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Time Out New York / Issue 695 : Jan 22–28, 2009

Ox populi

Gather your firecrackers: The Year of the Ox is upon us.

By Francoise Villeneuve

When it comes to New Year's, the Chinese have the food-and-drink beat down (no warm Korbel for these folks). The celebration kicks off on January 26 and lasts through February 9 (see [Own This City](#) for [event and parade listings](#)). For those with higher edible aspirations than a carton of General Tso's, we've assembled this guide to traditional Chinese New Year eats—and where to find them. Your fortune cookie can't do that.

Whole fish

Because slicing at the table can symbolize severing family ties, a New Year's meal often includes steamed whole fish. From head to tail, the creatures signify the end of an era and the beginning of another.

Annisia Among the six courses offered on Annisia's January 26 tasting menu is a whole steamed *rouget*. The fish comes swimming in a standard ginger-scallion sauce, with the added luck of Taiwanese radishes. *13 Barrow St between Bleecker and W 4th Sts (212-741-6699). Chinese New Year prix-fixe meal: \$85.*

Lucky Eight Straight from the tank to the steamer, where it's enlivened with spicy ginger, the whole fish at this Brooklyn Chinatown staple is the neighborhood's go-to delight. *5204 Eighth Ave between 52nd and 53rd Sts, Sunset Park, Brooklyn (718-851-8862). Whole flounder: \$22.*

Philippe Say what you will about this infamously sceney eatery. But Philippe Chow's fragrant, surprisingly classic whole steamed fish of the day—made festive with the colorful addition of scallions—fits the bill on New Year's. *33 E 60th St between Madison and Park Aves (212-644-8885). \$55 for two.*

Yu sheng

Singaporean and Malaysian revelers welcome the New Year by mixing a communal appetizer salad at the table. The dish—*yu sheng*, or "raw fish"—is a colorful mixture of fish, shredded pickled fruit and vegetables, and other bright ingredients in plum dressing. All the components are tossed together in order as a family, to signify luck and abundance in the coming year. Each ingredient has significance—from fish, as the Cantonese word for "fish" sounds like "prosperity," to the peanuts that are sprinkled on the dish to make gold rain down on the household.

Singapore Café This eatery, as colorful as the salad itself, serves a version with fresh and pickled vegetables. It's also vegetarian-friendly: The salmon can be served separately from the white radish, carrot, sesame seed, deep-fried cracker and peanut concoction. *69 Mott St at Canal St (212-964-0003). Yu sheng: \$18. Jan 24–11 Feb*

Shang Chef Susur Lee's Chinese cuisine is strongly influenced by other cultures, and his signature Singapore Slaw is no exception. This 19-ingredient spin on *yu sheng* replaces peanuts with less oily toasted hazelnuts. Shredded Chinese jicama, cucumber, daikon, pickled ginger and other vegetables are tossed with salted plum dressing. *Thompson LES Hotel, 187 Orchard St between E Houston and Stanton Sts (212-260-7900). Singapore Slaw: \$16, with a side of yellowtail \$25.*



Singapore Slaw from Shang
Photograph: Joe Karandy

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Nyonya A go-to for fans of Malaysian food, this popular Manhattan Chinatown eatery adds dried melon, turmeric and fresh pomelo to its take on the New Year dish, as well as the anticipated carrots, ginger, salmon and lime. Get it anytime after January 19 and go back for seconds as late as February 9. *194 Grand St between Mott and Mulberry Sts (212-334-3669). Yu sheng: \$19.95.*

Turnip cake

This southern Chinese New Year cake, or *niangao*, is eaten to symbolize prosperity. The gelatinous patty comes in many incarnations, but is usually formed from cooked, ground glutinous rice and shredded radish, and is sweetened with brown sugar. It represents the glue that holds families together for the coming year. It is ceremoniously offered to the Kitchen God—who decides whether mortal families have been naughty or nice—to encourage a positive report.

Chatham Square Restaurant Bustling with local families enjoying chicken feet and baked pork buns, this eatery is dominated by Cantonese dishes. The menu boasts New Year turnip cake, from January 23 to 26, fresh from food carts, dim sum-style. Make sure to ask *niangao*, or you may get the popular dim sum treat made from turnips instead of daikon. *6 Chatham Sq between East Broadway and St. James Pl (212-587-8800). Niangao: \$3.*

Hong Kong Supermarket Snacks, spices and packaged goods from Japan, Singapore, and China can be found at this sprawling Chinatown grocery. Many of the labels are not written in English, so ask a staffer where you can find its year-round stash of *niangao*. *109 East Broadway at Pike St (212-227-3388). Pack of niangao: \$2.79.*

Tai Pan Bakery The bustling Flushing location of this Chinese bakery chain makes two varieties of *niangao*, a sweet taro and a savory plain. Drop by anytime January 15–27 for a reliable *niangao* source, or just to pick up the popular custard buns. *3725 Main St at 37th Ave, Flushing, Queens (718-888-1111). Small niangao: \$8.80.*

Eight Treasure Rice/Tray of Togetherness

Eight is considered a lucky number, as it sounds like “wealth” in Mandarin, or “fortune” in Cantonese. To bring good fortune, it's featured in a number of ways over the New Year festivities. The ‘tray of togetherness’ is usually set out at family gatherings, containing eight compartments. Eight Treasure or Eight Jewel Rice is a sweet rice dish flavored with eight dried and candied fruits and nuts, which are the “jewels,” usually including dried lotus seeds, dried jujubes, dates, candied plums and walnuts.

Bar Q Chef-owner Anita Lo's Chinese New Year menu serves up Eight Treasure Rice with duck as part of the special seven-course January 26 menu, kicking off with a nod to the Year of the Ox in the form of a rum-spiked oxtail broth. *308–310 Bleecker St between Seventh Ave South and Grove St (212-206-7817). Chinese New Year prix-fixe meal: \$70.74.*

New Green Bo A hearty haven for dim sum lovers, this Shanghai-style joint is nothing fancy, but it does offer a satisfyingly sticky and traditional Eight Jewel Rice year-round. *66 Bayard St between Elizabeth and Mott Sts (212-625-2359). Eight Jewel Rice: \$4.95. Cash only.*

Dynasty Supermarket Sprawling and packed with hard-to-find Chinese items, this supermarket has an impressive selection of candied items that are ideal for a makeshift tray of goodies. Bring health with their candied melon, and fertility with the candied lotus seed. *68 Elizabeth St at Hester St (212-966-4943)*

Dumplings

You probably already know and love Northern Chinese *jiaozi*: half-moon dumplings. Fried or steamed and stuffed with a minced meat or vegetables, they were originally made to mimic the shape of the gold or silver ingots used as currency in ancient China, and they're eaten on New Year's Day to bring fortune for the coming year. Ironically, they also represent an excellent bang for your buck.

Pacificana In addition to hard-to-find dim sum, this Sunset Park spot offers terrific pork *jiaozi*. *813 55th St between Eighth and Ninth Aves, Sunset Park, Brooklyn (718-871-2880). Jiaozi: eight for \$7.75.*

Joe's Shanghai Restaurant Alleviating dumping cravings since the '90s, this original location of what is now a chain is known for its soup-filled dumplings. However, it also serves *jiaozi* year-round, which are as satisfying as those signature broth-filled parcels. *136-21 37th Ave at Main St, Flushing, Queens (718-539-3838). Jiaozi: \$4.65.*

Shandong Dumpling For non-Mandarin speakers, ordering from a dumpling stand inside a restaurant court where everything is written almost solely in Chinese characters could be daunting, but not here. The friendly staff will meet you halfway, and the *jiaozi*, in addition to being everything dumplings should be, are among the least expensive of the lot. *Golden Shopping Mall, 41-18 Main St between Sanford and 41st Aves, Flushing, Queens (no phone). Jiaozi: 12 for \$4.*

Tangyuan

Traditionally eaten to celebrate the Lantern Festival that brings the New Year festivities to a close, *tangyuan* sounds like “reunion” in Chinese, and they're a mixture of rice flour and water formed into little balls. Often stuffed with peanut, black sesame or red-bean paste,

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they are cooked in water and served in the resulting broth to celebrate the final day of the Chinese New Year, when spirits are guided home. Originally, their circular shape represented unity for this family-oriented day, but they have since become a popular dessert and are available year-round in many locations. Lantern Day is also a day for lovers, as it's one of the few times of year in ancient China when young women could socialize freely with men. So if Valentine's Day is too cheesy for you, sweeten any day with this traditional dessert.

Spicy & Tasty Lip-smacking sesame or peanut-butter-filled tangyuan offer sweet relief from Spicy & Tasty's searingly hot Szechuan eats. *39-07 Prince St between Roosevelt and 39th Aves, Flushing, Queens (718-359-1601). Tangyuan: \$2.95.*

Lan Zhou Handmade Noodle This under-the-radar noodle heaven makes glossy black sesame-stuffed tangyuan that are smooth in texture, comfort food in the making. The filling balances nuttiness with a delicate sweetness. *144 East Broadway at Pike St (212-566-6933). Tangyuan: \$3.*

XO Kitchen Cheap and cheerful, this Hong Kong diner's traditional menu items are consistently reliable, and the peanut-filled tangyuan here is no exception. *148 Hester St between Bowery and Elizabeth St (212-965-8645). Tangyuan: \$1.95.*

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