



Chow Fun

By Laurie Winfield

Appreciate the complexity, experience the simplicity of Chinese home cooking

Before you have another bite of your next Chinese meal, look at it. Take a minute to notice the green of the broccoli, the orange of the carrots and the deep red of those spicy peppers. When your eyes have had their fill, breathe in the aroma of the garlic, ginger and onion. Now it's time to take a bite. As you chew, savor not only the flavor but the feeling of the food in your mouth and on your tongue.

In food workshops taught by Cecilia Ling, a photographer, artist and Chinese culture consultant, you'll learn that color, smell, taste and the feeling of the food in your mouth — the crunchiness of the chicken and softness of the tofu — are basic elements of Chinese cuisine.

Not only is the cuisine incredibly healthy — lacking the sugar and butter of Western food — but each dish also reflects a connection to the culture and climate of the area from which it originates, Cecilia says.

Eating *kung pao* chicken from a Styrofoam container in my Austin home

seems pretty far from the dish's origins in China, so I wanted to know more. To help me better understand Chinese cuisine's regional connections, Cecilia gave me a very brief

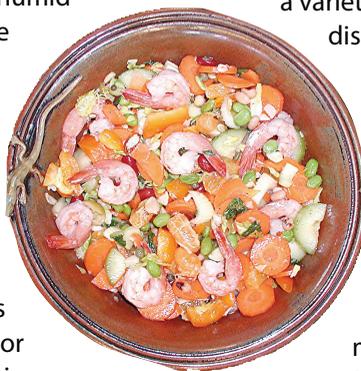
overview of four major cooking styles of China. (Many sources break this list down further into eight or nine regional cuisines.)

The *kung pao* chicken

I ate recently is part of the *Sichuan* cooking style, characterized by foods that are spicy, flavorful and colorful. *Sichuan* province — located in southwestern China — has a humid climate, and the red pepper used in the cuisine is thought to reduce "dampness" in the body.

Cecilia also says that the red color used in the cuisine represents the passion of the regional culture.

The elegant *Jiangsu* cooking style of southeastern China is known for its lighter colors, moderate flavors and dishes such as sweet and sour fish



Cecilia Ling teaching at Gina's Kitchen

by Laurie Winfield

and egg and vegetable fried rice.

Shandong cuisine includes many wheat-based foods such as scallion pancakes, steamed buns and noodles. And its proximity to the Yellow Sea means you'll find all types of seafood on the regional menu.

The *Guangdong*, or Cantonese, style of cooking, has its origins in southern China, where Hong Kong is located. (Just mention Cantonese food and my mouth starts to water when I think of Sunday morning *dim sum* with friends.) The Cantonese are also famous for their many soups and a variety of seafood dishes.

The Cantonese are obsessed with freshness, Cecilia says. A housewife in *Guangdong* may well turn up her nose at pork from a pig that was slaughtered more than two hours before purchase; it's no wonder there are two markets per day for these discerning shoppers.

Even from this superficial overview, it's

apparent that the variety of food in China is as vast as the country itself.

According to Cecilia, a major regional cooking style might include up to 1,000 unique dishes. At a fancy banquet for a dignitary, a chef might present over 200 dishes for one meal.

So, how does a cook with limited experience and ingredients prepare regional Chinese dishes in an American kitchen?

Cecilia says creativity, efficiency and accessibility are far more important than sticking to traditional recipes.

In fact, Chinese home cooking can be simple. You can get the ingredients at almost any grocery store and use familiar cooking techniques to concoct a healthy, authentic meal consisting of three or four unique dishes.

To learn more, I attended one of Cecilia's three-hour food workshops. This one happened to be scheduled on the eve of Chinese New Year and showcased simple but festive foods.

The night's menu included an appetizer, soup, cold dish, main dish, rice, dessert and tea. As Cecilia walked us through each

item on the menu, she explained regional connections, health benefits, accessibility of ingredients and tips on food prep and cooking techniques.

For example, the simple but delicious *Jiangsu*-inspired crispy celery with dried tofu is made of fresh fruit, vegetables and dried tofu that you can get in most regular or Asian supermarkets in town.

The hands-on part of the class proved that we could employ basic kitchen skills to create an authentic look and feel as we prepared the celery, Asian pear and tofu strips for the dish. My favorite part of the class — the eating part — let us put our new knowledge to the test as we viewed, tasted and compared the various textures of the food we had created, while brushing up on our chopstick

handling skills.

Cecilia, who grew up in Beijing, starts each class by saying that she is not a chef, but a lover of Chinese food who takes pleasure in sharing how Chinese people cook at home.



In China, preparation and enjoyment of food is a way of life. Learning more about the regional origins of dishes and cooking techniques made me feel more connected to the Chinese appreciation of food and more apt to incorporate these ideas in my own cooking.

Cecilia Ling offers workshops on Chinese food, tea and culture and Asian brush calligraphy. Her art is often displayed in galleries and office buildings all over the city. Currently, you can find her work at The People's Gallery at Austin City Hall.



Photo and art credits:

Food photos by Cecilia Ling. From left: fish ball soup, shrimp salad and ginger cabbage. Copyright © 2006 Cecilia Ling. All rights reserved.

Calligraphy by Cecilia Ling. Top: Chinese character for "tea." Bottom: Character for "harmony." Copyright © 2006 Cecilia Ling. All rights reserved.

Map of China by Courtney Clapper.

ON THE WEB:

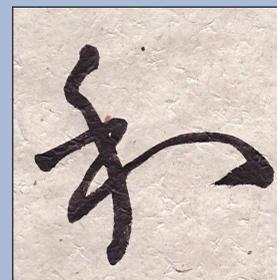
TEA TALK

Cecilia Ling's tea culture class explores the history, philosophy and folklore surrounding this ancient beverage. Austin Traveler recently dropped in on one of her classes and learned answers to these interesting questions:



- Who made the first cup of tea?
- Why is some tea \$1 a pound, while some can cost up to \$1,000 per pound?
- How do you make (and drink) a proper cup of Chinese tea?
- What could wine and tea possibly have in common?

Visit www.austrintravelermagazine.com for these answers and more!



Asian brush calligraphy class

Cecilia is offering a basic-level, six-course workshop from March 26 to April 30 focusing on calligraphy as stress relief and a way to foster focus, concentration and patience. Cost is \$80 per person. If you bring a friend, you get 10% off.

To learn more, come to an orientation on Sunday, March 19, 3-4:00 p.m. For reservations and location information, e-mail her at cling@icenlink.com or call 413-6517.