

China's Dongbei Cuisine

DONGBEI, IN THE FAR NORTHEASTERN corner of China, lies between Mongolia to the west, Russia to the north, and the Korean peninsula to the south. Until recently this region's distinctive culinary style, called *Dongbei cai*, or northeast cuisine, was little known outside China.¹ Yet its food—simple, natural, and substantial—is of decided interest. The inhabitants of Dongbei prepare hearty meals centered around meat, to which they add a wide range of fresh and pickled vegetables. Pickled foods are so widespread in Dongbei, in fact, that they appear not only in dumplings, soups, and main dishes but also in desserts. Other accompaniments include grains such as wheat, millet, and sorghum. Overall, *Dongbei cai* tells a tale of numerous invasions that reflect Manchurian, Mongolian, Korean, Russian, and Japanese culinary influences. Its ubiquitous hot pots came from Mongolia, kimchi from Korea. The extensive use of shredded and boiled potatoes evolved from Russian rule, as potatoes were rarely consumed before the mid-1800s, when China ceded its northeast region to Russia. Japanese influence is visible in the serving of raw fish dishes at the start of the meal, a practice that was virtually unknown before the creation of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo in 1931.²

Situated at the northern terminus of the Great Wall at Shanhaiguan, Dongbei encompasses a vast area of more than three thousand square miles. Two important year-round ports (including Harbin, on the Songhua River, which empties into the Sea of Japan) provide shipping for China's industrial heartland. The region comprises three provinces: Heilongjiang (whose capital city is Harbin), Jilin (whose capital is Changchun), and Liaoning (its capital is Shenyang). All areas experience long, harsh winters that begin in mid-October and last until May; the winter temperature often drops below minus twenty degrees Fahrenheit. Summer consists of a single, short season, during which the temperature only occasionally rises above eighty degrees.

The foodways of Dongbei were not always so distinctive. Archaeological studies reveal that in prehistoric times the

diet of the Northeast was similar to that eaten in what the Chinese call their “two river food regions” of the Yellow and Yangzi rivers. Throughout this area food was prepared by boiling, simmering, steaming, roasting, baking, and cooking directly over an open fire. Although the Northeast was slower to develop than the rest of China, the early inhabitants of Dongbei relied on the same kinds of foods consumed elsewhere—grains, vegetables, meat and other animal products, mushrooms, and oils.

It wasn't until the sixteenth century that the peoples of the Northeast (by this time called Manchu) were successfully united by the first Manchu emperor, Nurhachi (1559–1628), who founded the capital of Shenyang in the province of Liaoning.³ There he began building an imperial palace, which his descendants completed. After his death, his son Abahai (1592–1643) established the Qing dynasty in 1636 and moved south, conquering Beijing in 1644. By 1680 the Qing controlled all of China. At first they governed well, keeping the various ethnic groups together and appointing both a Manchu and a Han (an ethnic Chinese) to rule every department jointly.

The Manchu welcomed the Han and other outsiders into their territory, and over the centuries Russians, Koreans, French, Greeks, Poles, Yugoslavs, Hungarians, and Eastern European Jews migrated to Dongbei. In the late 1800s, toward the end of the Qing dynasty, the Russians surrendered the northeast territory, after which the Chinese government encouraged, and sometimes forced, Han to move to Dongbei, in an effort to control the local Manchu population. The Han poured in by the hundreds of thousands and by 1900 outnumbered the Manchu. Nevertheless, the Manchu remained hospitable, never imposing their own ways on those who came to live among them. Thus the newcomers continued to eat their own foods, practice their own customs, and speak their own languages. As a result, by 1937 both the Manchu language and the traditional Manchu food culture had virtually disappeared—a process accelerated by periodic incursions by Japan and Russia,



Above: A Dongbei-style hot pot known as “Farm Family One-Pot Meal.” It is made with beef, corn, squash, green beans, and steamed bread.

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as well as the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway, which facilitated the movement of peoples and foods.

By the mid-twentieth century many different Chinese ethnic minorities had moved to the Northeast, lured by jobs in heavy industry. They settled mostly in the region’s capitals. These immigrant populations included such formerly nomadic peoples as the Ulchs, Hezhen, Sushan, Xianbei, Buyeo, Mohe, Gorgwiyeo, Balhae, Khitan, and Jurchen. Their culinary practices added complexity to Dongbei cuisine, as they brought a taste for ginseng and tiger parts and a preference for soy, barley, buckwheat, millet, and wheat products over the meat traditionally eaten in the region. They and other outsiders, particularly the Russians, introduced strong black tea made from the fully oxidized tea leaves of *Camellia sinensis*; they also introduced other, more potent beverages, such as kvass made from wheat, fruit, and herbs, and alcoholic drinks made from corn, wheat, rice, sorghum, and potatoes. All of these replaced the weak tea, boiled water, and water flavored with fermented fruits that the Manchu had drunk.

Unlike in the rest of China, where the culinary staple is rice and other grains, the inhabitants of the northeast provinces rely primarily on animal protein. Lamb is favored,

though goose, venison and other game, horsemeat, fish, and seafood are also consumed. The meat is seasoned with cumin and other spices and supplemented with pickled vegetables—cabbage, mustard greens, and beans—and a few other locally grown foods, including soy and other beans, potatoes, barley, wheat, millet and glutinous millet, buckwheat, oats, sorghum, sugar beets, and many herbs. Some glutinous and nonglutinous rice is also eaten.

Because of the harsh climate, vegetables in this cold region are preserved in brine, in any available vegetable oil, or in rendered meat fat. Sometimes the vegetables are stored in underground chambers dug well below the frost line to keep them frozen or nearly so. Meat and fish—raw, salted, and dried—are also kept in these cellars. The food is often layered with rice or covered with millet stalks and topped with bamboo and straw mats to help maintain its temperature.

Dongbei residents enjoy any dish made with pickled vegetables. Hot pots with pickled cabbage are popular during the cold months. So is lamb, flavored with cumin or sometimes



Above: *The Dongbei region of China.*

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with cumin and caraway. Sticky rice buns, filled with sweet bean paste and often with fresh or pickled chives or scallions, are another favorite food. Near-daily fare are *nianbao*, dumplings stuffed with sesame or other seeds, or with pickled or fresh vegetables, meat, and fruits; such dumplings are mainly consumed at the New Year elsewhere in China. Cornmeal is also widely eaten, and in many different forms, from congee (porridge), corncakes, and buns to pancakes, which are often served with fish, seafood, raw or cooked vegetables, and sweet bean-jelly dishes. Though the consumption of endangered species is generally frowned upon, Dongbei inhabitants still enjoy bear paw, camel toe, and various tiger parts. Some eat these foods for health reasons, others because they like the taste, still others because of their importance in traditional Chinese medicine.

Dongbei is known for the crabs from Dalian, the local river fish from Dandong, fresh breads from Harbin, silk-worm cocoons from the countryside, and a wide variety of mushrooms and herbs. Northeasterners tend to prefer foods that are both exceptionally hot in temperature and very sour. Overall, few seasonings are used—salt, cumin, caraway seeds, black pepper, chili pepper, and vinegar being the

most popular. Favorite breakfast foods include cow’s milk and “milk” pressed from almonds or soybeans; dark wheat, rye, and buckwheat breads, with or without butter; steamed buns, dumplings, fried eggs, and “red” sausages, so called from the preservatives and coloring used in their production. At main meals (lunch at the workplace, or lunch or dinner at home) the first plate to be set on the table always contains pickled vegetables, a Dongbei version of kimchi that is far less piquant than the Korean condiment. These pickles are almost always accompanied by boiled peanuts and sometimes by strips of cold seaweed, such as *kanpo*. Kimchi is often followed by a sour-tasting, slightly piquant dish of cold jellyfish that has been blanched, then slivered very fine and covered with a vinegary sauce. Many types of dumplings follow, filled variously with lamb, pork, shrimp, chicken, fish, vegetables, or eggs. Rarely pleated like southern Chinese dumplings, the large Dongbei dumplings are neither pretty nor uniform. They are handmade and flavorful, very hearty, and always luscious.

Because the area covered by the provinces of Heilongjiang, Liaoning, and Jilin is larger than that of Spain and Portugal combined, it is hardly surprising that each province should have its own specialties. Heilongjiang foods show a marked Russian influence, while those of Jilin reflect Korean practices. Liaoning dishes represent a mix of both of these culinary traditions, with an additional Mongolian inflection. The inhabitants of all three provinces adore mushrooms and also consume many different types of hot pots, which are closely associated with Liaoning.

Heilongjiang is home to Harbin, China's northernmost provincial capital. The city was once known as Little Moscow, after the many Russians who fled there following the 1917 Revolution. It boasts charming Russian architecture, a wide variety of Russian street foods, and many different types of leavened and flat breads. Grilled meats on a stick, grilled sausage with a mildly piquant sauce, haw fruit skewered on a stick, and spring rolls filled with strips of potato and pickled cucumber or eggs represent a hybrid of Russian and Asian flavors. Also available on many street corners are roasted white and sweet potatoes, along with grilled breads and dumplings and pancakes stuffed with pickled vegetables and various meats.

The inhabitants of Heilongjiang still hunt for grouse, moose, and venison and fish for wild salmon and seafood. Reindeer are raised for their meat, hides, and medicinal parts. During the short summer farmers cultivate corn, sorghum, millet, wheat, potatoes, soybeans, sugar beets, herbs, and seed plants such as caraway and fennel. Also cultivated are small, leafy vegetables, many in the *Brassica* family. The favored mushroom is the monkey-head (*Hericium erinaceus*), which some call "lion's mane" (*nameko*), or *kabutori*, its Japanese name. These firm, meaty fungi grow sour as they age, a flavor much appreciated in Dongbei. They and other mushrooms are often cooked together with potatoes. Ginseng and other medicinal products such as ground deer antlers provide cash crops for the inhabitants, as do salmon, sturgeon, deer, rabbit, and other small animals that are either hunted or raised. A favorite dessert is ice cream. Residents of Harbin and elsewhere in Heilongjiang province enjoy strong alcoholic beverages, several of which are distilled from grapes, sorghum, and corn. They like beer even more, as evidenced each August at Harbin's International Beer Festival. In addition to beer halls, tea-houses abound in Heilongjiang. The locals like their tea strong and black and sweetened with plenty of sugar.

Liaoning's capital city, Shenyang, is the oldest in the region. Founded some two thousand years ago, it served as the Manchu capital from 1625 to 1644. A small version of the Forbidden Palace, with only three rooms, still stands

from the early seventeenth century. The Manchu emperors who lived there enjoyed banquets at least as lavish as those prepared for the Ming emperors in Beijing, who lived in that city's Forbidden Palace. Feasts lasting up to three days, known as "Man-Han banquets," consisted of as many as 196 courses of extravagant delicacies, all served on dishes made of china and accompanied by Western-style knives, forks, and spoons crafted of precious metals, jade, or rosewood.

Dongbei hot pot is synonymous with Liaoning, where it was brought by the invading Mongols. Lamb, beef, chicken, clams, shrimp, and all kinds of fish are sliced razor thin. These ingredients are placed in a hot pot, and then cooked in one of a variety of broths, which differ considerably from those prepared elsewhere in China. Some are *mala*—exceptionally hot, as is popular in Sichuan province—but many others, made from mutton, chicken, or seafood, are mild. Far more vegetables are included in a Liaoning hot pot than in other regions of China, and fewer dipping sauces are served, although some popular local sauces feature rice wine, vinegar, soy, sesame oil, and shrimp paste. Unique to this province are the wheat noodles in place of mung-bean noodles that cooks add to the remaining soup after the meats and vegetables have finished cooking. As elsewhere in China, raw eggs are stirred in just before serving.

Corn, especially in the form of cornmeal pancakes, is frequently eaten in Liaoning province. Also enjoyed are the apples and golden peaches grown around Dalian, the white pears from Huludau, and the plums and apricots from Dandong. Local soybeans and sorghum are used in myriad ways in soups, stews, and vegetables dishes, as are wheat for dumplings and noodles, peanuts, silkworm cocoons, grapes, and ginseng. Abalone, sea cucumbers, jellyfish, and clams are prized, as are crabs, sea urchins, shrimp, scallops, and other shellfish. Many of these sea creatures are eaten raw, dipped either in vinegar or in a slightly piquant sauce.

Anshan, about fifty miles southwest of Shenyang, is China's great steel capital. Contrary to its industrial image, strong Buddhist and Daoist influences have caused many vegetarian foods to be enjoyed in Liaoning province. The local hot springs at Tanggangzi attract visitors suffering from rheumatism, and it is believed that those who come for the cure have encouraged a predominance of healthy, vegetarian foods in this province.

Jilin's capital city of Changchun (earlier known as Hsinking) is the city where China's last child emperor, Pu Yi, ruled the Japanese state of Manchukuo until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911. Many Han, Korean, Manchu, Hui, Mongolian, and Xibe peoples live there and throughout Jilin province. The nearby Changbai Mountains form

China's southeast border with Korea; thus, many Korean influences have made their way to Jilin, as have Japanese culinary traditions, following that country's rule.

Most restaurants in Jilin province feature Korean foods and homegrown produce such as corn, millet, sorghum, wheat, potatoes, soybeans, sugar beets, and ginseng. Many small and large animals, including frogs, rabbits, pigs, and deer, are raised both for food and for their fur, hides, and organs for medicinal use. Hard flatbreads and bread dishes with eggplant, winter melon, radishes, and cabbage are popular, as are some spicy dishes, many potato dishes, and various dumplings.

Thanks to Dongbei's complicated history, the foodways of numerous ethnic groups arrived in the region. Although the harsh climate works against easy cultivation of vegetables and grains, the Northeast's many rivers and mountains supply the main dietary staples of fish and game. Ultimately, *Dongbei cai* is quite simple. The foods are often slow-cooked, with minimal seasonings beyond cumin, fennel, hot peppers, and pickled vegetables, especially cabbage. Nevertheless, it is a cuisine worth exploring. Hearty and satisfying, *Dongbei cai* is perfect for a cold winter's night. ☉

NOTES

1. Dongbei foods were first introduced into the United States in restaurants in Flushing, Queens (New York City). Small Dongbei restaurants have recently opened in California to serve the large Chinese populations in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Milpitas, and the Monterey area. Although these California restaurants serve Dongbei foods alongside other regional Chinese dishes, the Flushing restaurants serve Dongbei foods almost exclusively.

2. Attracted by the region's rich mineral resources, the Japanese first invaded the northeast provinces in 1894, sparking the Sino-Japanese War. The territory was hotly contested over the next decades, and Japan invaded again in 1932. The Japanese succeeded in establishing a puppet state called Manchukuo (Japanese for "nation") and occupied the area until 1945, when they were ousted by the Russians.

3. The peoples of the Northeast, known as Jin (Qing), ruled nearly half of China, including Dongbei, for about one hundred years beginning in the twelfth century, until being conquered by the Mongols in 1234.

Dongbei-Style Shoestring Potatoes

SERVES FOUR TO SIX

This dish can also be prepared with carrots, eggplant, or a mixture of all three vegetables. It is eaten throughout the northeast region but is most popular in Heilongjiang province.

INGREDIENTS

- 1½ pounds potatoes
- ¼ cup peanut oil
- ½ or 1 whole star anise
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled and minced
- 3 tablespoons white vinegar
- 1 teaspoon coarse salt
- ⅛ teaspoon powdered chicken bouillon
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- 2 ounces cured ham (such as Smithfield), shredded
- 1 green hot pepper, minced (optional)
- 1 teaspoon hot red oil (optional)
- ½ teaspoon sesame oil

Dipping sauce (optional)

- 4 teaspoons thin soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- ½ teaspoon coarsely ground black pepper
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch mixed with 2 teaspoons cold water

Peel the potatoes, then shred them with a cleaver, mandoline, or in a food processor.

Soak the shredded potatoes in cold water for one to two hours to reduce the starch, then drain and dry in a towel.

Meanwhile, make the dipping sauce by mixing all the ingredients together and boiling for one minute, stirring constantly. Set aside.

Heat the peanut oil in a wok or deep pan over medium heat. Add the star anise and stir until it turns black, then remove with a slotted spoon and discard. Drop in the minced garlic and the potato sticks, then immediately add the vinegar, salt, chicken bouillon, sugar, shredded ham, and hot pepper (if desired). Stir vigorously. The total cooking time should be no more than three minutes.

Just before serving stir in the sesame oil. Serve the potatoes hot, warm, or cold.

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