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Spring Festival is a period for reunions among family and friends. Traditionally, this is also the time to relax and catch up with long overdue visits.

The Chinese home is an open house in the first week of the lunar new year, welcoming all who enter with lots of food and plenty of drinks. Special snacks are always prepared, as well as candy, mandarin oranges, melon seeds and groundnuts — all to wash down conversation and fellowship.

Different regions in China have different lunar new year tidbits.

In the northern wheat country, dainty buns in the shape of flowers and animals, fluffy pastries with sweet jujube puree, are proudly presented, and the famous candied wheat dough crullers, *shaqima*, appear on the table.

Peanut brittle, crisp crunchy and sweet, is good with Chinese tea. There is also sesame brittle, with its lingering fragrance in the mouth.

In my childhood, the kitchen would be busy churning out tubs of snacks for guests weeks in advance.

I remember sitting by the marble kitchen table, watching as nimble-fingered aunts rolled out tiny wafer-thin dough circles and filled them with a teaspoon of crushed peanuts and sesame seeds mixed with sugar.

The plump half-circles were then pleated shut, no bigger than a walnut half. These little pastries went into a waiting vat of hot oil and came out as crisp little puffs called *kok zhai*, or baby horns.

Another popular New Year snack deep-fried in the vat of oil was vegetable crisps — made from thinly sliced arrowhead, sweet potatoes, potatoes and often little nests of shredded taro.

These were generously sprinkled with seasoned salt and were the children's No 1 favorite. We were given only a small ration each day, but we always managed to wheedle a little extra when guests came to visit.

We have a saying in the south, *nianwan jiandui renyou woyou*. This translates to “*jiandui* for New Year's Eve, everyone has some, and I must have one”.

A *jiandui* is a large, deep-fried, crisp and chewy glutinous rice ball filled with candied peanuts, maltose and sesame seeds. It is difficult to cook and requires long, slow deep-frying to thoroughly dry out the glutinous dough and make it very crisp. But it is a must-have for the celebrations because its round, full shape symbolizes reunion and prosperity.

The saying is often applied to bachelors looking for a wife, as well.

When visitors arrive at the house, they are immediately ushered to a seat and drinks are served, usually festive orange squash or juice, tea or beer, and the occasional fiery white spirit, *baijiu*.

Next, a round platter with compartments filled with candy and melon seeds appears and the guests are expected to politely take a handful of melon seeds. This is to *chouyin*, or “extract silver”,

The time to indulge in eating well

Chinese homes always welcome their lunar new year guests with plenty of food, drinks and special snacks and tidbits



Peanut brittle and almond brittle (top) and tarts filled with pineapple jam (above) are good with Chinese tea; Fluffy golden egg rolls (right) are cooked like crepes and then rolled up to cool and harden. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

since the words for seeds and silver are homophonic.

As the adults crack melon seeds and groundnuts and exchange the latest gossip, the children will have their eyes locked on the candy tray.

There will be all sorts of white, frosted fruits and vegetables. These are Spring Festival specialties, rarely eaten out of season. They may include candied lotus root, lotus seeds, coconut strips, whole, pressed kumquats, winter melon batons and even slices of golden carrot.

Southern families also like pampering guests with fluffy golden egg rolls cooked like crepes and then deftly rolled up before they cool and harden. It is a hazard eating these, as they tend to crumble and disintegrate all over your brand new clothes.

The golden pineapple has special significance, especially in the eastern province of Fujian and on Taiwan island. Here, it is known as *onglai* in the local dialect, which sounds exactly like “wealth beckons”.

Cookies and tarts filled with pineapple jam are thus offered together with hearty wishes for wealth and health in the coming year.

Also from this region is a deep red pork jerky called *bak kwa*, which northerners nicknamed *yingtaorou*, or cherry meat. It has nothing to do with cherries, but is highly seasoned, sweetened pork that is first spread out, steamed to cook, then slowly grilled on the fire till it is fragrant and smoky.

It does not have to be rich or expensive. Inventive flavoring added to plain flour dough can make crispy snacks.

For example, a fermented red bean curd is used to season flour, which is then rolled and folded into curly whirls and deep-fried. These sweet-savory crisps are perfect beer food.

All over China, Spring Festival is the best time to indulge in the national pastime of eating well.

The one difference is, many double-income families may now choose to go online to order their New Year delicacies rather than slave in the kitchen. These are the signs of progress.