The Tongue-Numbing "Flower Pepper" of Sichuan Province

by Kimberly Dukes

In Chengdu, the capital of China's Sichuan Province, eating is often more than just food. Huoguo , or "hot pot," restaurants, for example, are an experience. They often open at dusk and close long after midnight, tables spilling out onto the dark sidewalk. Hot pot isn't a solitary activity--the more friends, the better. Noisy groups toast each other with petite, ever-refilled glasses of liqueur or beer. A bubbling pot of fiery oil sits on a burner at the center of every tiny table. Chiles and Sichuan peppercorns bob thickly on its surface. Diners dunk chunks of vegetables, meat, and tofu into the pot while they chat and laugh throughout the night.

Buddhist Stupas

Even on a hot, late-summer night, I was sweating more from the spices than from the heat--and so was everyone around me. It was my first taste of hot pot on this trip to China, and I eagerly dipped my chopsticks into the pot and pulled out a tender morsel glistening with spicy oil. My mouth and tongue began to burn. My eyes teared. With every bite, I got hotter: my tongue went numb, my lips tingled, and sweat poured from my forehead. And yet, I couldn't stop. Chopsticks akimbo, I went back for more.

That night of hot pot convinced me to find out more about what Sichuanese call "hot and numbing" flavor. In the United States, we know chiles well. But Sichuan cuisine adds something special to the heat of chiles: a curious tickle on the tongue brought by the unique Sichuan "peppercorn," also known as fagara.

Not hot like other peppers, Sichuan peppercorn imparts a tingling numbness that enriches other

fiery tastes. In fact, it isn't really pepper at all. Dried, it looks like dark brown peppercorns, but the "peppercorns" are actually the aromatic berries of a tree related to the prickly ash. Their rust-colored husks open up like blossoms to reveal a tiny seed, earning it the Chinese name hu a jiao
, or "flower pepper."

A Chinese saying claims, "China is the place for food, Sichuan is the place for flavor." Sichuan peppercorn and red chiles contribute much of that earthy flavor. As a chef described it to me, the two "cooperate." Together, they provide both kinds of spiciness integral to Sichuan (Szechwan) cooking: "ma" meaning the biting, numbing flavor of Sichuan peppercorn, and "la" meaning spicy-hot.

Facing Heaven Chiles on the Street

While cooks all over China are specialists in balancing the five flavors of Chinese cooking (salty, sour, spicy-hot, sweet, and bitter), in Sichuan, "numbing" often takes the place of bitter. According to Chinese medicine, if the body becomes internally damp, the body's yang energy is reduced. Imbalance and illness can occur. In Sichuan's damp climate, people consider that foods like chiles and ginger help heat and dry the body--and they say that Sichuan pepper's numbing quality lets you eat even fierier food. This means that even on sweltering summer nights, sidewalk restaurants are full of cheerful patrons feasting on blisteringly spicy hot-pot.

During ten months of living in Sichuan, I grew to crave the pungent, numbing peppercorn. I ate across the province, from its laid-back, crowded capital to small country towns, seeking dishes with the spice. These range from the mild but flavorful--like shoestring potatoes dusted with pepper-salt--to the scorching--like chunks of spicy beef accompanied by a bowl of fire to roast them with.

As I grew more fascinated with the characteristic flavors of Sichuan province, I wanted to learn more about how the peppercorn is grown. Chinese farmers cultivate pepper trees, though some

chefs claim wild peppercorns are stronger and taste better. The berries are harvested during the hot summer, in late July and early August, and dried in the sun.

I didn't want to wait for summer. My husband and I went into the spring countryside in search of Sichuan pepper trees. In Damba, steep mountains surround green hillsides. Orderly fields, striped with rows of barley and other crops, surround the traditional stone houses of the area. Ancient towers jut up from hillsides. Dirt roads wind up the mountain, with steep trails connecting the roads to scattered houses.

A farmer, her long black hair pulled back in a tight ponytail, stopped to chat. I asked if she grew "flower pepper," and she beckoned us to follow her. We climbed up a narrow, winding track. On either side, waist- high rock walls guarded verdant fields. The sun was strong, the sky blue, and the gnarled Sichuan pepper trees cast sharp shadows on the pale dirt.

Sichuan Pepper Plant

The farmer stopped at her line of trees, edging a barley field. Smiling, she pulled a branch down towards us. The berries were a bright, pale green, clustered in what look almost like flowers from a distance. She brushed her fingers over the berries and then brought her hand to her nose. I copied her, breathing in the unmistakable aroma of Sichuan pepper despite the youth of the berries. At her house, she offered us water, introduced us to her mother, and brought us into her storeroom to scoop up handfuls of dried peppercorn, putting some into a bag for us to keep.

I knew I loved the taste of Sichuan pepper, and now I knew how to identify the peppercorns. But I wanted to learn how to cook with hua jiao. In Tagong, a Tibetan cultural area in the mountains of Sichuan province, a close friend was happy to let me watch her cook. Wu Fan owns a small and popular restaurant near the town square. These were cooking lessons like no other. She chopped like the wind, set oil to heat in her large old wok on her single burner, dipped ladles in and out of the wok, and darted spoons in and out of tiny spice boxes, chatting all the while about other matters. I scurried back and forth interjecting questions, trying to time cooking stages, and scribbling down what Wu Fan had just done while watching what she was doing

now.

Cooking with Wu Fan and other friends, I found that "How much do you use of this spice?" and "How long do you cook that pork before doing the next step?" were impractical questions. In Sichuan, you learn to cook by watching, by tasting, and by cooking, not by numbers.

Looking for new recipes, I headed back to Chengdu, known for its sophisticated yet spicy cooking. My first teacher was patient with my questions and my inadequate Chinese, but started out teaching me "tourist" versions of typical local dishes--light on the chiles and light on the Sichuan peppercorn. She doubted my desire for spice, but with every dish we practiced, her confidence in my chile-head credentials grew. Our last lesson, a spicy shredded-vegetable salad, made my eyes water and my tongue tickle in a satisfying Sichuan way.
Farmer's HouseNext, I visited an official chef-training school, the Bagoubuyi Cooking School, where one of the chef-teachers allowed me to attend his morning cooking demonstration for students. But if I went to the school hoping for focused recipes, I re-learned my earlier cooking lessons. Student cooks are expected to use their intuition and growing experience in learning how to use ingredients and proportions. The teacher, Wang Qing Shen, wrote on the board in Mandarin Chinese the name of the dish, its principal flavor category, and the names of the main ingredients and seasonings--but no measurements. In demonstrating the dish, he didn't provide any measurements either, simply naming ingredients as he dipped his ladle into various containers or poured a bit or this and that into the wok.
Small-town Sichuan Restaurant

After meticulously chopping vibrant green and red peppers, he simply tossed a good handful into the wok while his students scribbled in their notebooks. Back in the United States, I took out my treasured bags of Sichuan peppercorns and practiced developing some more cooking intuition. Long banned here due to fear of importing pests, Sichuan peppercorn is now legal and easily available. American cooks who sought out smuggled spices a few years ago--or who tried to substitute other pepper in Sichuan recipes and were disappointed--can now experiment with new recipes and freshly imported peppers.

I found that Wu Fan and my other friends were right. Without recipes, I had to remember the tastes I craved and strive to create them by balancing ingredients and improving the dish every time I tried it. I discovered I could fashion delicious Sichuan "hot and numbing" food in my own kitchen, even without identical vegetables or other ingredients.

Even more, though, cooking like this gives me practice in remembering Sichuan itself. Chopping and tasting, I think of laughing with friends in a crowded, noisy city restaurant, happily sweating alongside other contented eaters. With a trial bite, I remember brushing my hand over fresh pepper-berries, standing in the sun and listening to a tiny tractor chug along a dirt road. And I

think: I'll have to try this dish again.

Note to Cooks

If you are not using a wok or are unfamiliar with stir-frying in a wok, be extra careful not to burn the spices. Try putting the chiles and Sichuan peppercorn in when the wok or pan is medium hot, and lift it off the heat to adjust the cooking temperature. Another note about wok cooking: it's always best to "season" the wok every time you cook. Heat a little oil in the wok and swirl it around, then discard, before putting in the oil you will cook with. This helps prevent the food sticking to the wok surface.

Sichuan Pepper-Salt

In Sichuan, this pepper-salt can add zing to almost anything. Try it as a general seasoning in marinades for meat and chicken, or sprinkled on fresh popcorn. Note: Remove any twigs or thorns found in the Sichuan peppercorns before toasting.

1/4 cup whole Sichuan peppercorns1/2 cup salt (if you can't find salt from Sichuan, kosher is best) Roast the peppercorns in a heavy pan over medium heat. The peppercorns will smoke. (Moderate the heat so that they don't burn.) Once they smoke, take them off the heat and cool. In a food processor or spice grinder, grind the peppercorns and the salt until you have a fine powder. Sift to remove the shells. Store the pepper-salt in an airtight container in a cool, dark place.
Yield: approximately 1/2 cup
Heat Scale: Mild

Tongue-Numbing Spicy Beef

The chef who demonstrated this recipe called his version "Fire Beef," not because of the spice--which he took for granted--but because he accompanied the platter of beef with a small bowl of solid alcohol, lit with a match, so diners could toast pieces of beef over the fire at the table. The numbing Sichuan peppercorn complements the heat of the chile; experiment with the balance of hot to numb if you're adjusting the amount of chile to your taste. Because this is a stir-fry and must be cooked quickly, do all your chopping and measuring before starting to cook. Note: Like the following dish, this is best eaten with chopsticks.

Sesame Sauce Ingredients:2 teaspoons sesame oil2 teaspoons Sichuan pepper oil1/2 teaspoon sugar
Salt to taste
The Stir-Fry:
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
1 egg white
1/2 teaspoon cornstarch
4 teaspoons peanut oil, divided
1/2 pound sirloin, cut into thin strips or small cubes
Chunk of ginger about the same size as the garlic, chopped
3 cloves of garlic, chopped
1 small green or red sweet pepper (or a mixture), chopped (about 1 cup)
1 small red onion, chopped (about 1 cup)
3/4 teaspoon of extra-hot chile powder
1/4 teaspoon ground Sichuan peppercorn
Cilantro or parsley, chopped, to garnish (optional)
To make the sauce, in a medium bowl, combine the salt, pepper, beef, egg white, and cornstarch.
In a small bowl, combine the sesame oil, Sichuan pepper oil, sugar, and salt to taste.
In a wok, heat a little oil to season the surface. Once it's hot, discard the oil. Add 3 teaspoons of peanut oil and heat. Add the meat, and stir-fry for about 4 minutes, until the meat is just cooked. Using a slotted spoon, remove the meat to a plate and drain.
In the wok, heat 1 teaspoon of oil. Add the ginger and garlic and stir-fry until it is fragrant, 15- 30 seconds. Add the sweet peppers and onion, and stir-fry for 1 minute. (They should remain a little crisp.) Add the chile powde and ground peppercorn, stir for a few seconds, then add the beef and stir. Stir the Sesame sauce again, add to the wok, and stir for about 15 seconds.
Serve on an oval plate in a single layer, so that the hot-and-numbsauce is spread out evenly. Garnish with cilantro or parsley if desired.
Yield: 2 servings, or 4 in combination with other Chinese-style dishes and/or rice
Heat Scale: Hot
Tangy Chicken and Peanuts (Gong Bao Chicken)

This is an immensely popular dish that you can find in nearly every restaurant or home. I like the crunch of crisp American celery with the chicken and peanuts. Play with the recipe by replacing the chicken with shrimp or tofu, or by replacing the peanuts with cashews to dress it up a bit more. If you use peanuts, look for "Spanish" peanuts, which still have their reddish skins. In Sichuan, "facing-heaven" chiles are used in spicy dishes. They add visual appeal as well as flavor, but if you can't find these, substitute other peppers that are medium-hot and richly flavorful. Here I use small Japanese chiles easily available in most supermarkets. Note: Because this is a stir-fry and must be cooked quickly, do all your chopping and measuring before starting to cook.

Marinade Ingredients:3 teaspoons sherry1 1/2 teaspoons light soy sauce2 teaspoons dark soy sauce 1/2 teaspoon salt 2 teaspoons cornstarch 1 teaspoon water

Sauce Ingredients:
4 teaspoons sugar
1 1/2 teaspoons cornstarch
2 teaspoons dark soy sauce
2 teaspoons light soy sauce
4 teaspoons vinegar
2 teaspoons sesame oil
2 teaspoons water

Stir-Fry Ingredients:
1 to 2 boneless chicken breasts, cubed (about 1/2 pound)
3 tablespoons peanut oil
24 small Japanese chiles, halved, most seeds discarded
2 teaspoons Sichuan peppercorns
Chunk of ginger about the same size as the garlic, minced
4 medium cloves of garlic, minced
1 cup chopped celery (cut on a slant)1 bunch green onions or scallions, chopped in 1-inch sections (about 1/2 cup)
1/2 cup peanuts
Cilantro or parsley, chopped, to garnish (optional)

In a medium bowl, combine the marinade ingredients and stir well. Add the chicken and let it sit while you chop, measure, and combine the other ingredients.

In a small bowl, combine the sauce ingredients.

In a wok, heat the oil over high heat. When it is quite hot, add the chiles and the Sichuan peppercorns and stir continually for about half a minute, until the oil smells spicy. Be careful not to let the spices burn--you might want to take the wok off the heat for a moment or two.

Add the chicken and whatever is left of the marinade, stirring continually for a few minutes, until the chicken is cooked through. Add the ginger and garlic, stir-frying until it smells fragrant, 15-30 seconds. Be careful not to burn them.

Stir the sauce again and add it to the wok, stirring for about 30 seconds. Add the celery and stir for about 15 seconds. Add the spring onions and stir for about 15 seconds. Add the peanuts and stir for about 15 seconds.

Serve on a flat oval plate in a single layer so that the sauce is distributed evenly. Garnish with cilantro or parsley if desired. Eat with chopsticks if you can!
Yield: 2 servings, or 4 with side dishes and/or rice
Heat Scale: Hot

Peppered Tofu

Even if you think you don't like tofu, try this simple and tasty dish! This recipe comes from Wu Fan, the owner of a popular restaurant in Lhagang, a small town in Sichuan province. This is one of Wu Fan's favorite "homestyle" recipes with Sichuan peppercorn. It's not very spicy, but you could experiment with adding Sichuan pepper oil, chile oil, or hot chiles to increase the heat scale. Accompany this dish with a snack of boiled peanuts, rice, or vegetables, or serve it alongside spicier dishes to create a balanced overall flavor.

1/2 block of very firm tofu, cut into 1/2-inch thick "tiles"Small bunch of green onions, chopped on a slant (about 1/2 cup) 4 tablespoons peanut oil 1/2 teaspoon flour or cornstarch
2 tablespoons water
Salt to taste
3/4 teaspoon ground Sichuan peppercorn
In a wok, heat the oil until very hot. Fry the tofu slices until they begin to look brown and toasty. Using a slotted spoon, remove the tofu to a plate to drain. Remove the oil and wipe the wok. Add just enough oil to make the bottom of the wok gleam. Heat until very hot. Add the green onion and stir fry for about 30 seconds. Add the drained tofu and stir fry for about a minute. Add the cornstarch, water, salt, and stir. Remove to an oval plate. Dust theground Sichuan peppercorn on top of the tofu.
Yield: 2 servings
Heat Scale: Mild

Spicy Spinach

In Sichuan, this simple technique is often used to cook a vegetable usually translated as "empty-hearted vegetable." If you live near an ethnic grocer, you may be able to find this vegetable, but if not, try this recipe for the spinach more easily found in in the United States. The hot-and-numb flavor also suits many other green vegetables--try it with broccoli. I used small Japanese chiles here, but almost any chile should do; adjust the spiciness to your liking. Note: This may seem like a lot of fresh spinach, but it will reduce as it cooks.

2 teaspoons of peanut oil6 small fresh chiles, halved, seeds discarded1/2 to 3/4 teaspoon whole Sichuan peppercorns
Approximately 6 cups of fresh spinach, washed and torn into bite-size pieces

1/2 teaspoon sesame oil
Salt to taste
In a wok, heat the oil. Add the chiles and Sichuan peppercorn. Stir-fry for about 15 seconds, being very careful not to burn the spices.
Add the spinach and stir-fry for 2 or 3 minutes, until it looks dark green and cooked.
Turn off the heat. Add the sesame oil and salt. Serve in a small bowl to accompany other dishes.
Yield: 2 side-dish servings
Heat Scale: Medium

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