

Asian Flavour Begins with a Grain of Rice

By: Carol Harvie Yamaguchi

It is a crisp winter's day in Tokyo and my family and I have just welcomed the first day of the New Year by eating "o-zoni". "O-zoni" is a traditional soup consisting of chicken, vegetables, shitake mushrooms, and chrysanthemum leaves served over a chewy rice cake called "mochi". My daughters enjoy "mochi" very much; I am always slightly hesitant when eating this glutinous delicacy which is a very important ingredient in Japanese culture. Many old people choke on "mochi" every year, and still it is an essential part of New Year's celebration. Now I am back in Vancouver and according to the lunar calendar, it is the New Year for the Korean and Chinese communities. This morning all my Korean friends have enjoyed "Ttokguk" which consists of a round, chewy rice cake surrounded by a steaming fragrant beef or chicken broth. The circular shape of the rice cake symbolizes money and wealth for the coming year, while the whiteness of the rice represents integrity and purity. In the old days, a good Korean wife was judged on how well she could slice the rice cake. Meanwhile in Chinatown, the bakeries are bustling and the restaurants are overflowing with happy customers. On the 15th night of Chinese New Year, many families will enjoy sweet sticky rice balls submerged in lightly sugared broth. They will also be tempted by pink and white rice cakes, filled with red bean paste or sesame jam, and shaped round to represent the first full moon of the year.

In most of Asia, the year begins and ends with rice. Rice is central to life itself. Rice plays such an integral role in the diet, culture, religion, folklore and tradition of Asia that the words for food and rice are synonymous. "Have you had your rice today?" is a traditional greeting in both Korea and China. Similarly, in Thailand and Japan, mothers say "it's rice time" to call their families to the dinner table. Rice is eaten at practically every meal in Asia, so it is not surprising that in Burma, for example, a person eats between 300-500 pounds of rice a year. Rice is regarded as such a versatile and valuable food that it is used in a number of delicious ways: sushi, porridge, fried rice dishes, desserts, beverages, curry, soups and stews. In Korea alone, over 700 recipes are made from this all important grain.

There is a Japanese proverb that says "a meal without rice is not a meal". However, depending upon the variety, rice can lack important nutrients and fibre, especially white rice. To improve the nutritional value of white rice, many cultures mix in grains such as barley, spelt or other varieties of rice including brown, red or wild. Often, rice is mixed with peas, corn, or beans to make extremely healthy and economical meals. All over the world there are traditional recipes in which rice is cooked with other ingredients to produce more interesting and nutritious combinations. Because of the lunar New Year, this article will focus on several signature dishes from Asia.

In Korea the traditional meal pattern has always included steamed rice, soup, and kimchee (a traditional condiment made from pickled cabbage, garlic, and chili pepper) with several other dishes. One of the most popular rice dishes in Korea is “Bibimbap”. A well balanced meal in a pot, it can vary from a simple farmer’s version of rice and greens to more elegant offerings with attractive portions of color coordinated vegetables and meat carefully placed on a mound of rice. It is traditional to serve “Bibimbap” in a sizzling hot “tolsot” or stoneware bowl, so that a delicious crust forms on the bottom of the rice. It is also customary to crack a raw egg on top of the meal which cooks as it is mixed into the rice and other ingredients. This meal presentation is colourful, fragrant, and noisy so it appeals to all the senses. Afterwards, “Bibimbap” might be accompanied by a cup of fragrant brown rice tea or a bowl of gingered rice gruel.

Many Chinese people start their day with “Congee” which is a thick porridge made with rice, broth and a variety of different ingredients depending upon what is available. Since “Congee” has a mild neutral taste, it can be spiced up with pickled plums, ginger or other condiments. Another classic rice dish is Fried Rice which is healthy and versatile and infinitely variable. White long grain rice is traditionally used; however other varieties are just as successful. The key to delicious fried rice lies in using leftover rice from the day before. Ingredients can include ham, shrimp, chicken, omelette strips, pork, mushrooms, ginger, and broccoli to name but a few. These should be fried in a wok before the rice is added. After creating such an appetizing dish, a small glass of golden “Shaoxing”, a wine made from glutinous rice, yeast, and water, might be in order.

Rice exists at every mealtime in Japan. A delicious rice dish aptly named “Takikomi Gohan” or “Mixed Rice” is very popular and has many different family recipes. An extremely versatile rice dish, it is traditionally made from key ingredients that can include chicken, carrot, burdock, shitake mushrooms and snow peas. Seasonal ingredients such as chestnuts or matsutake mushrooms or takenoko (bamboo shoots) for example can be added at different times of the year to celebrate the seasons. It is essential to cut the ingredients up finely and to achieve the right balance of rice and added vegetables, all of which are cooked together in a rice cooker. Both “sake”, rice wine, and “mirin”, sweetened rice vinegar, are used to season this recipe. If there is any leftover “Mixed Rice”, it can be used the next day to create “Omrice”, a very popular family meal. This special omelette is made by folding an egg mixture over a portion of rice and then seasoning it with a generous helping of sweet tomato based sauce.

All the above mentioned rice dishes can be easily adapted to contemporary West Coast cuisine with a multicultural approach. These recipes are all interchangeable and can be altered according to culture, season, taste or availability. For example, Spanish Paella, Turkish Pilaf, or Lamb Biryani could be served in a sizzling hot “tolsot”. Anything is possible when a chef’s creativity comes into play.

