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THAT SICHUAN SIZZLE

Text Michele Koh Morollo

Sichuan province in central China is home to one of the most popular cuisines worldwide, offering up palate-stimulating delights including mapo tofu, hot and sour soup, and kung pao chicken, which have become mainstays on Chinese menus across the globe. You're just as likely to find a decent Sichuan restaurant in Manhattan as you are in Madrid, but if you want to sample authentic tongue-tingling Sichuan dishes, there's truly no better way than to go to the source: Chengdu.

According to Sichuan-born executive sous-chef Tony Xu of MI XUN TEAHOUSE, the province has since ancient times yielded an abundance of vegetables, fruits, livestock, fish, salt, tea and honey. 'The people living in Sichuan became adept at altering the flavours of local produce with brine, salt and gingers, which resulted in a unique style of food as early as the Qin Dynasty.'

Sichuan food became officially known as a distinct regional cuisine during the Southern Song Dynasty era, between the 12th and 13th centuries, when historical texts first saw use of the phrase *chuanfan* to describe distinctly Sichuan dishes.

Sichuan food is a reflection of the abundant spices found in the province, and has become one of the most popular Chinese cuisines worldwide. Image by Yang Yidong / Shutterstock

The Sichuan Peppercorn

Contrary to what most people think, Sichuan food is not just about dried chillis and the famous *málà* numbing spice (as in the *huā jiāo* peppercorns), but a complex medley of six flavours — sweetness, sourness, numbness, bitterness, aromatics and saltiness — that have evolved through centuries of domestic immigration and foreign trade.

In fact, the now-famous peppercorn was only incorporated into Sichuan cooking fairly late in the game, around the 17th century. Introduced to China from South America by Portuguese traders to Macau, the rose-hued, fiery morsels first arrived in Zhejiang province as early as the 15th century, becoming popular in nearby Hunan, Hubei and Guangxi.

During this period, Sichuan cuisine was dominated by flavourful add-ins like coriander, sugar cane and star anise that grew in the fertile farmlands of the Sichuan Basin. Then, during the fall of the Ming Dynasty in the 17th century, a civil war waged by the notorious Yellow Tiger devastated Sichuan, decimating its population and destroying farmlands and crops. The newly established Qing government began resettling people from Hunan, Hubei and Guangxi in an effort to rebuild the province, and it was these migrant groups who were responsible for bringing with them the South American peppercorn now synonymous with Sichuan food.



Image courtesy of The Spice House



Warm Inside

Because of its valley location, the cities, towns and villages of Sichuan experience regular rainfall and foggy, chilly or humid weather. According to traditional Chinese medicine, spicy foods help to ward off the body's internal dampness and cold, making peppercorn and other foreign spices such as chillis, which traders introduced from Mexico, popular among the Sichuanese.

The humid climate also resulted in sophisticated food-preservation techniques such as brining, pickling, smoking and drying, leading to the creation of items such as broad-bean sauce, pickled mustard stem and smoked pork belly, which you'll find in the larder of every self-respecting Sichuan cook.

Today, Sichuan cooking methods vary from steaming and braising to baking and flash frying. The most commonly used spices and flavours include fennel, garlic, shallot, ginger, aniseed, cinnamon, clove, dried chilli, and of course, the mouth-numbing peppercorn.

The region regularly experiences foggy, chilly weather ideal for eating spicy cuisine. Image courtesy of Swire Hotels

Famous Sichuan Dishes

If you're a Sichuan cuisine initiate, here are some of the popular dishes that you'll need to try.

Twice-cooked Pork

There is a Chinese saying that if you haven't tried twice-cooked pork, then you've never been to Sichuan. Golden, unctuous boiled pork slices are stir-fried with fermented black soybeans and white and green garlic sprouts. This is a favourite among the locals and is the perfect salty accompaniment to a bowl of steaming rice.

Mapo Tofu

A spicy stew of bean curd cubes with minced pork or beef in a slightly oily chilli- and bean-based sauce. This dish goes beautifully with rice and shows up often on the menu of Chinese eateries across the globe.

Kung Pao Chicken

This classic Sichuan dish consists of diced chicken, crunchy whole peanuts, Sichuan peppercorn and dried red peppers fried in sweet and sour soy- and vinegar-based sauce.

Sichuan Hot Pot

On most food streets in Chengdu, you'll find humble little eateries as well as banquet-style restaurants that serve this communal, fondue-style dish of spicy broth, into which various raw ingredients are plunged. Order skewers of meat, vegetables, seafood, offal or tofu and dip these skewers into the boiling spicy broth until they're cooked and ready to eat for a fun and interactive meal.

Husband and Wife Lung Slices

This dish, which was made famous by a 1930s Chengdu street vendor named Guo Zhaohua and his wife Zhang Tianzheng, consists of thinly sliced beef lung seasoned with hot chili oil.

Dandan Noodles

Another well-loved Sichuan dish the world over, these noodles are served in a peanutty, spicy broth with minced pork, preserved mustard stems, chilli oil, those ubiquitous peppercorns and spring onions.



Sichuan Dining

There are a handful of excellent Sichuan eateries in and around Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li in Chengdu, where you can tuck in to authentic Sichuan dishes. **Bavin Door Feel** (shop 1243b) serves a wide variety of Sichuan dishes such as mung bean jelly with *málà* spice, crunchy stir-fried *málà* cauliflower and mapo tofu. Also in Taikoo Li is **Green Tea** (shop 2328). Though Green Tea's flagship restaurant is in Hangzhou, this popular spot, with interiors that conjure an atmosphere of ancient China, serves a good selection of Sichuan items including spicy fish head, lung slices, smoked duck, and hot and sour soup. If you want a healthy, vegetarian sampling of Sichuan flavours, and to soak up the atmosphere of a traditional Chengdu-style teahouse while you nibble away, then head to **MI XUN TEAHOUSE** in The Temple House (81 Bitieshi Street), where Chef Xu serves up *Houttuynia cordata* — local lettuce with a fishy taste cooked in a spicy sauce, and an

assortment of cold pickled dishes, teacakes and a Sichuan iced-jelly dessert. For elegant and contemporary Sichuan fare, book a table at **CiGuo** (Old Congde Alley, 88 Tangba Street) — an intimate and stylish private kitchen run by local artist Wang Hai with an ever-changing set menu of Sichuan dishes. A littler further away from Sino-Ocean Taikoo Li, along **Kuan Zhai Xiangzi** (literally, 'wide and narrow alley'), are a number of Sichuan restaurants where you can watch traditional opera performances and puppet shows as you enjoy your dinner.

This page: Sichuan iced jelly is the perfect complement to the sublime interiors of MI XUN TEAHOUSE at The Temple House. Images courtesy of Swire Hotels

Opposite page: Spicy Sichuan hot pot is a must-try when visiting the region. Image by Darren Donahue / Flickr

