

Savoring Chengdu street food

Spicy or sweet, and sometimes a little exotic, sample the vast array of delicious snacks from morning till night

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The cuisine of Southwest China's Sichuan province is known for its *mala* quality, a numbing spiciness that comes from the prolific use of its famous peppercorns. But Sichuan food is not just about heat. It includes a much broader spectrum of flavors, and this is best showcased by its vast variety of street snacks.

In Chengdu alone, you can be eating street food from morning till midnight and still would only have skimmed the surface of the available choices.

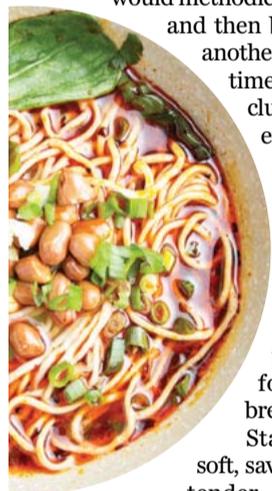
Let's take a trip, which begins with a leisurely cup of tea in the park, where pavilions and booths selling hot tea are a common sight. A lidded bowl of tea is a morning ritual, and you sip it slowly, catching up on the day's news with a newspaper, or settling down as a friendly old man cleans your ears for a small fee.

He uses a bamboo sliver with a scooped edge, so tiny it looks like a caviar spoon. He would methodically clean your ears, and then brush it clean with another bamboo stick, this time tipped with a tiny clump of downy feathers.

Hot tea and ear-cleaning services — an odd but irresistible combination.

Now that you can hear perfectly, it's time to sally forth in search of breakfast.

Start with a bowl of soft, savory bean curd. The tender, custard-like curds are topped with pickled vegetables for a bit of crunch and then drizzled with hot oil.



Noodles with tailor-made condiments.

Those with a sweet tooth can choose to eat their curds sweet, with a ladleful of brown sugar syrup. The curds are beloved in Sichuan, where they call it bean curd flower.

Or breakfast can be a bowl of noodles, if you can decide which variety you prefer.

There are the famous *dan-dan* noodles with savory meat sauce, little bowl noodles with tailor-made condiments that include sesame paste, soy, chili oil, herbs and Sichuan peppercorns, or the "sweet-water" noodles that are served with a sugary but spicy hot bean paste.

Chengdu folks have a fondness for innards, and a popular choice any time of the day is noodles served with chunks of large intestines doused with chili oil to help mask the gaminess.

Dumplings are also popular in Chengdu, and there are two or three very famous choices.

Hongyou chaoshou are large wonton dumplings served in a vinegary sauce spiced up with chili and Sichuan peppercorns. Named after the bright red sauce, these soft-skinned dumplings are fiery favorites.

Zhongshuijiao are also dumplings served in hot oil, but they are shaped differently.

Apart from noodles and dumplings, Cheng-



Chengdu loves a good skewer of meat or vegetables, which the locals call *chuan-chuan* (above); *Zhongshuijiao* (right) are dumplings served in hot oil. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

du loves a good skewer of meat or vegetables. They call these *chuan-chuan*.

Bamboo sticks are used to string up all sorts of ingredients and cooked in a spicy broth. These are then piled into a large basin and placed on the table. Diners pick out their favorites and then pay for what they eat.

There is also something called *maocai*, which is a selection of food such as fish, prawns, pork, beef, chicken or mutton cut up in slices or pieces. You choose your meat and add vegetables or tofu. The platter is then handed over to the cook, who then cooks up everything the way you want it, with the seasoning you prefer.

This stir-fry special is a city favorite for lunch, dinner or late night supper. At the same stall, you can often find another interesting off-cut — deep-fried nuggets of brain.

The brain has to be carefully cleansed of any blood vessels. It is blanched to firm it up and then coated in a crispy seasoned batter before being cooked in hot oil. For those who dare, the result is a crisp crunch at first bite, followed by

the custard-like texture of the brains.

Those with a taste for the even more exotic can try another Chengdu specialty, spicy rabbit heads.

These skeletal tidbits are a favorite street-side snack, although it can be a bit disconcerting to see a pretty Sichuan lass munching happily on a rabbit skull spotted with chili flakes.

Compared with this, the next Chengdu dish is positively tame. Granny's pig trotters are pig's feet cooked till they are fall-apart tender. They come in a thick soup, but you eat them dipped in spicy chili oil — what else?

Sometimes, the name intrigues more than the dish. "Lung slices by husband and wife" is one. It is a delicious stir-fry using beef, tongue, heart, tripe and intestines, and the only organ it does not include is lung.

Still, misnomer or not, it remains one of the most popular dishes on the streets.

After the skewers and meats, Chengdu foodies love their desserts.

Glutinous rice balls are cooked in boiling syrup till they turn golden brown. They are then drained and cooled until a brittle sugar crust forms. *Hongtang guozi*, or brown sugar rice balls, are then sold skewered onto bamboo sticks.

They must be eaten hot, so the sugar crust crackles in the mouth, exposing the soft, hot glutinous centers.

Another dessert that Chengdu children of all ages love is something called three cannonballs, also made of glutinous rice flour.

Cooked rice flour balls are bounced onto a dough board where cymbals are placed. The balls hit the cymbals before ricocheting into a basin full of toasted soy bean flour.

Customers buy these snacks more for the acrobatic skills of the vendor than the actual dumpling, but that's where the fun lies.

The candy artist also sells his skills and delights in exhibiting them. Using a special funnel, he draws with heated caramel and artfully turns out flowers, butterflies or even dragons as his customers watch.

As the caramel hardens, the candy becomes edible art.

And finally, there are the jellies.

Wobbly cakes made from bean pastes and starches are eaten with sweet or spicy sauces. Collectively known as *liangfen* or cool cakes, the plain white cakes are made of potato starch, and the yellow cakes from mung beans.

There is also a transparent jelly made from fig sap known as *bing liangfen* or iced jelly. These are served cold with brown sugar syrup.

These are just some of Chengdu's street snacks. To fully savor the whole range, you'd have to get an airplane ticket and plan for a very long, very delicious holiday.



Bing liangfen served with watermelon, strawberry and mango.



A stir-fry using beef, tongue, heart, tripe and intestines.