



Chicken soup with traditional Chinese herbs such as wolfberries, gastrodia, dried mushrooms and ginger slices. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Soup for body and soul

Whether or not you believe in its curative powers, making it is a ritual in the villages of Yunnan

By PAULINE D. LOH
paulined@chinadaily.com.cn

For the autumn, my husband and I are back in Kunming, in Southwest China's Yunnan province. Away from the urban lights and hustle and bustle, we are settling back into our country routine.

Here, the highlight of the day is the morning harvest, when I can wander out to the fruit trees and vegetable patch and see what is ripe and ready.

The osmanthus bushes at the bottom of the garden will yield handfuls of dew-damp buds. These go into the teapot with the oolong tea leaves, and they will last us for a morning and an afternoon.

For my breakfast yogurt, there are the tiny, honey-sweet strawberries, so juicy they break apart with the touch of a spoon. If I'm greedy, I can pluck a few wrinkled purple passion fruits and scoop out the aromatic pulp to add to the yogurt.

There are also the little, sweet, crisp persimmons, so heavy on the branches that they touch the lawn.

The gardeners have thoughtfully sowed baby *bok choy* and coriander ahead of our return, and the leaves are now ready to be harvested. Additional, unexpected salad ingredients are the nasturtium buds and tender leaves growing all over our rockery.

Together with my carefully nurtured Italian rocket leaves, they will all make a tasty, healthy bowl of greens.

Our silky chicken mother hen is foraging among the rosemary bushes, and her brood of five chicks are scratching for worms and bugs under her indulgent tutelage. Sometimes, a fallen persimmon gets them chirping excitedly.

My spouse teases me and suggests chicken soup for dinner, knowing full well that Mrs Socks will never go into the pot.

But yes, chicken soup is a ritual for us in Yunnan, because the chicken here is so delicious. Reared free range and still sold live, the chickens from our village market truly taste like chicken, unlike the bland birds of Beijing.

Because the quality is excellent, the simplest cooking method is enough, although soup is still our favorite.

Too many of us are divorced from the reality of the food chain.

Chickens do not magically appear as wing and leg parts, headless and clawless, neatly packed into styrofoam trays. In our village market, you get to see them in their full-feathered glory.

First, there are the brown hens with their red roosters. They are the big birds, easily hitting 2 kilograms or more. If you wanted a fatty bird with softer meat, you chose the hen.

Local chefs, however, are partial to the roosters, saying their well-muscled meat is more deeply flavorful.

Then, there are the black chickens, a cross between the silky chickens and the reds. They are big as well, but what sets them apart is that their skin, bones and even meat are tinted with a dark pigment. They taste just like the other chickens, but their color adds an exotic touch.

The true silkies are delicate birds that weigh only about 1.5 kg on average.

These birds are beautiful. Their skin and bones are black, but they are covered in a downy snow-white cloak of feathers. Coupled with their red wattles and blue ear patches, they look as if they belong more to a tropical aviary, rather than the barnyard.

Even their toes are covered in fluffy white, hence the name for our pet chicken.

Silky chickens have long been a favorite of Chinese mothers when they think of chicken soup. The birds are slightly gamey, but they are beloved because they have very little subcutaneous fat.

They are so flavorful that all they need are a few slices of ginger to bring out the best in them. Ginger and chicken are the perfect match, and the herb accentuates the meat with an almost magical fragrance.

In Yunnan, they use a special earthenware container with a funnel

inside the pot to steam the chicken. The high heat, steam and condensation extract the juices with amazing efficiency and what results is ... essence of chicken.

Traditional Chinese herbs such as wolfberries, also known as goji berries, are often paired with silky chicken. And if the heat is high and headaches are frequent, a few slices of *tianma*, or gastrodia, are added. This is the bulbous root of a highland orchid treasured for its medical benefits.

Is chicken soup really that good for you? Well, Chinese and Jewish mothers alike are firm believers in a bowl of piping hot chicken soup for body and soul, and the matriarchs of these two formidable clans cannot be wrong, can they?

Medical science agrees to a certain extent. When the body is wracked by a bubbling cold or a bout of flu, the taste buds can be soothed with a bowl of savory chicken soup.

The nutrients will help the body on its road to recovery, and the salt in the soup will replenish some of the phosphates lost. Hot soup will also help to clear congested sinuses. Additional vitamins from the vegetables used in the soup can do no harm, either.

Whether you believe in their curative powers or not, a few tried and tested recipes for chicken soup can only boost your repertoire of recipes, just in case.

Recipes

Chicken soup with root vegetables

- 1 free-range chicken, dressed
- 2 potatoes
- 1 large carrot
- 2-3 sticks celery
- 1 large onion
- 2-3 large tomatoes
- 1-2 slices ginger

Prepare the chicken by skinning it and removing all visible fat around the neck and inside the cavity. Clean out any entrails, blood clots or lungs. Rinse and season inside and out with salt.

Peel the potatoes and carrots and cut into 0.5-cm cubes.

Dice the onions, and cut the tomatoes into halves, squeezing out the pulp. String the celery stalks and dice.

Heat up a pot of water and blanch the chicken. Discard the water and rinse the chicken.

Bring 3 liters of water to boil and then add the chicken, diced vegetables and ginger slices. Bring to a boil, then turn down to a simmer for 45 minutes to an hour.

Remove the chicken and ginger slices, and shred the meat, discarding the bones.

To serve, pile a portion of shredded chicken in a bowl and pour the soup and vegetables over. Season with salt and pepper. A dash of sesame oil improves the flavor.

Black chicken, mushrooms and goji berry soup

- 1 silky chicken
- A handful of dried mushrooms
- 1-2 slices ginger
- 1 tablespoon wolfberries/goji berries

Remove all visible fat from the chicken. Don't skin it, because the mushrooms will absorb the chicken fat. Clean it well inside and out and rub with plenty of salt.

You can use dried Chinese black mushrooms or shiitake, but in Yunnan, we have the luxury of using dried matsutake, chanterelle, morel or porcini mushrooms. Soak the mushrooms well to rehydrate them.

Place all the ingredients except the goji berries in a pot and cover with cold water. Slowly bring to a rolling simmer and keep it simmering for an hour. Remember to skim off any scum or froth that rises.

Season to taste and add the goji berries before serving. This will preserve their natural vitamins and bright color.