

Chinese food and drink

The importance of food in Chinese culture is reflected in greetings. Instead of asking 'how are you?' (*ni hao ma* 你好吗), it is common to ask 'have you eaten?' (*chi fanle ma* 吃饭了吗), the logic being that people who have just eaten should be feeling well and happy. Food made from grain is the essence of Chinese food and its importance is shown in the way the Chinese express 'to eat a meal' as, literally, 'to eat food made from cooked grains' (*chi fan* 吃饭). Traditionally, rice is the staple food in central and southern China, while in the north wheat-based products such as noodles, dumplings and bread are more widely eaten. When dining in China, meat and vegetables may be left unfinished on the plate but it is vital to finish the staple food as a way of honouring the labour that went into producing rice or wheat. There are great regional differences in the cooking styles and flavours of Chinese cuisine, based on factors such as geography, climate, cultural preferences and the availability of ingredients. These can be broadly divided into five main regional cuisines: Northern (Beijing), Central (Henan), Eastern (Shanghai), Southern (Canton) and Western (Sichuan and Hunan). The majority of Chinese restaurants in Britain tend to serve Southern or Cantonese cuisine, due to the large number of immigrants from Hong Kong. However, restaurants specialising in other regional cuisines are becoming increasingly common.

The Chinese are historically the greatest tea drinkers in the world. The origins of tea, often regarded as an indigenous invention of China, are unclear, but were first mentioned in the 3rd century AD. Drinking tea in China is a way of life, and along with firewood, rice, oil, salt, sauce and vinegar, it is considered one of the seven necessities of life. The standard word for tea in Chinese is *cha* 茶, which derives from the dialect spoken in Guangdong province, while the origins of the word 'tea' may derive from a dialect spoken in Fujian province, where much tea is grown and exported to Europe. In ancient times, tea was used for medicinal purposes and Buddhist monks drank it to keep them awake during meditation. Later on, tea was developed as an infusion and to this day is said to purge the digestive system of toxins. Books for the tea connoisseur began to appear by the Tang dynasty (AD 618-907), explaining the etiquette of drinking tea and the utensils used in its preparation. One book was *The Classic of Tea* (*Cha jing* 茶经), compiled AD 758-80 by Lu Yu 陆羽 (AD 733-804). Manufacture of ceramics was boosted by the popularity of tea drinking. Tea began to be exported to Europe during the Ming dynasty (AD 1368-1644) by the Dutch and Portuguese and by the AD 1800s it had become highly fashionable in England, and was also being imported from India.

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