



The Dong family in the living room of their one-bedroom apartment in Beijing, China, with a week's worth of food. Seated by the table are Dong Li, 39, and his mother, Zhang Liying, 58, who eats with them a few times a week. Behind them stand Li's wife, Guo Yongmei, 38, and their son, Dong Yan, 13. Cooking method: gas stove. Food preservation: refrigerator-freezer. Favorite food—Dong Yan: *yuxiang rousi*—fried shredded pork with sweet and sour sauce.

On the Cusp

ONE WEEK'S FOOD IN JULY

Grains & Other Starchy Foods: \$6.52

Xiaozhan rice (a type of rice grown in China), 11 lb; white bread, 2 loaves; French bread, 2 baguettes.

Dairy: \$26.29

Bright yogurt, plain, 2.1 qt; Bright milk, whole, 1.1 qt; Hågan-Dazs ice cream, assorted flavors, 11.4 oz; butter, unsalted, 7.1 oz; Hågan-Dazs vanilla ice cream, 5.5 oz; Hågan-Dazs vanilla almond ice cream, 3 oz.

Meat, Fish & Eggs: \$26.97

Flatfish, 3 lb; beef flank, 2.4 lb; pigs feet, 1.8 lb; beef shank, 1.3 lb; chicken wings, 1.3 lb; eggs, 9; beef, marinated in soy sauce, 1 lb; salmon, fresh, 9.8 oz; pigs elbows, 8.6 oz; sausage links, 7 oz; sirloin steak, 5.3 oz.

Fruits, Vegetables & Nuts: \$16.45

Cantaloupe, 6 lb; oranges, 4.2 lb; firecracker fruit (sweet-flavored cactus fruit), 2.3 lb; lemons, 1.5 lb; plums, 1.1 lb; tomatoes, 2.4 lb; cucumbers, 2.3 lb; cauliflower, 1 head; celery, 1.4 lb; carrots, 1 lb; taro, 13.8 oz; cherry tomatoes, 13.4 oz; long beans, 10.6 oz; white onions, 10.6 oz; shitake mushrooms, dried, 8.8 oz; shitake mushrooms, fresh, 5.6 oz; black fungus (agaric), 3.5 oz.

Condiments: \$17.26

Luhua peanut oil, 1.1 qt; Hijo Blanca olive oil, 16.9 fl oz; soy bean juice, 16.9 fl oz; orange jam, 12 oz; hot pepper sauce, 9.7 oz; salad dressing, 7.1 oz; white sugar, 7.1 oz; Maxwell House coffee creamer, 6.7 oz; sesame oil, 6.8 fl oz; BB sweet hot sauce, 5.6 oz; citron day lily, 5.3 oz; dried flower bud is used for flavoring; honey, 5.3 oz; vinegar, 5.3 fl oz, eaten with

boiled dumplings; pepper paste, 3.5 oz; sour cowpea (black-eyed peas), preserved, 3.5 oz; seafood sauce, 3.4 fl oz; Knorr chicken-flavored MSG, 1.8 oz; MSG, 1.8 oz; salt, 1.8 oz; curry powder, 0.4 oz.

Snacks & Desserts: \$17.70

Snack chips, 7 bags; Ferrero Rocher chocolates, 1.41 oz; Xylitol gum, 1 bottle; Dove chocolate, 8.5 oz; Xylitol blueberry gum, 3 pk; Xylitol gum, 3 pk.

Prepared Food: \$6.12

Sushi rolls, packaged, 1.1 lb; eel strips, baked, 8.2 oz; Knorr chicken bouillon, 0.7 oz.

Fast Food: \$9.17

KFC: 2 chicken hamburgers, 2 chicken burritos; 4 Coca-Cola; 2 pkgs french fries.

Beverages: \$27.95

Grapefruit juice, 2.1 gal; Asahi beer, 6 12-fl-oz cans; Bright orange juice, 2.1 qt; Tongyi orange juice drink, 2.1 qt; Coca-Cola, 3 12-fl-oz cans; Great Wall dry red wine, 25.4 fl oz; diet Coca-Cola, 12 fl oz; Jinliu rice wine, 8.5 fl oz; Nescafe instant coffee, 3.5 oz; tap water, boiled for drinking and cooking.

Miscellaneous: \$0.63

Zhongnanhai cigarettes, 1 pk.

Food Expenditure for One Week: 1,233.76 yuan/\$155.06 USD

When Dong Li hears that teenagers are eating deep-fried starfish whole at Beijing's newly hip downtown street stalls, the onetime seaside resident howls with disbelief. "Really?" he says. "All of it—not just the inside? That's funny!" That there are trendy downtown street stalls at all is a telling sign of just how much—and how fast—China's capital city has changed. Travelers who last visited Beijing as recently as the late 1990s wouldn't recognize the place.

STEPPING FROM THE BLEAK CONCRETE STAIRWELL of a nondescript, government-issue lowrise into the Dong family's apartment is a bit of a cultural jolt. As is the custom, we take our shoes off at the door, but traditional China ends there. Using magazine photographs, cheap labor, and an artistic flair, Guo Yongmei has transformed her family's small one-bedroom apartment in ways that might make her old Chinese great-grandmothers fall off their *dengzi* [stools]: creamy lavender walls, built-in closets and cupboards, a parquet floor, modern furniture—and a tricked-out galley kitchen where Xiaozhan rice from outside Tianjin coexists peacefully with French baguettes and Maxwell House coffee creamer.

When he was a child on the Bohai Sea, near the port city of Yantai in Shandong Province, Dong Li explains, "We ate starfish at the seaside. My aunt would scoop out the inside and cook it with fish." "If you saw it being sold on the street whole, and deep-fried, would you eat it?" I ask. "No, no" he says, laughing. I tell him about the teenage girls we'd seen eating deep-fried scorpions-on-a-stick for the first time, on West Dongsi Street, within a few blocks of Tiananmen Square. They said they had read in a fashion magazine that eating this was good for their complexion. The saying goes that the Chinese will eat "everything with four legs except a table and everything with two wings except an airplane." Although the Chinese in the North would say this is only true of people in the South, those in the South would say with good humor that it's pretty much true of themselves. Anyone from outside China would say it seems to be true of everyone.

Dong Li and Guo Yongmei are part of the new breed of Beijinger, moving into China's upwardly mobile and aspiring-to-be middle class. Although the increase in disposable income available to each individual is certainly a factor in upward mobility, there is also

a palpable desire to express that individuality as well—and a desire to mold one's life oneself, rather than live a life prescribed by centuries of culture and tradition. (Within certain parameters, of course. The central government has loosened its grip on the daily lives of its people, but still watches them carefully.)

The Dongs' last apartment could more adequately be described as a compartment. They lived in a *hutong*—one of the many centuries-old warrens of family rooms that are arranged around a quadrangle and linked by a tangle of narrow alleyways. Today, they're being systematically razed to make room for shiny new office buildings and skyscrapers to accommodate the growing population that lives and works in Beijing. "I was looking forward to a change," says Guo Yongmei about her new digs. She and Dong Li were interested in creating a spacious environment of the sort that wasn't available when they were living in their small *hutong*. Dong Li, who works for the Beijing municipal government in the basement of the city's tallest skyscraper—the Jing Guang Center—and Guo Yongmei, who is a bookkeeper, live in Beijing's Chaoyang District with their only child, Dong Yan, 13, a quiet, studious boy. Like most children born after China initiated its one-child policy, he gets the undivided attention of his parents and grandparents (just as 6-year-old Cui Yuqi does, in rural Beijing Province [p. 90]).

HYPERSPACE CHINOIS

The Dongs, like most urban Chinese, enjoy a combination of Western fast food, international cuisine, and traditional Chinese food. "We like to shop at Carrefour," says Guo Yongmei, referring to the French hypermarket chain. "It's close to us, but too crowded on the weekends." So today they're shopping at the Japanese hypermarket Ito Yokado. "It's just the same," Guo Yongmei says, "but normally not as crowded." She doesn't shop much at the smaller markets anymore because they lack variety, but also, because she likes to see the international brands that are now flowing into the country, and stocking the shelves like never before. Although regional markets still serve the bulk of the country, the multinationals like Carrefour and Walmart (and the Chinese conglomerates like WuMart) have edged out the smaller markets in the cities, where individuals' purchasing power is greatest. They are the urban shopper's choice in China's biggest cities.

Ito Yokado is jammed when we go there with the Dongs. "This

isn't crowded?" I ask our translator, Angela Yu, who asks Guo Yongmei. Guo Yongmei shrugs and laughs. "Not really," she says. The noise level calls to mind a football stadium in overtime. We walk behind Dong Li, who has his shopping cart to carve a path through the masses to the seafood counter. To a foreign visitor, it's immediately apparent that the multinational hypermarkets have tailored their stores to Chinese tastes. The seafood counter turns out to be an aquarium-like fish and seafood emporium much like those found in the outdoor markets in many Chinese cities. There are swimming fish, shellfish, slithery eels, fish on ice, cases of live crabs, and frozen fish pieces. Guo Yongmei and Dong Li make their choices together, and send Dong Yan for this and that among the 1,000-year-old eggs, tea eggs, rows and rows of chips, extruded shrimp-and-vegetable puffs, frozen dumplings, fresh dumplings, vegetables, fruits, and sample tastings in every aisle. The enormous number of people working in the store almost equals the enormous number of people shopping there.

TRADITION TRANSITION

"Thirty years ago," says Dong Li, there was very little food. "Now there is a lot, and it tastes better." He and Guo Yongmei eat out at restaurants once a week or so, but even then they mostly go to Chinese restaurants. Dong Yan is more apt to want Western fast food. "There is a McDonald's near my school," he says. "I go with my friends." He eats there a couple of times a week—more often if he can. Does he eat differently than his parents? "I like more sweet foods that my parents don't really like." "He's growing up differently than I did," says his father. And it's clear from his voice that Dong Li's happy about it. He's hoping that his son grows up to be a linguist, so that he can travel and study in different countries. At 13, Dong Yan is not inclined to commit to his future.

When Dong Li's mother, Zhang Liying, stops by for a visit, we ask her what she thinks about her son's modern apartment. "It's not really to my taste," she says. "There is nothing here that is familiar." But she smiles as she says this. Zhang Liying, who retired ten years ago from an electronics factory, has cared for her only grandson since he was a baby and she will be in the photograph with her son's family. Is there anything traditional that she would like to bring over, to put in the picture? She brings a Chinese *huoguo* (a hotpot), which she uses to cook thinly sliced meats, fish balls, and fresh vegetables. Her modern daughter-in-law doesn't have one.

CHINA

- Population: 1,298,847,624
- Population of Metro Beijing: 14,230,000
- Area in square miles: 3,704,427 (slightly smaller than entire US)
- Population density per square mile: 331
- Urban population: 38%
- Life expectancy, male/female: 70/73 years
- Fertility rate (births per woman): 1.8
- Literacy rate, male/female, 15 years and older: 95/87%
- Caloric intake available daily per person: 2,951 calories
- Annual alcohol consumption per person (alcohol content only): 5.5 quarts
- GDP per person in PPP \$ (Purchasing Power Parity: an adjustment for what equivalent local goods would cost in the U.S.): \$4,580
- Total annual health expenditure per person in \$ and as a percent of GDP: \$49/5.5
- Overweight population, male/female: 28/23%
- Obese population, male/female: 1/1.5%
- Percent of population, age 20 and older, with diabetes: 2.4
- Available supply of sugar and sweeteners per person per year: 16 pounds
- Meat consumption per person per year: 115 pounds
- Number of McDonald's / KFC restaurants in 2004: 600+/1200
- Big Mac price: \$1.26
- Cigarette consumption per person per year: 1,791
- Percent of population, male/female, 18 and older that smokes: 59/4
- Percent of population living on less than \$2 a day: 47
- Number of days of curing, after which a "1000-year-old egg" is most delectable: 100

FIELD NOTE

One day, our son Josh, who is fluent in Mandarin, accompanied me on a gastronomic tour to the east of Tiananmen Square. Bypassing the more aggressive food vendors of Wangfujing Street, we headed for a mellow line of stalls with an incredible variety of food: sea horses, snakes, and live scorpions on skewers; deep-fried silkworm pupae, crickets, and scorpions; fledgling quail, chicken hearts, goat kidneys, and private parts labeled "goat cock and testicles"; clam's feet, frog's legs, and several kinds of squid; fish balls and meat balls; shiitake mushroom caps and hot potato-starch cubes; goat-head and goat-organ soup (both smelled delicious). We opted for potato-starch cubes (gluey and dull), chopped lamb sandwiches (terrific), Sichuan gelatinous dessert (Jello-like cubes made from rice starch, served with sweet syrup), and—most interesting—deep-fried starfish on a stick.

We barraged the stall workers with questions about how to eat the starfish. Should we eat the whole thing? Just the insides? With hot sauce? They pled ignorance—incredibly, the cooks didn't know how to eat their own food, because it came from a different region. So we copied the way everyone else was eating the six-inch creatures: the whole thing, from star tips to center, with a splash of hot sauce. It was crunchy and tasteless—I could only get down two limbs and a bit of the body. All the other customers seemed to be enjoying their deep-fried echinoderms on a stick, but most of ours ended up in the trash. Rating: less than half a star (p. 287).

On our last night in Beijing, we ate with the Dongs. Mr. Dong told us about his childhood visits to the coast in the summer, where he roamed the beaches. "Did you eat starfish?" I asked. "Of course," he replied. "But the only edible part is the center underside. You scoop it out—the rest is terrible." — Peter



FAMILY RECIPE

Dong Family's Pigskin Jelly

- 1 lb fresh pigskin, hair scraped off
- 1 scallion, cut into 6–7 pieces
- 1 oz ginger, peeled, cut into 3–4 pieces
- 3–4 cloves garlic, whole
- 1/2 oz Sichuan peppercorns (Asian prickly ash), whole
- 1 whole star anise, broken into 4–5 pieces
- 2 t Chinese cooking wine
- 1 t vinegar
- salt
- soy sauce

- Put pigskin in water to cover and bring to boil for short time to soften.
- Remove pigskin and cut into 1–2" strips to facilitate handling. Combine pigskin, scallion, ginger, 2 cloves garlic, Sichuan peppercorns, star anise, and Chinese cooking wine. Add water to cover and bring to medium boil.
- When water boils, add salt and soy sauce to taste. Continue to boil until pigskin is extremely tender.
- Remove all condiments and spices with chopsticks, but leave pigskin in water. Remove from heat; when cool, store in refrigerator.
- When ready to eat, take cooled pigskin from water and cut into bite-size pieces. Serve mixed with vinegar, 2 cloves mashed garlic, and salt and soy sauce to taste.



The Cui family of Weitaiwu village, Beijing Province, in their living room with a week's worth of food. Cui Haiwang, 33, and Li Jinxian, 31, stand with their son, Cui Yuqi, 6, Haiwang's mother, Wu Xianglian, 61, and father, Cui Lianyou, 59, and Haiwang's grandmother, Cui Wu, 79. Cooking methods: gas burner, coal stove. Food preservation: refrigerator-freezer. Favorite foods—Cui Yuqi: fish. Li Jinxian: vegetables. Wu Xianglian: "anything." Cui Wu: "everything."

Winds of Change

ONE WEEK'S FOOD IN JULY

Grains & Other Starchy Foods: \$3.98**

Wheat flour, 23.2 lb; white rice, 6.6 lb; cornmeal, 2.2 lb; millet, 2.2 lb; potatoes,* 2.2 lb.

Dairy: \$1.26

Milk, whole, 2.1 qt.

Meat, Fish & Eggs: \$23.27

Lamb, 11 lb; eggs, 44; pork, 6.7 lb; chicken, 4.4 lb.

Fruits, Vegetables & Nuts: \$11.84**

Watermelons, 18.3 lb; muskmelons (cantaloupe), 12 lb; white peaches, 6.6 lb; black grapes, 3.3 lb; green apples, 3.3 lb; plums, 3.3 lb; pears, 1.1 lb; cucumbers,* 15.5 lb; green beans, 5.5 lb; eggplant, 4.4 lb; tofu, 4.4 lb; cabbage, 2 heads; cauliflower, 1 head; chives,* 3.3 lb; tomatoes, 3.3 lb; zucchini,* 3.3 lb; celery, 2.2 lb; garlic, 2.2 lb; green peppers, 2.2 lb; corn,* 5 ears; Weixi soy milk powder, 1.2 lb; carrots, 1.1 lb; black fungus (agaric), 8.8 oz; green onions,* 8.8 oz.

Condiments: \$5.57

Peanut oil, 2.8 lb; soy sauce, 2.1 fl oz; sesame oil, 11.8 fl oz; ginger, 1.1 lb; Longfei vinegar, 1.1 lb; salt, 1.1 lb; white sugar,

8.8 oz; cilantro (also called Chinese parsley), 1 bunch; white pepper, 1.8 oz; yeast, 1.4 oz; five-spice powder, 0.4 oz; MSG, 0.4 oz; Sichuan peppercorns (Asian prickly ash), 0.4 oz; star anise, 0.2 oz.

Prepared Food: \$0.09

Chicken bouillon, 1.8 oz.

Beverages: \$6.73

Yanjing beer, 12 21.3-fl-oz bottles; Coca-Cola, 2.1 qt; Sprite, 2.1 qt; rice wine, 1.1 lb; jasmine tea, 5.3 oz; water for drinking and cooking, pumped from family well.

Miscellaneous: \$4.53

Hongmei cigarettes, 10 pks.

* Homegrown

Food Expenditure for One Week:

455.25 yuan/\$57.27

**Total value of homegrown foods, if purchased locally: \$1.96

"Chi fan le ma?" One farmer might say to another when they meet on the street. "Have you eaten?" "Chi bao le," his friend replies. "I'm full." Food has traditionally played such a central role in Chinese life that it is often invoked even in day-to-day greetings.

ON THE HALF-MILE WALK FROM HOME to his cornfield, Cui Lianyou greets neighbors who are working, lounging, eating, and visiting along the single concrete road in Weitaiwu, a rural village 60 miles east of Beijing. He turns down a small path, past the new chemical fertilizer plant, and hops onto one of the narrow, raised ridges of earth that separate the villagers' fields from one another. After a short distance, he steps into his own densely planted cornfield—tall now with plump yellow ears that will soon be ready for picking—and professes surprise that his neighbor's corn is just as tall. "They didn't plant until six or seven days after I did," he says. Grandfather Cui also grows barley, wheat, soybeans, and peanuts, depending on the season. Land assignments—made at the local government level—are temporary. In the government's most recent allocation, the six members of the Cui family were awarded half a *mu* each, for a total of three *mu* (slightly more than half an acre). Private ownership of land by Chinese citizens is still a foreign concept, though the government appears to realize that its citizens might invest more in improving the land if they had more than tenuous ties to it. The Cuis and their fellow villagers have been assigned more land at other times, but now large peach orchards blanket the area that Grandfather Cui and his neighbors used to farm collectively. The local government benefits financially, and some of that money trickles down into public works. Even five years ago all the roads near the Cui's home were dirt, and that's no longer true.

Grandfather Cui's wife, Wu Xianglian, and their daughter-in-law Li Jinxian grow tomatoes, cabbage, squash, and cucumbers in their courtyard kitchen garden, and grapes on a trellis, but despite the family's plots of land, they manage to grow only about 10 percent of what they need all year. The rest of their food is purchased with money earned by Li Jinxian's husband, Cui Haiwang, who is a printing press repairman working out of Beijing. He would prefer to stay with his family in the village, but there are no jobs at

which he can earn enough to support them. He comes home on the weekends. Li Jinxian sometimes works at a nearby factory that makes clothing for Japan and the United States. She is paid 20 yuan (\$2.50 USD) for a ten-hour workday and dislikes the job.

The family considers itself poor in comparison with the rest of their village, but they still have some of the amenities that disposable income brings—a TV, a stereo system, a phone—and their family compound has been refurbished within the last two years.

The Cuis, like most of the Chinese population, let nothing go to waste. Cornhusks are put to good use and fed to the three sheep in their shed. They're also fed a portion of the corn crop. The trio was purchased as lambs, and when full grown will be sold to the local butcher to provide the family with extra income. Grandfather Cui's wife will also occasionally weave corn leaves into cushiony seats for the ground outside—each cushion takes two hours to complete and lasts through a couple of rainy seasons. Her chickens in the courtyard will be eaten during the Chinese New Year celebration, or sooner if they stop producing eggs. But they don't raise pigs. Grandfather Cui says, "Pigs are too expensive to raise, because they require scraps and grain, not just garden greens." They have no scraps, he says, except for what they feed to Little White, the cat napping near the bedroom his 6-year-old grandson, Cui Yuqi, shares with his parents. "That's a real country cat," says Grandfather Cui. "It gets a lot of mice. If you go to Beijing, those cats don't know anything about catching mice."

Though more and more urban Chinese are embracing the cash economy, the traditional style of bartering goods and services still prevails in China's rural villages. The Cuis trade a portion of their harvested peanuts for peanut oil. When they dry some of their corn and have it milled into cornmeal, the local miller takes part of it as payment. They bring their wheat to a noodle maker in the village who gives them noodles in trade. It costs them 110 pounds of wheat and five yuan (62 cents. USD) to get 88 pounds of noodles back. They don't climb their five persimmon trees to pick the ripened fruit; instead, men come to do the harvesting, in exchange for a percentage of the fruit. "My grandson and I like to watch them jump from one treetop to the other," says Grandfather Cui. The entertainment is free of charge.

Does Grandfather Cui have a favorite food? "Pork," he says. Then, "No, pork and lamb. And beef." Finally, he summarizes:

"Meat! I like meat!" His wife laughs at him as she passes by on her way to another of her many household tasks—"There's nothing we won't eat," she retorts, and he agrees. "Back in the Cultural Revolution, we ate anything we could find. We dug up everything," says Grandfather Cui, "even wild grass. And if food fell on the ground, it didn't matter—just pick it up, brush it off, and eat it. We didn't waste anything!"

Grandfather Cui is concerned with what he sees as the wasteful ways of China's youngest generation. "Kids today who go and order giant tables of food and don't finish it all—that really upsets me. And little kids going to school, for breakfast they buy *you tiao* [a strip of fried dough]. They take a few bites and then throw the rest away. It's just not right. Our grandson doesn't do that," he says. Grandfather Cui thinks he knows where that habit comes from. "They have a lot of money," he says, "and they're not being taught well. In their minds a little waste is nothing."

The desire of typical rural Chinese to eat only traditional foods is changing with Cui Yuqi's generation. "For his birthday, we buy him foods he wants [but] we don't eat, like butter and cake," says Grandfather Cui, who has never eaten anything but food prepared in the Chinese manner by his mother and his wife. No one in the family has ever tasted cheese. Cui Yuqi likes packaged snacks and candy, and although he has never had Western fast food, he's looking forward to trying some. His mother says that she too would try it, but says so apprehensively. His grandparents want no part of it, even if it were affordable. They never eat food outside their home. "It's very expensive," says Li Jinxian. "We aren't in that kind of circumstance."

Though her husband works out of Beijing, the rest of the family has visited the massive city only once—it's geographically close, but beyond their reach financially. The big city overwhelmed the older folks, but "Cui Yuqi was fascinated," says his mother. She's sure he'll go there again. Grandfather Cui doesn't care to ever go back.

Wu Xianglian harvested the last of her tomatoes this morning and is chopping them up for her family's lunch. She cooks *lao bing*, a wheat-flour dough that flakes and puffs when dropped into hot peanut oil, and stir-fries tender bok choy. As she moves between the small detached and semi-detached rooms that form her family compound—the traditional living arrangement in many Chinese villages—daughter-in-law Li Jinxian sets out white rice and *baozi*.

RURAL CHINA

- Rural population (people/households): 800,000,000/245,000,000
- Population of Weitaiwu village: 450 (est.)
- Percent of laborers in China engaged in agricultural work: 50
- Population with access to safe water in rural/urban areas: 68/92%
- Population with access to safe sanitation in rural/urban areas: 29/69%
- Ratio of percentage of rural to urban population that is overweight: 1:2.3
- Ratio of rural to urban electricity use per person: 1:3.3
- Ratio of rural to urban household consumption: 1:3.5
- Ratio of suicide rates in rural to urban areas: 4:1
- Number of casualties in rural China resulting from 420 protests of angry farmers who surrounded local government buildings in the first half of 1998: 7,400
- Average per person income, rural/urban (in US \$): 434/1,029
- Number of refrigerators per 100 families (rural/urban): 12/80
- Percent of rural residential energy consumption that comes from noncommercial sources like straw, paper, dung: 57
- Ratio of Internet users in rural/urban areas: 1:100
- Rank of rat poison as murder weapon of choice in rural areas: No. 1

FAMILY RECIPE

Li Jinxian's Braised Lamb Meatballs

1 oz onion, chopped
 1 oz ginger, coarsely chopped
 2 pinches Asian five-spice powder
 salt, to taste
 2 lb lamb, minced or ground
 1 egg
 6 cups water
 2 oz cilantro (also called Chinese parsley),
 cut in approx. 1/2" pieces
 2 pinches chicken bouillon powder
 1/2 t white pepper
 sesame oil and vinegar, to taste

- With chopsticks, work chopped onion, ginger, five-spice powder, and salt into lamb; then add egg and knead until ingredients are thoroughly mixed.
- Boil water. Form lamb mixture into 1" balls, then place into boiling water; keep lamb balls as separate as possible so they don't stick together. Return water to simmer and cook for 15 minutes.
- Add cilantro, bouillon, white pepper, sesame oil, and vinegar. Mix and serve.

Shopping for the week's worth of food in the family portrait, Li Jinxian and Cui Haiwang buy chicken, lamb, and pork at the Luckybird Meat Store No. E0001 (*above right*) in the market town nearest their small village. Visiting a fruit vendor in another nearby town, they sniff the plums (*bottom right*) to find the ripest, sweetest fruit.



FIELD NOTE

In contrast to the Dongs in central Beijing (p. 74), who did all their grocery shopping at a huge supermarket, the Cuis, outside the city's periphery—two hours east and within sight of the Great Wall—bought their food from stalls in a traditional outdoor market. The sole exception was a big butcher shop, where the butcher totaled their purchase by scratching out the math with her knife on the well-worn wooden counter.

On the way to the market with the Cuis, we passed an improvised stand from which a neighboring family sold soybean milk, *youbing* (puffy, deep-fried dough), and a few other inexpensive fried or steamed foods to early-morning workers. The Cuis passed it by: too pricey. Instead, they stocked up at the market with melons, grapes, and bananas from a vendor whom they knew well. Sniffing and closely examining everything they purchased, they got apples, plums, tomatoes, green onions, black fungus, and other fresh food at several other stands. Three hours later, when we lugged back all the food, the neighbors had brought the benches inside—their makeshift breakfast stand was closed for the day.

The Cuis were doing well in their newly refurbished house, but they remembered hard times past. Later that day, over a sumptuous lunch of homemade steamed pork buns, steamed chicken, tomatoes, green pepper-beef, beef with cauliflower, and rice, we listened to their stories about living and eating during the Cultural Revolution. Like so many other families, the Cuis had been hungry for years and now were thankful for their relative prosperity.

— Peter

THE CHINA STUDY

Until recently, the rural Chinese diet consisted mainly of a wide variety of low-fat, plant-based foods that are rich in antioxidant micronutrients, complex carbohydrates, and dietary fiber. Land-animal meats, mostly pork and chicken, were mainly eaten on holidays. During the early 1980s, researchers surveyed diets and diseases in 130 representative rural villages and found that the consumption of plant-based foods was associated with fewer Western-culture diseases (heart disease, diabetes, certain cancers).

By contrast, a relatively small increase in the consumption of animal-based foods led to a gradual rise in the clinical conditions that characterize Western-culture diseases. In conjunction with other research, studies of the unique diet and health associations in rural China strongly support the idea that the most profound and comprehensive health benefits of food are obtained by consuming many different types of whole vegetables, fruits, and cereal grains.

— T. Colin Campbell, Cornell University,
author of *The China Study*

Breakfast at the Cuis' includes fresh eggs from the family hens (*bottom right*) and hot *mian tiao* (noodles) with a little cooked spinach and MSG. The round chopping block is made from a slice of tree trunk, a common practice in China. In the courtyard that morning, Li Jinxian husks corn (*above right*) from their cornfield under the watchful eye of Great-grandmother Cui Wu. The family will eat some of the corn and trade the rest; the husks go to the sheep. Two hours later, lunch is ready. Six-year-old Cui Yuqi (*left*) reaches for a piece of smoked chicken in the family's kitchen house. Other foods on the table include (clockwise from bottom) cauliflower and beef; pig's feet; dried tofu curd and cucumber; cucumber and beef; steamed egg-white custard; stir-fried green peppers and beef. The tomatoes in the center were picked from their kitchen that morning.



fish-size pork-and-vegetable-stuffed steamed buns. Her son is holed up in the bedroom, practicing basic Chinese character-writing for homework and producing drawings that he carries around from time to time to show the older Cuis. When Cui Yuqi approaches anyone in the family to explain the animals in one of his works of art or the color of the sky over the distant mountains in another, everyone stops their work to take a look.

Children in Cui Yuqi's generation, one of single-child families created by the Chinese government's adoption of a one-child-per-couple policy 25 years ago, are guaranteed the undivided attention of at least two family members—the parents—and four other highly interested parties—the grandparents. The policy has been around long enough that the latest generation of grandparents, who had only one child, now has only one grandchild. These Chinese families pay much attention to their sole descendant, channeling whatever resources they have toward the child's happiness and well-being. Although it's apparent that some of these only children have learned to take advantage of the situation they find themselves in by government decree, Cui Yuqi doesn't seem to be trying to profit from his position in the catbird seat. It will be interesting, though, to see what happens in another generation or two, when this formerly collectivized country is swarming with what the Chinese commonly call *xiao huangdi*—little emperors.

Great-grandmother Cui Wu leans heavily on her cane and steps carefully from her room at the back of the compound, moving toward the dining room through the light mist of rain that has begun to fall. Her husband died many years ago, and she has always lived with her son's family—customary in rural China. She's a bit deaf and had a mild stroke four years ago, but has a droll sense of humor that surfaces when we talk about her childhood. She says of her traditional Chinese clothing of that time, "It was hard to make, and even harder to wear." When she married, she says, like others her age she dropped her given name—called her *gui ming*, or "inner chamber name"—the name young girls were called only within their home, before they were married. Today she's known only by her husband's family name, Cui, and her family name, Wu, and no longer remembers what she was called as a girl.

Grandmother Wu puts the chopsticks on the table and four generations of the family sit down to eat—except that Cui Yuqi says he isn't hungry. "Too much soy milk," suggests his grand-

father. "He doesn't like vegetables," says his grandmother.

China has been called a vegetable civilization. Wu Xianglian sees the boy's refusal to eat vegetables as a bit of a warning shot across the bow of Chinese culture. His mother coaxes him to the table, and the boy decides that he is hungry after all. He reaches for the smoked chicken. His grandmother offers him the bok choy.

THE PRICE OF BIG RICE

"Never could we have imagined that we would ever have this much to eat," says Grandfather Cui, thinking back to his childhood, here in this same rural village. "Back then, we ate cornmeal and mixed grains. Now we have pure grains, and they're affordable." "When I was young," says his mother—Great-grandmother Cui Wu—"we had potatoes—and potatoes." "We relied completely on the land," says Grandfather Cui. "If there was no rain, we were hungry. There was no water at the fields. We had to carry water where it was needed."

Cornmeal figures prominently in many rural Chinese families' early modern history. Corn came to Asia after it was discovered in the Americas, and this was the Cuis' most important grain, along with millet, known locally as *small rice*—which is drought tolerant. It wasn't until after the end of the Cultural Revolution that white rice—colloquially called *big rice*—became an affordable staple for most Chinese families. Today, half the country's white rice is grown along central China's middle and lower Yangtze River basin.

How long have the Cuis been eating big rice? "In the 1960s, it was too expensive," says Grandmother Wu. "We had very little." "Some people could buy big rice then," says Grandfather Cui, "but that was during a difficult time—some people had money to buy it, but no one dared." During the Cultural Revolution, private enterprise was extinguished, farming became collectivized, and the Chinese people were swept up into regional groups of workers under state control. Grandfather Cui's memory of the food during that time is one largely shared by his and his mother's generation: "There wasn't much difference between the quality of food before and during the Cultural Revolution. Both were bad. It has gotten much better."

The Cui family bears no responsibility for the text in this chapter. It is based solely on observation. All information about the government was supplied by other sources.

WOK THIS WAY

I've spent several years traveling this massive country, and almost every mile of the way was, among other things, a foodie's dream. Street foods and cheap eats are my favorite. There's savory Xinjiang lamb shashlik, Shaanxi seasoned pork in a steamed bun (so good that the first time I had one, I walked a mile back to have a second), spicy Sichuan wontons in red oil, thick Shanxi knife-shaved noodles with a tad of aged vinegar...okay, I should stop before I get any hungrier. These treats are all quite well known (in country), but everywhere from the largest city to the smallest town has its own specialties, finding them just takes the patience to eat your way through the millions of restaurants, stands, and vendors China has to offer.

Here are the rules: 1) Forget about cleanliness, since pretty much any food outlet that doesn't cost a fortune will have substandard sanitation. Find comfort in the fact that a billion people eat at places like this every day, but it isn't solving the problem of overpopulation. 2) Don't spend a lot of money, because a day of palatial bliss shouldn't cost more than \$3 USD. 3) Look for the universal indicator of good chow—that is, if it's feeding time, search for places where throngs of people are scarfing it up; otherwise, you really need someone familiar with the local area. If you're lucky enough to know/meet someone who can speak more than a single word of English (that word being "hello"), ask them.

Truthfully, some things (read: dog meat) are difficult to get used to, but with enough curiosity and persistence, you, too, will develop cravings for the likes of stinky tofu and pig's blood soup. They're just so... delicious. So head for China with an open mind and an empty stomach, and take with you one more rule: 4) Don't cower in the corner of one of China's growing number of McDonald's.

— Josh D'Aluisio-Guerreni, Beijing