

## 06 FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD!

What is the one thing that always perks everybody up on a trip? Why, food, of course! Food rules the world! Our China trip was a huge smorgasbord of gastronomic adventures and pleasures. First and foremost was the way our food was often served in bowls resting on a rotating carousel in the center of the table, with diners serving themselves from the dishes they chose. This was particularly fortuitous for picky eaters. We had a few of those, and we also had a number of what my mother would call “a good eater.” The trouble is that the “good eaters” at our table sometimes helped themselves so generously that the rest of us would start to throw some rather pointed eye daggers their way. After several days of this, someone in our group started a petition requesting our guide to assign those “good eaters” to their own tables. Frankly, I thought that was a little rude, and I am sure Miss Manners would think the same, so I did not sign. I never found out what happened to the petition, but I noticed that any time the level of food left in a bowl in the center of the table slipped below the quarter mark, a hovering server would whisk it away and replace it with a full bowl. Sometimes I wondered what they thought of fat Americans who could stuff more food down their gullets in one day than the Chinese person would do in a week!



But I do think that part of the enjoyment of eating all the strange foods we tried in China was being able to see the cornucopia of largesse rotating in front of us enticingly as we selected delicacies.



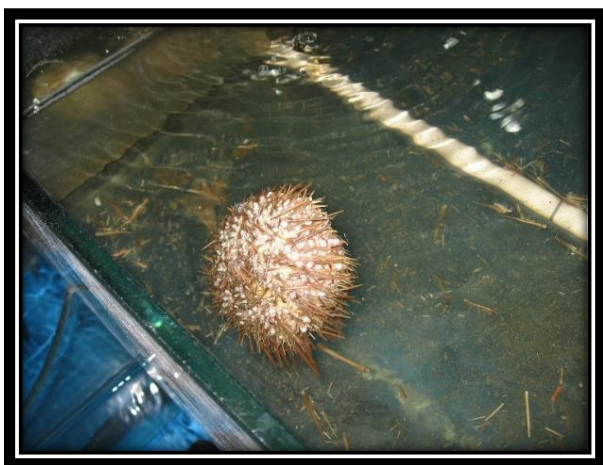
Another immeasurable gastronomic delight was ambling through food markets, especially ones like the massive Temple Street Night Market in Hong Kong and the Shuang'an night market in Beijing. Our guide allowed us to spend hours roaming through these markets. It is true she did prefer we stay with her, so she would not have to try to corral her ducklings in narrow crowded streets. Many of us stayed with her just to learn about the strange foods that were on display, like the red globby thing here that provided so many hours of squabbling between me and Myrtle.

Our guide said it was Guiling Gao, Turtle Shell Jelly. Myrtle insisted it was plain old Blood Sausage that you make with congealed pig's blood. Thankfully Myrtle limited the scope of her argumentative superpowers to the enjoyment of my little ears, and I was spared the indignity of trying to save face for her and me in front of everybody. Just between you and me, dear reader, I do sometimes get really, really tired of having to do that!

On our first night in Beijing our guide informed us we would be treated to a special meal in a famous seafood restaurant. To enter the restaurant, you walked between huge tanks of seafood, presumably examples of what we would be eating. Myrtle and I were near the end of our little procession of ten, and before we entered the "tunnel of enlightenment," a man in our group let out an undignified hoot and sort of bellowed "By Jove, will you look at that?! We will be eating priapulida, penis fish!" Well, I tell you dear reader, that brought us all to swift attention, and in a flash there was a crowd looking where he pointed. "Eew!" squealed a female in our group, turning away in disgust and sort of gagging. Our poor guide tried her best to herd us into the restaurant to our table, and I saw her trying to hide her red face behind her scarf.

At the table she tried to assure us that we would not be eating the food on display at the entrance. But you know what, dear reader? I am pretty sure we did eat that. Among the dishes that appeared on our carousel, there were some fried crispy things that resembled Cheetos exactly. I even touched one to see if it left that tell-tale orange residue on my finger. It did not. I saw our "good eaters" helping themselves generously and freezing at the first bite with an alarmed look on their faces. The bellower had gotten into a disgusting and detailed discussion about the benefits of eating priapulida to boost the male libido, and I noticed his male listeners were quietly taking a few extra servings. I wondered who or what they expected their priapic outlet to be on this trip. Maybe pandas? Tee Hee.

Our poor guide must have been ruing her decision to treat us to a meal famous for Chinese epicures. I did my best to tamp down my emergent queasiness as I determined I must try everything on offer. I really have no idea exactly what I ate, but those Cheetos things were crunchy on the outside and squashy creamy inside. I sort of swallowed mine whole and pinched my arm to take my mind off my stomach, and I shivered a bit. But I kept it down. I think we also had sea urchin - definitely custard-like - and probably sea cucumber. Most of us gamely tried many of the offerings, but it must be admitted that the only platters that had to be refilled by the servers were those that held identifiable things like shrimp and shellfish.



So that was our introduction to epicurean Chinese cuisine. Could things get any better? Ah, my friend, indeed they could. Let me tell you how much better it could get. Does hairy tofu make your mouth water? Or stinky tofu? Or chicken feet? Or fried scorpions? I was thinking it is no wonder so many of these foods are served French-fried! How about the lovely little pork testicle on the right in the left photo below? Or the cute little silkworms? “You have GOT to be kidding!” huffed Myrtle. “It’s not enough they boil the little critters to make silk, but they also French-fry them to EAT them? Ugh.”



Now stinky tofu, dear reader, does smell like old sneakers or unwashed socks, despite which detriment it is favored with a huge following of admirers in China. It is fermented tofu with a black surface, crispy outside, and soft inside. To me it tasted sort of like fried tofu, which I can tolerate. But the smell of this stinky tofu, that we could detect several blocks away in the market, quite effectively turned me off. Perversely, Myrtle insisted I take some photos of her with a forkful of that black smelly thing going into her mouth. I will be honest: that made me gag. I would much have preferred to have her popping fried scorpions into her mouth.

Hairy tofu looks exactly like its name, chunks of white tofu with a thick covering of white mold that looks like fur. It crumbles like blue cheese and tastes salty and cheesy. Like its cousin stinky tofu, it has gained an admiring following, even among non-Oriental, me being an exception. Now chicken feet was right at the top of my food gross-ometer. Here we see a frozen block of chicken feet and thawed ones ready for



sale. Our guide told us there is a protocol for eating chicken feet politely: Firmly grasp the chicken foot with chopsticks, holding the foot with toes pointing at you. Delicately bite between the joints, chewing the skin first and then sucking the cartilage between the tendons, spitting out the bones. Then eat the pad of the foot.

OK, dear reader. I hope you will try this and let me know how you fare. I got stuck at the first step because that blasted chicken foot kept leaping out of my chopsticks. Sigh.



Chicken feet seemed to be always on offer as street food in the markets. Over the course of our trip, we tried chicken feet five ways: boiled, pickled, fried, marinated in black bean sauce with red chili slices, and in chili sauce. I confess I cheated every time, because I used a fork and knife to separate the scanty meat from the feet. Crafty Myrtle was determined to best me, and she managed to use her chopsticks every time except one. That happened to be the time the feet were in that red hot sauce that makes smoke shoot out of your head. But she didn't get that far. Her

chicken foot slipped off her chopsticks and fell in a beautiful red streak right down the front of her blouse. This caused her to shriek a little, and she rushed to the bathroom to try to wash it off.

Unfortunately, her blouse was thin and the sauce quite seeped through it and attacked the skin on her chest, all with the unhappy result that Myrtle was sort of itching uncomfortably that whole long day, which, I confess, was a day-long source of enjoyment for me because of the hours of boasting I had to put up with from her, all over those chicken feet. I doubt I will ever look at a chicken foot the same way again.

As we drove and flew around the vast country of China, we learned how very different foods and customs can be in the various regions. Beijing is, of course, famous for Peking Duck, Xian for dumplings, and Chengdu for spicy food.

On one of our bus drives our guide lectured about the countryside through which we traveled. "You see all the farming fields here. These are owned by China. Before 1980 the commune system was in effect. Farmers followed orders. They could not make their own decisions. No matter how hard they worked, they got the same work points to be allotted grain at the end of the year. The 1980s reform introduced the responsibility system wherein farmers can decide what to do with the land they are responsible for. They pay the government every year by selling grain to the government. What they have left over they sell on the free market or use themselves. Farmers loved this policy. Then local governments, county governments, and other entities all started to tax the farmer, and now there are a lot of complaints from the farmers. City income is increasing 140 times faster than farming income. Recently some university students investigated a farmer's situation and wrote a big article exposing the multiple taxes and farmer's hard lives. Last year the central government decided that taxes on farming will be eliminated because industries are generating enough income. So there are no taxes on the farmer anymore. Now the land belongs to the farmers. In this province that we are driving through, Sichuan, farmers used to be so poor they would try to sell their babies. This province has rich soil. You see ducks and fishponds. They raise pigs for pork, rice, corn, bok choy, cucumbers, cabbage, potatoes, chili peppers, green beans, lettuce, and more. The rice harvest is in July and August. In this area they usually do not grow two crops of rice a year. There are also potatoes, soy, rape seeds for canola, taro, lotus, oranges, peaches, pears, and loquats. When we get to Chengdu, the capital of this province of Sichuan, you will discover how spicy their food is. I sometimes wonder if their spicy food is the reason they talk so fast. They have a

local dialect that they speak so fast it is hard for me to understand them. To me it always sounds like they are quarrelling. Chengdu is famous for its hibiscus. It is said that one of the emperors loved hibiscus and ordered them planted here. Chengdu is most famous for 'knowing how to enjoy life.' They love to play Mahjong and play it day and night for money. Maybe that spicy food keeps them going." We all laughed.

She continued. "There are more private cars in Chengdu than in most cities, and traffic during rush hour is really bad. It is a city of 9 million people. The cost of living has gone down a little, though. Ten years ago a pet dog cost \$2000. Now prices are much better. Today you must register a dog, expensive at 500 yuan a year. Tea houses are famous here. There are some really fancy ones in the hotels. Chengdu is also famous for brocades, and especially famous for Changing Faces, a unique art form of this province, like the Peking opera. Actors put layers of masks on their faces and skillfully remove a mask while dancing, and nobody can figure out how the change is made. It is a family skill taught only to boys."

Before some of us (Myrtle) could start to complain about that policy, the bus began to slow for a pit stop. Soon we were once again walking happily through a busy food and spice market, and I did not need to fret about Myrtle getting into a big argument about why girls cannot do the Changing Faces.





However, the item on the left of the bottom picture here provided me and Myrtle some quality arguing time. She insisted these blobby things were pigs' faces and I insisted they were pigs' stomachs. "Myrtle," I said patiently, "If it were a pig's face it would have to have ears." "They simply cut the ears off," she responded with triumph as she started forward. I just knew she was planning to lift that thing up and look for the ears. So I hissed, "You touch, you buy, and don't even THINK about bringing that thing into my room! Get a room of your own." Well, that stopped her. She still argued about it, though. But

do you know what, dear reader? When we went to Cambodia, we saw lots of pigs' faces for sale in the market and of course I had to draw Myrtle's attention to them. I did refrain from saying "I told you so." To tell you the truth, dear reader, while those blobby things here look quite disgusting, they really don't hold a candle to what a pig's face looks like. I can hardly wait to show it to you when I write about our Cambodia trip!



We visited several teahouses while in China, and Oh My! We all know China is famous for its tea, but I had no idea how many different teas there are! On the way to the teahouse our guide told us there are really only six distinct categories of tea: white, green, yellow, oolong, black, and post-fermented. But within those six categories there are vast numbers of varieties, based on how the tea is harvested and processed, for example with heat treatment or oxidation treatment. In the beautiful teahouse pictured here we were treated to a formal tea ceremony, which included ritual steeping, pouring, and presentation of tea

presided over by a Tea Doctor, who lectured about the different teas we were encouraged to taste. While helpers prepared the hot water and the tea, only the Tea Doctor poured the tea into our tiny cups, pouring that steaming liquid from a height of at least three feet without spilling or splashing a drop! How do those tea professionals DO that?! The tea lecture was interesting.

“There are more than 1000 kinds of tea in China. Today we will taste three.

- Jasmine Tea is black tea from the Jasmin flower.
- Oolong Tea is also called Black Dragon Tea. It is popular with ladies and girls, also for men with a big beer belly. Oolong Tea helps reduce weight, helps digestion, and helps hypertension.
- Black Tea. We are tasting Lychee Black Tea today. It is sweet and warm to the stomach.

In China we use the tall, tiny cup to smell the tea and the wide mouth cup to drink the tea. For Jasmine tea do not use boiling water because it destroys the vitamins. Use 80-degree water. After sniffing, pour into the larger cup, then roll the small cup and smell. Roll the cup on your face. Then drink to Happiness, Long Life, and Good Future in three sips.”

At one tasting Myrtle insisted she wanted to try to pour from on high. Our guide tried to discourage her because the Tea Doctors spend years perfecting their craft. After much pleading on Myrtle’s part, our guide relented and allowed Myrtle to pour the tea into her own cup with all of us standing out of the way. Myrtle started pouring, and oh my goodness, dear reader! First her steaming flow completely missed the cup. Then it found the cup but was splashing about, and finally the tea came down in a bit of a cascade and tipped the cup over! I regret to say that I could not help myself then. I hooted and giggled and clapped with everybody else, as poor Myrtle stood stunned, and two servers scrambled to clean everything up. Then I felt so sorry for Myrtle I started to sing, “For she’s a jolly good fellow,” and everybody chimed in and Myrtle found her Chutzpah again and gave the tea doctor a resounding smack on the cheek followed by her 300-watt smile. And all was well again.

Most of us bought a little tea from the shops we visited; and after her fiasco, Myrtle bought a huge bag of tea, to save face, I think. I was grateful tea is so light to carry. Even so, Myrtle made a present of her big purchase, leaving it on the bureau in lieu of a tip as we checked out of our hotel.

Throughout our travels in China we sampled many different foods, including those we already talked about: silkworms, snake soup, deep fried scorpions, pot stickers, Mongolian hot pot, lotus root raw and

fried, roasted lima beans, popped peas, persimmon cakes, fried bananas, dragon fruit. We learned how to make sticky rice balls with palm sugar in a banana leaf bowl and barley cake made in a sheepskin pouch. In Xian we participated in the famous 17-Dumpling Dinner, where the servers did indeed bring 17 different kinds of small dumplings to our dinner carousel. I counted them. By the time we had sampled seven or eight I gave up trying to make note of the ingredients, and by the time we were past ten, many of our group started to drop out with groans of “I can’t eat one more bite.” I confess, dear reader, that this gastronomic feat presented for me a gustatory marathon, and I determined right from the start that I would not rise from that table until I had tried all 17 varieties of dumpling.

And I did it! Myrtle even gave me a little cheer as I gamely chewed on the 17<sup>th</sup> dumpling. It is true that after about the twelfth one, they started to taste quite alike, and I even wondered at one point if the kitchen crew had cheated and served some reruns because nobody ever ate all 17 varieties, so what was the point of making a different one? Who knows? At any rate, I did taste all 17 varieties of dumpling, taste being the operative word. After eating about 10 whole ones, I started taking smaller and smaller bites, so that by the time I got to number 17 my bite was indeed quite bird-sized.

But my group did give me a rousing cheer, because I was indeed the only one in our group who made it through all 17 dumplings. I heard one woman say with a smirk, “I bet SHE will have a good bellyache tonight!” I thought that quite rude, truly, and I also thought it smacked of sour grapes. Oh well.

One food that I was really curious about we did not get to sample: bird spit soup from the nest of a swift. Our guide told me that particular soup is awfully expensive, and most westerners do not like it, so she does not include it in our itinerary. “But not to worry,” she said, “As we walk through the Xian herb market you will have the opportunity to see this food and many other strange foods.” That proved to be true. She talked about how the university in Xian is doing research on mushrooms and producing square watermelons. “They are looking for efficiency in shipping, you see,” she said. Myrtle wanted desperately to see one of those square watermelons, but our guide said it was not the watermelon season.

In Xian we watched a professional noodle maker rolling the dough for our noodles in a restaurant, and we watched the grandmother of one of the home hosts make flat noodles. She invited us to try, and this time Myrtle refrained. I knew from experience that it takes a light touch to roll the dough to a perfect thickness, so I refrained, and I was not surprised that the two women in our group who tried, did not succeed. One left the dough too thick and one rolled it so thin it stuck to the table. But the grandmother gamely smiled at them and kept repeating, “Very good, very good.” So we clapped for them.





Our favorite time in Xian was the famous Xian Herb Market, one of the largest herb markets in northwest China. Our guide told us that many other provinces and private businesses come here to buy. The market sells over 600 kinds of herbs. Our guide said that the Chinese use many different things for herbs and spices, including plants, animals, insects, deer horn, penis of dog, placenta of human being, minerals, etc. Prices vary according to the areas where they are grown or collected.



As we started to walk the market, I grabbed hold of Myrtle and said, “Now you know what we are going to see. Please try not to scream and make a big scene?” Well, of course, she really huffed up about that and jerked her arm away from me. But you know what? Every time we saw those snakes curled up in the boxes, like on the left side of the photo here, she drew in a sharp breath and clamped her lips shut. Probably because she just wanted to prove me wrong. Whatever. At least she did not make a big scene. In this photo we see the curled-up snakes, turtle shells, mushrooms, and sheep kidneys.



Here we see a very fat snake (I wondered how many yuan that beauty would bring!) and a dog's penis. Myrtle gasped when the guide identified it as such. She quietly said to me, “Our guide is wrong, I am certain. That thing would not fit on a dog! It has to be a bull's penis!” I, who had seen a dried bull's penis one time pulled out to its full length (dear reader, do not go there - that is a story not fit for polite ears!) of course said, “No, Myrtle, it is indeed a dog's penis.” But nothing makes my little Myrtle happier than having something to argue about. So we argued.



But then one of the men in our group said it was a sheep's penis and those red crescent-shaped things in the bin in the next stall were sheep kidneys. It wasn't long, of course, before there were some rousing arguments going on in our group. I am sure our guide was listening, but she wisely chose not to interfere. Then one of the men said testily, “OK, guys, who cares? Give it up already! Are you planning to eat it?” That statement of course elicited a very pretty chorus of “Ewww”s, and the man got a bit carried away and started to mime holding a penis in his fist and chowing down on it noisily.



But soon there was another thing to argue about: sheep's kidneys. That argument went into high gear a few stalls later when we came upon the absolutely splendid example shown in this photo. This perfect specimen captured everybody's attention for minutes, maybe because it was displayed with an equally perfect specimen of a dried lizard. "How in the world do you cook and eat a dried lizard?" exclaimed Myrtle. But soon we were all too busy with our own discoveries to pay much attention to the sheep kidney and dried lizard. My eyes fell on the

beautiful Spiny Turtle shells, next photo, and Myrtle kept watching the silkworms and locusts to see if they might yet be alive. She even paid no attention to the bowl of curled-up snakes!



Our time in the Xian Herb Market was altogether so interesting and so much fun that we were all restored to excellent humor by the time we exited the market and met our bus. Some in our group even slipped into a late afternoon nap, replete with a little snoring. Our trusty guide wisely put down her microphone and sat quietly staring out the window. By the time our bus pulled up to a large, free-standing building from which wafted interesting aromas, we were more than ready for a refreshing drink and a good meal.

To be continued . . .