

Chapter Five Culinary Culture



Lesson Ten Dinning Etiquette

1. Etiquette

From time immemorial, Chinese people have not only regard food and drinks as very important things, but also associate them with various rituals. Different from rectangular tables used in western meals, tables in Chinese meals are usually round or square ones with dishes placed in the middle, enabling everybody to share the food. In ancient times, the baxian table was always the used in China. It was a kind of square table used when eating and drinking wine. The tables allows eight people to sit around it, which is the most practical furniture in Chinese families. The origin of the name of baxian table is related to Taoism. In the Taoist,

there are eight human beings who attained Tao thus becoming immortals representing respectively male, female, old, young, wealth, honor, poverty, and cheap, and were referred to as the Eight Immortals.(八仙 in Chinese). Though endowed with immense magical power, they still share the temperament of common people and thus regarded as extremely prominent representative of Taoism. Later, with the development of economy and the enhancement of living standard, people began to pay more and more attention to what they eat. While inviting guests to dinner, the host would prepare a dozen of dishes; they often come in even numbers, which is regarded as auspicious. it is inconvenient to eat as there are so many dishes on the table, so the revolving table was invented. People sitting around the table can revolve the huge disk to get the dish they want to eat, which becomes very convenient while eating. The custom has been carried on for thousands of years, for it is compatible to the Chinese tradition that emphasizes family and group relationships, and plays a prominent role in displaying family ethics and enhancing interpersonal relationships.



The seats in a Chinese meal are classified into shangshou(primary seat) and xiashou (secondary seat). Shangshou is the most important position which generally refers to the seat facing the door. This seat should be offered to seniors or the primary guests. If there are many guests present, the senior or high-ranked people would sit in the primary position, others would sit alternately on the left and right side of the primary position according to the sequence. The left side includes the 2nd, 4th and 6th positions, while the right side includes the 3rd, 5th, 7th positions.

According to the etiquette, Chinese would drink wine prior to eating. In order to let the guests drink to their hearts' content, the host would repeatedly propose a toast and urges the guests to drink. Before filling up his own glass, the toastmaster would first charge the glass of the guest, and then click the glasses while drinking a toast to the guest. If the guest empties his or her cup in one gulp, the host would feel honored, adding the liveliness of the banquet atmosphere. When clicking glasses with seniors or people with high social positions, the toastmaster would conventionally hold the rim of his glass lower than that of the toaster's, which is a sign of respect and humbleness.

Chinese place much emphasis on dinner etiquette. Chopsticks and spoons are widely used in Chinese meals. People utilize chopsticks or spoons with their right hand, while carrying the bowl or plate using their left hand. There are many eating etiquette at Chinese tables, for instance, the guests will not pick the dishes until being invited by the host; people would not pick the dishes from a distant plate; never keep



on picking one's favorite dishes; don't stand in others way while picking; don't keeping on eating the same dish, no matter how much you like it; don't make sound while chewing food or drinking soup, never stick the chopsticks vertically in the bowl which is only a practice while offering sacrifices to gods or ancestors. As all of the people at the table share dishes with each other, people would use serving chopsticks and spoons to take food onto their bowls and plates before eating. Youngsters are not allowed to eat unless the seniors start eating. When somebody get full, he (she) has to greet people present at the table before leaving. These acts become a kind of habit with the growth of youngsters' age gradually.

During a Chinese feast, the host would enthusiastically offer food for the guests, hoping them to eat more. The guests should accept with politeness and show their thanks. Even if the hosts offer something that the guests don't like to eat, the guest should not reject it but they can

put them aside instead. During the meal, people can have some humorous small talk with persons nearby to enhance their friendship. Before leaving the table after a meal, guests should remember to say thanks to the host, for it is an expected etiquette. At the end of the meal, people would raise their glasses and say some words with good wishes.

2. Chopsticks

Also known as “箸”, chopsticks are essentially eating utensils in Chinese meals. In the Chinese language, there are many proverbs using analogies related to chopsticks, such as “one chopstick is easy to be broken, while a bunch of chopsticks are as hard as iron” and “it’s difficult to pick up food with a chopstick just as it’s hard to soar into the sky with only one wing.” All these proverbs emphasize collective power and reflect the characteristics of Chinese culture and national spirit.



According to the ancient story, when Yu the Great was undertaking the water control project, he didn’t enter his home while passing it for three times and had his meals in the field. Because time was lacking, he had to start eating as soon as the food was cooked and then proceed with his journey. As the soup was too hot for the hands to pick up food, Yu the Great snapped two twigs from the tree and employed them to take food. These were the early forms of chopsticks. Whether the Legend is true or

not, it is absolutely persuasive to say that people use chopsticks to avoid scalding themselves with hot food.

China's chopstick-making has enjoyed a long historical standing. The emergence of chopsticks is related to Chinese people's production methods and lifestyle centering on land cultivation. Materials used to make chopsticks vary from south to north. Chopsticks in southern China are mostly made from bamboo while those in northern China are usually made from wood. Examining from the construction of the Chinese character “筷”, it is highly probable that early chopsticks were mainly made of bamboo, for the two characters “筷” and “箸” invariably contain the radical “竹”. (meaning bamboo)

Chopsticks come with many advantages. First, they are flexible and convenient, and suitable for the traditional way of eating where the whole family sits together around the table. Second, using chopsticks can enhance the flexibility of the arms, fingers and acuteness of the brain. The method of holding chopsticks is as suitable as holding a brush. Usually, we should, first of all, adjust the whole pointed tips of a pair of chopsticks until they are even with each other; Secondly, hold the chopsticks gently using the thumb, index finger, middle finger and ring finger, with the middle finger positioned between the two chopsticks. Then maintain the lower chopstick with the ring finger and the part of the hand between the thumb and index finger, and then employ the thumb, index finger and middle finger to manipulate the higher chopstick.

Different from knives and forks used in western meals, chopsticks used in Chinese meals invariably form pairs. Chinese people love

even numbers and chopsticks carry a connotation of “good things in pairs”. Aside from everyday use, chopsticks are sometimes given as gifts. In the meanwhile, because “筷子”(chopsticks) is homophonous to “快子” (having baby soon) , people like to send chopsticks as presents to newly married couples, wishing them to give birth two precious children as soon as possible. People could also send them to friends and teachers, as chopsticks are long, which signifies long and lasting friendship. People could even send them to their business partners to mean that they hope they are like two sticks working together as one, sharing a longstanding partnership.

Chopsticks are made from a wide variety of materials. Traditional materials include bamboo, wood, gold, silver, stone, animal bone, and ivory. Bamboo and wooden chopsticks are the most commonly observed ones, besides there are also porcelain and stainless steel chopsticks. Back in the Shang Dynasty (about 1600-1100BC), the Emperor used chopsticks made of ivory. Such chopsticks have been a symbol of wealth and honor. Later chopsticks were made of gold and silver, which were popular among people at the top of the social ranks. Common people back then used those made from bamboo or wood, as they were cheap to make and easy to use. And people today prefer such chopsticks. In modern Chinese people’s life, chopsticks, apart from being used as eating utensils, are also called as works of art by the public on some of the traditional commercial avenues in Beijing. for example, Dazhalan(colloquially Dashilan) in Qianmen Street, there are shops selling all kinds of chopsticks exclusively.

Japan and Korea in Asia both belong to the Chinese character cultural

sphere thus chopsticks are also found on their dining tables. However there are apparent differences among Japanese, Korean and Chinese chopsticks. In terms of the shape, Chinese chopsticks are usually thick and square at the upper ends while thin and round at the tips. Japanese chopsticks are made thinner than Chinese ones to facilitate the picking of rice and seafood. The majority of Korean chopsticks are made from metal, making them more effective for eating during barbecues.



Some say that sitting at a table with a Chinese feast and not knowing how to use chopsticks is like finding oneself on a battlefield and being a poor shot. This is no exaggeration, especially for Chinese food maniacs. What's more agonizing for them might be the unfamiliarity of how to use the chopsticks properly in the presence of native Chinese. So let's check how they can master the art of using the two sticks.

On Chinese dining tables, there are several commonly observed rules of etiquette. For example, the guests should not take up their chopsticks to pick up food until invited by the host; one should not hesitate over which dishes to take while holding one's chopsticks above the table; one should not dig or search through the dishes for one's favorite food; try not to stick the chopsticks upright in the dish or bowl of rice, as doing so

is akin to setting up sticks for the dead, which can be quite offensive; not to dip chopsticks in the dishes, as this might be a behavior that turns people off; Chinese people like to chat over meals, and quite a lot of business deals are done over the dining table. So if you happen to find yourself in such a situation, especially on formal occasions, be sure you don't point at others with your chopsticks, as that equals pointing a finger at others. As the saying goes "when in Rome, do as the Romans do", it is always desirable to observe Chinese people's eating etiquette when having meals in China. Now you might find that using chopsticks with delicacy is not so easy, it has to be cultivated and practiced over the years. That's why such manners are deemed by many in China as a suggestion of someone's upbringing.

Some people like to collect chopsticks, which are decorated with inscriptions, poems, drawings or mosaics and the like. In Shanghai, you can even find a chopsticks museum that challenges your wildest imaginations. Chopsticks, which are prevalent in east Asia, are also a bond of Southeast Asian culture. It's important for people to rediscover the cultural value of chopsticks.

3. Tea Culture

Tea is the "national beverage" of China. As the homeland of tea, China has a long history of tea-growing and drinking. Chinese people attribute the discovery of tea to Yan Emperor Shennong, a legendary ruler of ancient China who not only taught people cultivation of the five grains but also invented pottery and kitchenware. In his exploration of plants beneficial to human beings, Shennong was poisoned after testing all the

plants. It was not until he found out the detoxification power of tea that he was finally saved.



Tea drinking has a long history in China and is an integral part of the culture. Before the Han Dynasty, tea mainly served a medical function. Records of tea as a formal beverage appeared in books of Han Dynasty when tea was grown in many places and traded as a kind of commodity. During the Northern and Southern dynasties, the custom of tea drinking prevailed. Tea became an individual product of entertaining guests among the literati and officialdom. With the approach of the Tang Dynasty, tea drinking had not only penetrated all levels of society, but also was regarded by people as a kind of artistic activity. It was during this period that the first monograph on tea, the book of tea by Lu Yu, was written. The book systematically summarized the technique of tea-making and methods of tea-baking and tea-drinking both in and before the Tang Dynasty, which deepened people's understanding of tea and pushed forward the development of the art of tea-savoring.

In China, tea is not only a kind of beverage, but also a form of culture. Tea is produced in many parts of China with various kinds such as green tea, black tea, yellow tea, white tea, dark tea, scented tea, oolong etc.

Generally speaking, people in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces like to drink green tea and people from the northeast of China prefer scented tea, while people from Fujian province like oolong. Among the 56 ethnic minorities of China, influenced by distinct climates, environment with no production and living. Some have developed their own unique drinking customs such as the milk tea of Inner Mongolia areas and the butter tea enough Tibetan and so on.



Longjing, the Dragon Well Tea, is one of the most renowned and pricey tea. Once the tea is soaked in fresh-boiled water, a sweet woody aroma rises out. Its leaves bloom like flower buds and bounce slightly up and down, which makes the brewing process itself a sight to behold. Longjing tea is an inseparable part of the city's cultural legacy. One of the most famous pieces of folklore related to Longjing tea is a tale about when Emperor Qianlong, who reigned from 1711 to 1799, visited Hangzhou. According to folk legend, the emperor randomly arrived at a tea garden underneath the Lion-shaped Mountain in the Hangzhou suburbs. Amused by the girls who were busy gathering tea leaves there, he began to pick some himself. Just after scooping up a handful of leaves, a messenger arrived with news that his mother had fallen ill. Without thought, Qianlong stuffed the tea into his pocket and rushed back to Beijing to see his mother. The mother could smell the leaves in her son's

pockets, which refreshed her. As the legend goes, she brewed the dried leaves and got better after drinking them. The emperor was pleased, so he named the tea trees he saw there the “Royal Trees” and had the tea farmers send him fresh tea every year thereafter. It was at that time that Longjing tea became a household name.

Traditional Chinese medicine holds that each type of tea has different properties and benefits for the human body. Drinking black tea (often called red tea, or hong cha) in the morning can help rid the body of chill, and increase the circulation of blood, which is sluggish after sleeping. It sharpens mental faculties. Drinking green tea at midday helps to suppress anger and control excessive “liver fire.” Tea’s polyphenols are powerful antioxidants with many health benefits.

Tea, as one of the seven basic daily necessities (firewood, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar and tea), is closely related to the life of Chinese people. Tea can not only quench one’s throat, help to improve one’s eyesight, but also brings a taste of comfort. As a popular saying in China goes, “I’d rather do three days without food, but cannot stand a single day without tea.” People in many places keep the habit of drinking tea in the morning and at night. For example, in Guangdong province, the old people enjoy drinking tea in the morning at home, while young people prefer drinking evening tea in the tea house. Drinking tea brings people a lot of benefits: in the first place, it’s good for the health; In addition, it’s a kind of entertainment. Moreover, it can also cultivate people’s temperament. Serving tea to the guest is a Chinese tradition. The tea cannot be too full, because according to the old saying “a full cup of tea is offensive to the guests while a full glass of wine shows respect

to them.”

Numerous tea houses, no matter big or small, are scattered all over Chinese cities and the countryside. The Lao She “Teahouse” in Beijing is named after the modern Chinese writer Lao She and his famous play “Teahouse”. Ever since it’s opening in 1988, it has received more than 70 foreign leaders, multiple socialites as well as over 3,000,000 domestic and foreign tourists, making it a window displaying Chinese culture and a bright enhancing China’s friendship with other countries in the world.

Questions:

1. On Chinese dining tables, there are several commonly observed rules of etiquette. Can you list some after the learning of this lesson?
2. Chopsticks and spoon, which one would you choose? List your reasons.
3. Is there a custom of drinking tea in your hometown?if yes, list some.
4. Green tea, black tea, yellow tea, white tea, dark tea, scented tea, oolong...What kind of tea is your favorite?
5. Could you list the advantages of using Chopsticks?