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A cloud of steam rises when the lid is lifted, and the table is suddenly shrouded by a delicious mist. The cold helps the vapor linger, and it is a few minutes before the gathered company can see what is within the clay pot.

As winter settles over the land, clay pot dishes are becoming more popular. It used to be a specialty of the south, but now clay pot dishes are eaten in restaurants everywhere in China, with each city developing its own distinctive dishes with regional ingredients.

But nowhere in China is it so ingrained in local culinary culture as in the southern provinces, where the best clay pots are still cooked over a coal stove.

In Guangdong and the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, clay pot cooking is elevated to an art. Specially made earthenware pots are often reinforced with wire to hold the pots together and prevent them from cracking in the intense heat of the open fires.

The clay pots come in all sizes and heights.

Soups are braised long and slow in the taller clay pots with wide bellies and narrower mouths, a shape that helps the ingredients soften in concentrated heat. A lidded clay pot prevents the soups from evaporating, and a clever ditch around the mouth catches the drips. Sweet flavorful broths become thick and rich in the process.

In addition to soups, winter means clay pot stews will become more common. These are cooked in wider, shallower containers with heavy lids.

A prime example is the famous mutton stew, braised until the meat falls off the bone, temptingly scented with the fragrance of various Chinese herbs like licorice, angelica, panax ginseng and wolfberries. Dried bean curd sticks are also added to soak up the juices.

Mutton is considered an ingredient full of tonic properties and ideal for when the weather is cold and damp. Eating mutton gets the blood circulating and warms the body.

Another well-recognized meat broth is the famous pork ribs soup known as *bak kut teh*. There are the Chaozhou and Fujian variations, but the main ingredient stays the same — tender racks of pork ribs cooked long and slow in the clay pot.

The Fujianese like to add Chinese herbs to their broth and sweeten it with sugar cane, but the Chaozhou version is flavored with just lots of garlic and plenty of white pepper.

Both are served bubbling hot in clay pots.

In Hong Kong and Guangdong, winter dishes are served sizzling to the table in clay pots, because the contents keep warm better in clay pots.

Chicken, fish, meat and vegetables are stir-fried and then quickly placed into preheated clay pots to finish cooking at the table. The chefs time it so the dishes are cooked just right.

My personal winter favorite in this series is a bubbling pot of tender chicken with caramelized shallots and large fresh chestnuts. The tender chicken pieces are seared golden brown at the



Clay pot keeps the dish hot, which is good, particularly in winter.

Fired up about clay pot cuisine

Steaming hot dishes in earthenware are eaten in restaurants everywhere in China as winter settles over the land

edges and sweetened by the melt-in-the-mouth shallots, caramelized whole. The chestnuts are sweet, too, on a different level and become delicious golden nuggets that you eagerly seek out in the thick brown juices.

This dish is known as Jie-Jie Chick-

en, for the sizzling sound it makes as it is brought to the table.

Another clay pot dish is eel braised in a brown sauce. The fillets are quickly tossed in a rich, thick gravy and brought to the table in a clay pot. The chef then adds a dollop of raw chopped garlic on

top and douses it with a cupful of boiling oil. The scent of the roasting garlic is the best appetizer you can get.

Of course, you cannot mention clay pot cooking without the classic rice dishes. Clay pot rice is a whole new discipline in itself, starting from the choice of rice and ingredients to the cooking method and time.

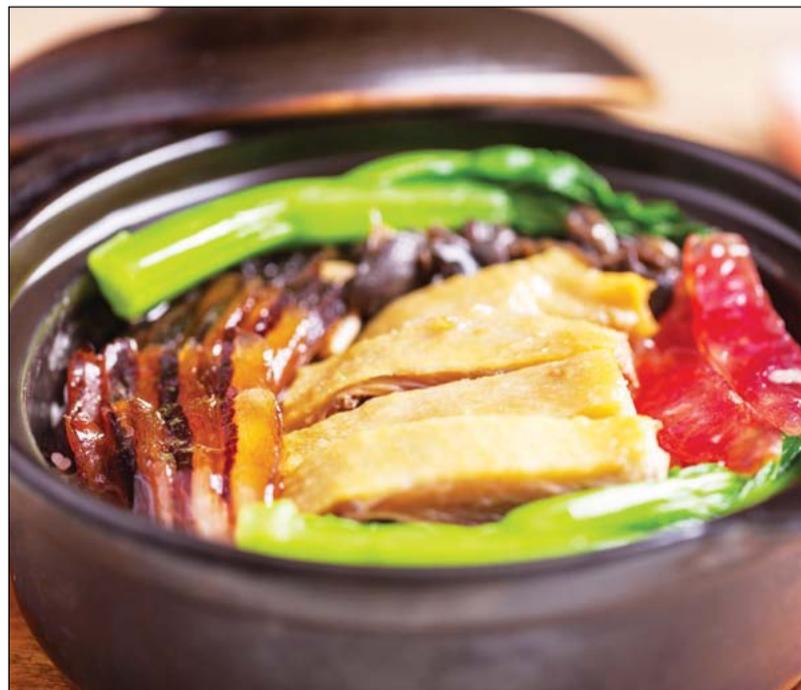
The ideal pot must have perfectly cooked rice with a golden crust at the bottom, perfectly cooked ingredients on top of the white rice, and a perfectly blended sauce to pour over the whole pot.

The clay pots are artfully angled over the charcoal fire so the rice at the bottom develops a crisp crust that is golden brown but not burned.

Wine-scented Chinese cured pork belly, meat and liver sausages, and cured duck legs all add their distinctive aroma to the rice.

Fresh pork ribs seasoned with pickled plums and fermented bean paste, spicy chicken with succulent dried mushrooms, tender fillets of beef with a soft-boiled egg added on top — these are just a few of the choices available.

Eating a sauce-flavored pot of fragrant white rice topped with these savory delights is what makes many look forward to the cold of a winter night.



Clay pot rice topped with savory delights. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Recipes

Clay pot liver with ginger and scallions

- 300g pig liver
- 2-3 stalks scallions/spring onions, cut into short lengths
- Cornstarch, salt and pepper
- 6 thin slices of ginger
- 1 tablespoon Chinese rice wine
- 1 tablespoon oyster sauce

Trim any veins or membranes from the liver. Soak in icy water and rinse till there is no more bloodshed and the water runs clear. Drain and dry. Slice into thin pieces.

Marinate with a little cornstarch, salt and pepper.

Heat up two spoonfuls of oil and fry the ginger till the edges curl and become golden brown. In the meantime, preheat a small clay pot over the stove.

Add the spring onions to the ginger. As soon as they turn color, quickly add the liver slices and oyster sauce.

Stir to mix over high heat, and quickly transfer to clay pot and serve. The liver will continue cooking in the residual heat.

Clay pot cauliflower

- 500g cauliflower
- 1/2 carrot
- 1/2 large onion
- 1 tablespoon light soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon dark or sweet soy sauce
- 1 teaspoon chili flakes

Cut up the cauliflower into florets. Slice the onion into very thin wedges, and cut the carrots into thin batons.

Heat up oil in wok, and preheat a clay pot on the stove.

Fry the onion over high heat till caramelized at the edges. Add the cauliflower and carrots and season with the sauces and chili flakes.

Cover the pan and cook three minutes, adding a sprinkle of water. Transfer to the clay pot and serve hot.