

# A TASTY LOOK AT ART OF CHINESE COOKING DISCOVERING THE SECRETS OF CHINESE COOKS: [THIRD EDITION]

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## Abstract (summary)

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### Full Text

Book Review The Food of China By Nina Simonds and Deh-Ta Hsiung Whitecap Books, 304 pp., \$40

I grew up in a Chinese family of serious cooks, and when I was young I would sometimes ask my mother, my grandmother, or one of my many aunts how one dish or another was cooked. The answer always seemed to be the same: "Ginger, garlic, scallions. Sherry, soy sauce, sesame oil."

In my 20s, when I finally got around to entering the kitchen,

I thought: How hard could it be? Ten minutes, a shrieking smoke alarm, and a billowing cloud of black smoke later, I realized I must have missed something.

In the ensuing years, I gradually learned to cook risotto, challah, lamb korma, paella, coq au vin, puff pastry - anything but Chinese food. The very sight of a wok shamed me.

I waited for a book, written in English, to unlock the secrets of those few simple ingredients, combined and recombined into a dizzying variety of flavors. That book, I am happy to say, has arrived at last.

Compiled by a research team that traveled all over China, and written by veteran cookbook authors Deh-Ta Hsiung and Nina Simonds, "The Food of China" is a gorgeous coffee-table book that also happens to be a hard-working kitchen companion (and a steal at \$40).

I started with familiar recipes like mu shu pork and ma po dou fu, the fiery tofu dish named (as legend has it) for the pockmarked matron in Sichuan who sold it from her corner stall. I followed the meticulous instructions, carefully measured the quantities, and, to my amazement, the ingredients obediently organized themselves, one by one, into the flavors of my childhood. My tastebuds knew it at once: there was no doubting the authenticity of this book.

Hot and sour soup, I discovered, takes its heat from white pepper, not chiles; the sourness came from black vinegar, a bottle of which had been sitting quietly in my pantry.

Hsiung and Simonds's earthy, brothy version, loaded with black mushrooms and wood fungus, bears no resemblance to the orange, glutinous fright served in strip malls everywhere.

When I made West Lake fish, a Shanghai classic, aromatic clouds of steam ascended from the refined, rice wine-scented sauce fashioned from a simple poaching liquid and poured over generous handfuls of ginger and scallion. (My father was born on the West Lake in Shanghai, and all my life I had wondered what made West Lake fish so sweet. Now I know: It's sugar.)

Flower-cut squid, traditionally served with black bean sauce, had always seemed like an intimidating dish. The very notion of turning a cephalopod into something resembling a hairbrush simply screamed, "Don't try this at home!" But it was easier than I had expected, requiring only a sharp paring knife and a little patience to make a nubbled, sauce-grabbing feast of textures.

I was glad to learn the simple secret behind white-cut chicken (15 minutes of simmering and then 4 hours in a closed pot), a household staple for both sides of my family. Sichuan-style spicy eggplant was more flavorful than any steamed eggplant dish really has a right to be, although with its generous dose of raw garlic you wouldn't want it to precede any delicate face-to-face encounters.

Scallion pancakes were drier and less oily, and hence a bit less flavorful than the ones you might find in Chinatown. But they benefited greatly from a simple soy dipping sauce.

Finally, emboldened by success, I attempted char siu bao, the delectable roast pork buns eaten in every Chinatown. The dough was simplicity itself, springy and elastic and fun like Play-Doh. The pork, which has to be suspended and steamed in a hot oven, was more involved. As I prepared the marinade I felt like a medieval alchemist, ladling out viscous tablespoons from jars of brown liquids - hoisin sauce, oyster sauce, black bean sauce - that Chinese cooks learn to trust and even love.

Although the diced pork didn't turn red and succulent like it does in the tea shops (they use food coloring), the taste was dead-on. At the first bite of steaming, pork-filled sweetness, I was reduced to a 5-year-old's ecstasy.

Occasionally, "The Food of China" misses an important detail. It would have been good to know that mandarin pancakes can't be stacked as you roll them out, and that covering them to keep in the humidity doesn't help.

There is something heartbreaking about seeing 24 once-perfectly rolled dough circles oozing and sagging like the cow on the Elmer's glue bottle.

The authors probably cooked them as they made them - the best technique, but impossible for one person. Also, it would have been useful to have listed the names of all the dishes three ways: in Chinese characters, transliterated ("char siu bao"), and in English ("roast pork buns").

Although the authors always provide the characters, they alternate freely between using transliterated and English names. Providing all three - Chinese, transliterated, and English names - would have granted maximum access to a maximum number of readers.

With its glamorous cover (showing a cascade of bean-thread noodles wrapped in newsprint), its breathtaking photographs, and informative essays about regional cuisines, "The Food of China" will leave you agonizing over whether to keep it by the living room armchair or to sacrifice it to the spills and batterings of the kitchen god. It's destined for triumph in either part of the house. Maybe it would be best to buy two.

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