

A blue-tinted street map of the Flushing neighborhood in Queens, New York. The map shows a grid of streets including Union Dr, Parsons, Leavitt, Carlton, Rosenthal, Barclay, Kissena, Ash, Beech, Cherry, and Robinson. Landmarks such as Flushing Hospital and Flushing Armory are also visible. The text "East Asia" is overlaid in a large, white, serif font, centered on the map.

East Asia

◎ CHINA

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP IN QUEENS, MY family frequently ate what we then regarded as Chinese food. Pre-1970s Queens Chinese food was Cantonese, and invariably limited to a few tried-and-true favorites like chow mein, fried rice, and barbecued spare ribs.

If there were other things on the menu, our family ignored them. Our fellow diners were also “round-eyes.”

As an adult, I began to experiment with the varied Chinese dishes offered by Manhattan’s more sophisticated Chinese restaurants. A course in Chinese cooking given by the China Institute also opened my eyes to the broad range of culinary wonders under the umbrella of Chinese cuisine.

While I was educating my palate in Manhattan, large numbers of Chinese immigrants were moving to Queens. A Chinatown sprang up in

Flushing, distinctly different from its Manhattan counterpart. Flushing’s streets, compared with those in lower Manhattan, are spacious, and there was room to build. Consequently, a cleaner, more middle-class Chinatown emerged, shared by a broad spectrum of East Asian cultures. According to 2000 census figures, there are 139,820 Chinese Americans in Queens—40 percent of New York’s Chinese population.

Chinese immigrants have continued to settle throughout Queens in large numbers. In the new millennium, it has become more difficult to find an old-style



KUNAN LAM PREPARING FOOD AT HONG KONG DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL HELD ANNUALLY AT FLUSHING MEADOWS PARK

Cantonese restaurant catering to a Western clientele than it is to find an ethnic or regional one. In the Queens of today, the appropriate response to the question “Would you like to have Chinese food tonight?” would be “What kind?”

Chinese is one of the great cuisines of the world, right up there with French. Food is such a fundamental part of the Chinese culture that the question “Have you eaten?” is the equivalent of “How are you?” to North Americans. It’s just a pro forma inquiry that does not require a truthful, detailed

answer. Simply answer “Yes” even if you haven’t actually eaten.

Regional Chinese styles are about as different from one another as a New England boiled dinner is from a Cajun jambalaya or a Tex-Mex burrito. Chinese cuisines have certain things in common, but their differences can be extreme.

When dining in Chinese restaurants that cater to an ethnic clientele, sometimes you will be steered away from dishes that the server believes Westerners will not like, or the restaurant will prepare a toned-down version of a spicy dish. If

FOOD SYMBOLISM

Long noodle is the symbol of longevity in China, so youngsters and seniors alike will have a bowl of long-life noodles in the expectation of a healthy life.

you are an adventurous eater, be insistent about what you want. If you shy away from novel foods, your server is probably right. If you like spicy food, tell your server you want your food to be “ma la.” That means “spicy.” Having a little knowledge of Chinese etiquette can’t hurt in ingratiating yourself with the establishment. Here are some pointers.

Chinese tea is normally served throughout the meal. You should always top up the cups of those around you before topping up your own. To thank one another for the courtesy, you will often see the Chinese tapping the first two fingers of the right hand on the table. This gesture dates back to the time of the Qing dynasty, when a certain emperor was fond of wandering incognito among his people. Since his companions could not

kowtow to the emperor without revealing his identity, they devised the finger tapping as an inconspicuous substitute. It’s also quite practical because one can continue to talk and tap his fingers at the same time.

The Chinese use wooden chopsticks for eating and a porcelain spoon for soup. When finished, set your chopsticks on the table or on the chopstick rest provided. Placing them parallel on top of your bowl is considered a sign of bad luck. You must not stick your chopsticks upright in a bowl of rice. This has too much of a resemblance to incense burning in a bowl of sand, used in ceremonies for the dead. And you must not wave your chopsticks or use them to point at people, as you can easily poke someone in the eye. It is also impolite to cross over someone else’s chopsticks when reaching for food.

When eating rice, it is customary to hold the bowl close to your mouth.

Serving dishes are not passed around; instead, you should reach for food using the opposite end of your chopsticks

(not the end you put in your mouth).

Turning a fish over on its plate is considered a bad omen, since it represents the capsizing of a boat. Instead, the fish bone should be removed from the top to get at the flesh underneath. You can always leave this to the server.

The serving of fruit signifies the end of the meal. Once the meal is over, you are expected to leave promptly. This is contrary to the Western custom of lingering over a cup of coffee. In fact, most Chinese restaurants will not even serve coffee, so here’s your hat, what’s your hurry?

WHEN DINING WITH A CHINESE HOST OR AT A BANQUET

Never begin to eat or drink before your host.

At a banquet, eat lightly in the beginning, since there could be up to 20 courses served. Expect your host to fill your bowl when you empty it. Finishing all your food may be an insult to your host, indicating that your host did not provide

you with enough food. But leaving a bowl completely full is also rude. Never take the last piece of food on a platter.

Before you begin to explore the differences, there are some basic commonalities to all Chinese cuisine. Since all Chinese eat with chopsticks, Chinese food is almost always cut up by the food preparer, or occasionally by the server during presentation.

Tea is the beverage of choice throughout China. At every restaurant, a pot of tea arrives with the menus. Grocery stores sell dozens of kinds of tea in colorful cans and boxes. Tea shops may offer more than 50 varieties, some for everyday drinking, some—very expensive—for connoisseurs.

TEA

Tea is a beverage, a health enhancer, and a social custom. It was enjoyed throughout China by the seventh or eighth century, and is as deeply intertwined with Chinese history as its art or literature. People have gathered to socialize in teahouses since at least the Song dynasty (960-