

It is a tradition to have dumplings during the Spring Festival in China's northern regions.

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By PAULINE D LOH  
paulined@chinadaily.com.cn

All through the year, the humble *mantou*, or Chinese bread, is a nondescript staple on northern Chinese tables. It is just part of another pile of buns to satisfy hunger.

Come Spring Festival, it shakes off its dowdy image and takes on bright new clothes to match the red and gold decor favored during this time.

It is so important to the festivities that a whole day is devoted to its rising and steaming in the final lunar month.

"On the 28th, wake the yeast and knead the dough," a folk ditty merrily reminds the cooks.

On that day, home chefs in most kitchens north of the Yangtze River will be busy kneading and resting their dough. Over the next 48 hours, these crafty hands will be shaping breads and buns of all shapes and sizes, stuffed with all sorts of delicious pastes and puree.

The miraculous rising of the dough is symbolic of the improving good fortune everyone expects in the coming year. So these special breads will be given specific names.

Flower cakes, *huagao*, will be *mantou* dough delicately molded into peonies and chrysanthemums, often stuffed with auspicious red Chinese jujubes and filled with sweet red bean or jujube paste.

They can be shaped into a flat bouquet or stacked up like a pyramid of blooms. Once steamed, they are stored in a cool place before being taken out as offerings to the gods on the eve of the new year.

Often, the intricate buns will be topped with a fresh flame-red pomegranate flower to complete the tribute.

This is the same flower many senior matriarchs will tuck into their hair as part of their Spring Festival ensemble.

The *mantou* dough is also artfully manipulated into various other shapes,

# Lunar new year gives rise to tradition

*Mantou* and dumplings take on special importance during northern Chinese families' Spring Festival celebrations

including barnyard animals and mythical beasts.

Dragons, phoenixes, bunnies, cows and pigs will all be skillfully cut and plaited from the dough.

The dog is the new year's zodiac animal, and many buns will adopt floppy ears and little black noses.

In our home, we also use scissors to snip the dough to form quills for our hedgehog buns. Hedgehog shapes are very popular, since farmers regard the bug-eating animals as their friends.

My nanny comes from Henan, in the Central Plains, the heart

of noodle-making country and the cradle of China's wheat cultivation belt. She grew up making buns that turn into flowers with a few dexterous twists of her fingers, and she always tucks a nice red Chinese jujube in the center of her creations.

These are the plain *mantou*. There are also the stuffed *mantou*, otherwise known as *baozi*.

Spring Festival *baozi* are mostly sweet, to augur better beginnings and a smoother path ahead.

The most popular fillings are red bean paste, followed by fragrant jujube puree and lotus seed paste. Sometimes, candied fruits such as dates, citrus peel or even firm salted

egg yolks are stuffed in the center.

These *mantou* and *baozi* are eaten slowly throughout the 15 days of festivities, and when it is time for the workers to return to the big cities, they will have some in the luggage to assuage hunger and homesickness on their way back.

Another tradition is to prepare lots of dumplings, or *jiaozi*.

On New Year's Eve, after the reunion meal is done, the whole family gathers for dumpling making. It is part of the all-night vigil that most families keep, to ensure that their senior members have a long and healthy life.

While some family members take charge of kneading and rolling out the dough and wrappers, others add the final touches of seasoning to the meat and vegetable fillings.

Then, everyone sits down to form a production line, wrapping the dumplings and placing them on large round reed trays to dry out. Everyone will probably be working with one eye on the television, where most channels will be broadcasting the annual national Spring Festival variety show, or *chunwan* as it is popularly known.

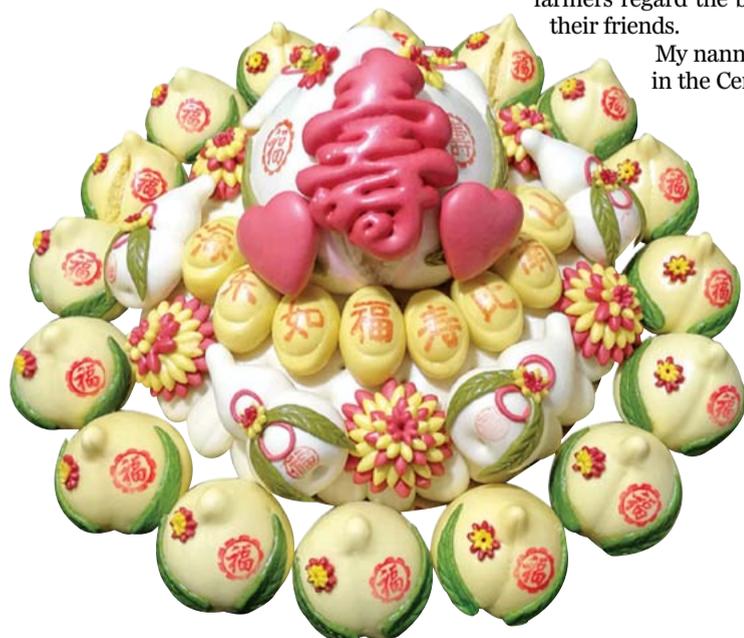
In some families, it is the custom to place little surprises in the dumplings — a dried jujube, a little silver coin and a cooked chestnut.

This custom probably parallels the Western tradition of the lucky sixpence in the Christmas pudding. In China, the fortunate bachelor who gets the jujube in his dumpling can expect to have a new sweetheart before the year is over.

The chestnut means there will be a new baby in the family, and the silver coin signifies good luck and prosperity for the person who bites into it.

The prepared dumplings will be eaten as the first meal of the New Year. The first hour of the day, the hour of the Rat, begins at 11 pm, so it is not too long to wait.

Eating and cooking have always been the pinnacle of any celebration in China, and this is never more true than during Spring Festival.



Flower cakes are *mantou* dough intricately manipulated into various shapes.