, enriched with plenty of shredded root vegetables and flavored with diced cured meats, dried shrimp or cuttlefish and plenty of diced dried shiitake mushrooms.

The garnishes are just as colorful, using a mixture of spring onions and diced red chili peppers.

For dessert, guests in Cantonese households would be offered a translucent jelly made with water chestnuts, a refreshing *matigao* that is sweet and crunchy.

Just a little north of Guangzhou, near where South China's Guangdong province meets the eastern province of Fujian, the Chaoshan people are known for their New Year pastries called *guo*.

Often with sticky, chewy wrappers, these are formed in beautifully carved wooden molds that have been listed as an intangible cultural heritage in China.

Angku kuih, bright red tortoise cakes in the shape of that celestial reptile, are filled with sweet mung bean paste, or a mixture of crushed peanuts and sugar. No festivity is complete without these traditional temple offerings.

The pragmatic people of Chaoshan also make peach cakes or *png kuih*, also called *tor kuih*, molded in the shape of longevity peaches and filled with savory glutinous rice.

Another popular cake is the *soon kuih*, a pastry made with wheat starch and filled with shredded bamboo, yam bean or jicama, minced pork and dried prawns.

It is every Chinese housewife's lofty ambition that her family never goes hungry, especially during Spring Festival, and she is prepared to galvanize the whole household before the festivities begin.

Heirloom radish cake (*luobogao*)

Ingredients:

- 4-6 dried shiitake mushrooms, soaked overnight
- 1 cup dried shrimps, soaked overnight
- 4 Chinese sausages, quartered lengthwise, then diced
- 50g Yunnan ham, finely diced
- 4-6 dried scallops, soaked overnight
- 1 cup chopped spring onions
- Oyster sauce, 1 tablespoon
- Soy sauce, 2 tablespoons
- Fish sauce, 1 teaspoon

Cake batter:

- 500g rice flour (non-glutinous)
- 100g corn or potato starch
- 1 cup water
- 1.5 kg white radish (daikon), roughly shredded

Garnishes:

- Fried garlic
 - Fried shallots
 - Chopped spring onions
 - Finely diced red chili peppers
 - Chopped coriander
- Dice the shiitake mushrooms into 0.5-cm cubes.

Drain the scallops and dried shrimps, reserving the water.

Shred the scallops and chop the dried shrimps.

Cut up the sausages and Chinese ham into little cubes.

Heat up 3 tablespoons of oil and fry the chopped spring onions till fragrant. Add the sausages, ham and shiitake mushrooms. Next, add the shredded scallops and shrimps, followed by the seasoning mix of oyster and soy sauces and the fish sauce. Add pepper. Toss till well mixed, then set the fried ingredients aside.

Pile the shredded radish into a large frying pan and cook till water seeps out and radishes turn translucent, about 30 to 45 minutes on low, then medium heat.

Combine the scallop and shrimp liquid with 1 cup water. Stir in the rice flour and corn starch to form a slurry.

When the radishes are cooked, add the slurry, stirring so nothing sticks to the bottom of the pan. It may seem too thin at first because the radishes will give out liquid. Keep stirring until the batter thickens.

Fold the stir-fried ingredients into the thickening batter, making sure the nuggets are well distributed. Turn the fire down low and continue cooking another 5 minutes or so.

Prepare the largest baking tray with deep sides that you have and line with double thickness of parchment paper. Heat up a steamer to a rolling boil. Have a boiling kettle on standby.

Pour the batter into the prepared tray and smooth out the surface with a wet wooden spoon. Place in the steamer and cook for an hour, covered. Replenish the hot water when necessary.

Test the radish cake with a wooden skewer. If it comes out clean, the cake is ready. Allow it to cool thoroughly. Sprinkle the top with the garnishes. Keep in the refrigerator until required.

Traditionally, this radish cake is sliced and then fried on demand.