

# When snakes grow fat

Best loved in soup, autumn is the ideal time of year to eat the reptiles when they are plump and meaty

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To understand why the Cantonese eat snakes, you have to look at the atlas. South China's Guangdong province sits in the tropical Lingnan region, south of the Nanling Mountains.

It is an area rich in flora and fauna with a vast diversity nurtured by the wet tropical climate. And for the Cantonese, who are so famously obsessed with the freshness of their ingredients, it is a natural larder of mountain treasures and marine pleasures.

Before they were known as Cantonese, the people living there have hunted, foraged and cultivated for centuries, and it was natural that they should have been curious about the many reptiles in the undergrowth.

History records that as far back as 1,000 years ago, snake was already on the menu.

Snakes are eaten in many ways, but there are also certain taboos. They are never eaten raw. The heads are always discarded, and baby reptiles are always released.

They may be braised, stewed, steamed or deep-fried, but the most famous and arguably most popular way to eat them is in a soup.

In the West, snakes are harvested for their skin, and valued in making belts, boots and bags. But in China, the whole reptile is used, with nothing going to waste except the head.

As the local saying goes: "When the autumn winds rise, the three snakes grow plump," which typically refers to cobras, kraits and gray rat snakes.

This is the signal for snake shops in Guangdong and Hong Kong to start preparing for a steady stream of customers.

It is a risky business as the most valuable species used in soups are poisonous species, such as vipers, cobras and sea snakes.

These are now mainly farmed, both for their venom as serum and also for their meat.

There are many anecdotes told in the snake shops.

Besides snake soup, they serve snake wine and snake bile. Snake bile is a precious Chinese medicine known for its phlegm-clearing qualities. It is said that Cantonese opera divas of old would saunter down to snake shops for a shot of bile and wine before going on stage. They believed it helped them sing better.

Snake wine is believed to be good for rheumatism and arthritic complaints and is consumed or directly applied to affected areas. Snake meat warms the body and is an excellent tonic to fight against winter chills.

An equally colorful story is told about the origin of a certain delicacy, The Admiral's Five-Snake Soup, a luxurious dish that is served to this day to well-heeled diners.

In the later years of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Cantonese scholar Jiang Kongyin had just passed the imperial civil examinations, was admitted to the prestigious Hanlin Academy and was soon appointed an admiral for his abilities.

In his official capacity, he had to do a lot of entertaining, and the banquets at



Snake soup is a seasonal broth that is best served in autumn. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

his home became the social events of the moment. Among the dishes served was a rich broth full of shredded meat, scented with fresh white chrysanthemum petals and thinly slivered lemon leaves.

This elegant broth was often the highlight of the banquet, and it was made from snake meat from five species, abalone, chicken, Chinese ham, bamboo shoots, fungus, ginger, shiitake mushrooms and superior stock made from marrow bones and chicken essence.

Admiral Jiang's family was very well-known in the region. His son was a talented opera composer whose works are treasured to this day. One of his granddaughters was a well-known singer and film actress in the heyday of Hong Kong cinema, and another of his granddaughters was a very respected food critic in the 1960s.

Little wonder then, that the family's culinary heritage has been carefully preserved and passed down, and now three generations of Jiang disciples keep snake cuisine alive.

In fact, the Admiral's snake soup has become a signature dish of Hong Kong, and there are several specialist restaurants now that sell this dish throughout the year, not just in autumn.

Tourists, especially overseas Chinese, flock to these eateries for a bowl of this famous snake soup, and are surprised to find it very palatable.

So what makes this broth so special? First, the broth is based on a stock that is brewed with huge pork marrow bones and snake vertebra along with a secret blend of Chinese herbs.

The stock is simmered overnight and the result is a rich broth full of collagen that comes from the skins and bones.

The snake meat, chicken, thinly sliced abalone and shredded mushrooms are mixed into the broth just before serving before being garnished with lime or lemon leaves, more aged citrus peel and white chrysanthemum petals.

It is a masterly combination. You really can't tell the difference, and just for once, snake meat really does taste like chicken, only the texture is softer and very tender. There is no gamy aroma at all, only a fresh sweet aftertaste.

A lot of it is because of the citrus peel and the lime leaves, which refresh the palate after the richness of the meats. The chrysanthemum is a visual garnish and a scented reminder that this is an autumnal, seasonal dish.

It is indeed a seasonal broth because once winter arrives, the snakes go into hibernation and slowly use up their fat as they sleep. In spring and summer, the dish is considered too rich for the body and the snakes are left alone to fatten, until next autumn.

These days, snake restaurants open their doors all year round, thanks to the steady supply of farmed reptiles. But, there was a time when snakes were only sold during the three autumn months, and the booming business was enough to help shops survive without opening their doors the rest of the year.

## Dishes and benefits

### Popular snake dishes:

Salt and pepper snake chunks

Skinned chunks of snake are coated in a light batter and deep fried. The crisp pieces are then coated or dipped into a roasted Sichuan peppercorn and salt mixture.

Snake meatballs

Snake meat, fish meat and prawns are minced together and repeatedly beaten until the collagen firms. Aged citrus peel is added and the mixture formed into meatballs and deep-fried.

Braised snake belly

Tender fillets of belly are braised in a savory sauce of ginger, scallions and aged citrus peel.

Stuffed snake skin

The skin is carefully cleaned, then steamed to soften it. A mixture of prawn and fish paste is then stuffed into each piece of skin before it is steamed again. Often, a savory gravy made with chicken stock is drizzled over the dish.

### Health benefits:

Viewed as a food ingredient, snake is a valuable source of easily digested protein. Traditional Chinese medicine recommends it for the weak and anemic, and for those whose energy or *qi* is lacking.

Because of its high energy level though, those suffering from hypertension, should avoid eating it, as should pregnant women and very young children.