

WEEKEND JOURNAL; Food & Drink – the dish: Beijing hot pot; This Mongolian import is the Chinese capital's favorite winter warmer

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Full text: The Mongolian influence in China has inspired fortification of the Great Wall, is responsible for Beijing's charming hutong alleyways and turned the Forbidden City into Kublai Khan's bacchanalian paradise. But perhaps the best-loved contribution to come from the nomadic northerners is the simple tradition of plunking food into boiling cauldrons and plucking morsels out while drinking with friends. The Mongolians who introduced the dish weren't known for their delicacy.

But what they left behind, the Mongolian hot pot, is a delicacy indeed. Beijing is rife with hot pot places, though most have strayed far from the original Mongolian incarnation, which, according to Jack Weatherford of Macalester College in the U.S., and author of "Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World," was little more than "a large pot over a fire of dried animal dung."

"The only seasoning would (have been) a very small amount of salt," Prof. Weatherford says. Often it was eaten without salt, though, he says "since Mongolians (preferred) the salt in their milk tea rather than the soup." They would drink the soup and eat the meat "with no sauces of any type."

In Beijing, the hot pot that retains the most Mongolian of flavors is known either as mutton or chrysanthemum hot pot. Mutton was the meat of choice among fuel-starved Mongolian tribes, who would shave the frozen or dried meat into thin, curling slices for more efficient cooking. Chrysanthemum hot pot is a Han Chinese riff on the Mongolian tradition, as Chinese patrons sprinkled their hot pots with fresh chrysanthemum flowers, the winter bloom that signals the start of the cold season. These days, the seasoning is available year-round, but is still popular as a winter treat.

Either way, hot pot is warming fare for cold nights, though Beijing patrons now face a host of choices and additions, including fresh greens and seafood that would have bewildered a Mongolian herdsman. "It has been greatly elaborated on in China," says Prof. Weatherford.

The Mongolians controlled Beijing during the Yuan Dynasty of 1279 to 1368, and one would be hard pressed in today's capital to still find any of the dung fires and salt-only seasonings of yore. Hot pot has morphed into a flavorful, all-out social affair where patrons have their pick of Korean-style cauldrons, Thai-inspired broths, numbing Sichuan elixirs and even Russian borscht bases, tossing any number of ingredients into the bubbling gas-fired pots and fishing the bits and bobs out with chopsticks and slotted spoons. It is best enjoyed in large groups, so a variety of ingredients can be ordered. As the harsh northern Chinese winter approaches, a night around a hot pot remains a favorite in the city.

In Beijing, the spicy, chili-filled hot pot of central China now rivals the traditionally bland northern style. Sichuan spice is, according to chef Xu Anjing of Beijing's popular Ding Ding Xiang restaurant, moved across more tables in Beijing than any other variety. "The . . . Sichuan style is always a favorite. People love the spicy flavor and everything tastes good when paired with the hot chilies," he says. Not everyone will necessarily agree: My own visit left me trying to eat the tablecloth to counteract the spice but this, according to Mr. Xu, is the sign of a weak amateur.

Look out for a wide assortment of dipping sauces. Sesame oil and sesame paste are the most common, but some go for still more chili oil. Perhaps the best indication of a good Beijing hot pot is that it won't leave the diner struggling with that ailment tactfully known as "hot pot belly."

Here are some of Beijing's favorite hot pot spots:

Ding Ding Xiang

Don't even think about getting a table here between 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. without a reservation. Beijingers crowd in

and slurp up some of the finest hot pot in town, with all variations represented.

14 Dong Zhong Jie, Dongzhimen Wai, Dongcheng district. 86-10-6417- 2543. Price: \$15 to \$20 a person, including drinks and dessert.

Jing Gui Gui Jie Xiao Shan Cheng

This restaurant doesn't look like much from the outside but cut through the bamboo facade for spicy hot pot and cold beers. It's located on Beijing's Ghost Street, where patrons go from eatery to eatery all night under the street's red lanterns.

183 Dongzhemen Nei Dajie (aka Gui Jie or Ghost Street), Dongcheng district. 86-10-6407-6570. Price: \$10 a person.

Huo Ba Zi

Classic Sichuan hot pot with all the trimmings in a bustling atmosphere that keeps the fires burning 24 hours.

Great for groups and those on a budget.

13 Xinyuan Li, Chaoyang district. 86-10-8451-0505. Price: \$8 a person.

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