

Fusing food, fortune

Chefs prepare 'lucky' New Year's dishes Ingredients laden with symbolic meaning

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BY DEE GIBNEY

As dim sum master chef Wing-Sun Ching grasps a Goliath-size mixing bowl in both arms and carefully releases its contents into a roiling broth, he all but disappears in a cloud of steam.

He is boiling shoestring-thin slices of turnip for savoury turnip cake or treasure cake. It's one of the many Chinese New Year specialties he and his team at the City Inn restaurant in Markham must prepare in advance. And like other Cantonese New Year dishes, it's rich in symbolism. The word for cake, for instance, is pronounced "go" or "gao," which is the same sound as the word for "rising" or "ascending," which signifies rising fortune.

Also significant is the diversity of the turnip cake's ingredients: dried shrimp and seafood, which represent the bounty of the sea, and bits of pork rib and sausage, which represent livestock or the bounty of the land. Hence the name "treasure" cake.

Deceptively simple, the precision of its execution is exacting. Ingredients must be sliced, diced or ground by hand, right down to the fine rice flour imported from China.

"It's to ensure the proper consistency and therefore the proper taste," explains Christina Li, director of business development for her parents' Ambassador Group of restaurants in Richmond Hill and Markham.

"If the rice is not properly mixed with the water, you will be able to taste the rice and this is not good. What you should be tasting is the perfect unity of the ingredients, which is like the unity of the family."

Even the stirring and blending actions must be exact. The steaming turnip must be at just the right temperature when it's added to the cold mixture of flour, water and meat which, itself, must be blended from the bottom up.

The mixture is then poured into large square cake pans and steamed in huge bamboo steamers for an hour until it's spongy. The result must be so subtle that no one flavour dominates.

"It's all in the chemistry," says Li. "You have to let it breathe for a few days like wine so that the flavours settle."

Small pieces of cake are gift-packed in little golden "treasure boxes" of eight items each, which include an alternative, nuttier version of turnip cake called taro cake. Other cakes in the treasure box include Chinese New Year sweet cake made with brown sugar, custard powder, coconut milk and rice flour, and golden sticky cake.

Slices of the glutinous cakes can be warmed in the microwave or pan-fried for serving. Westerners may find the texture a little unusual, but the taste is delicately delicious.

The cakes are just the beginning.

Wing, who trained in Canton, has his plate full as he gears up for Chinese New Year. He has more than 2,000 orders to fill.

There are several other musts to include in the treasure boxes. The first is the crunchy sweet golden dumpling filled with tiny bits of coconut, peanut, sesame and sugar. It turns a gold colour when deep-fried.

"In ancient China, they used a gold coin in a half-moon shape," Li explains. "So the dumpling symbolizes both wealth and the sweetness of life."

Also essential are the crunchy-soft sweet "smiley sesame balls," so called because the dough cracks into a, well, smile, as it hits the hot oil. Not surprisingly they represent happiness.

A crunchy chip made of alternating layers of red bean curd and dough, which look like spirals when thinly cross-sectioned, is both sweet and savoury and very popular among the elderly, Li says, because it reminds them of their youth.

These take-home goodies are only part of the continuing gourmet feast that characterizes the two-week celebration of Chinese New Year. Office banquet parties abound leading up to the event.

On New Year's Eve, families gather for a traditional feast.

A typical 10-course banquet (10 signifies perfection) includes a number of mandatory items, beginning with steamed fish or *yue*, which means both fish and excess or surplus wealth. If you had either surplus food or money in ancient China, you were wealthy. Today, it refers more to a stable life and standard of living.

Many of the key foods involve similar plays on words.

No New Year's menu is complete without black mushrooms, *dont gu*, and steamed lettuce, *sang choy* ("grow money"). *Dont* is the same sound as east, the first of the four directions. The significance here is that you will have the blessing of the gods from all four directions.

Shark's fin is significant because it is expensive and therefore prestigious, symbolizing wealth because only the well-to-do can afford it. A standard serving for 10 is only four ounces.

For those who celebrate Chinese New Year, food doesn't just nourish the body and the soul. It spells health, wealth and happiness.