

KAGOME

Chinese Food in America: The Rise of Regionality and Reinvention



The New Chinese: Regional Flavors, Modern Ideas, and America's Changing Taste

This report explores how Chinese cuisine in America is entering a new chapter, one defined by regional discovery, cultural authenticity, and culinary innovation. For decades, many American consumers associated Chinese food primarily with familiar dishes rooted in Cantonese traditions and Chinese-American takeout culture. Today, however, diners are increasingly seeking a deeper understanding of the diverse cuisines that exist across China's vast geographic and cultural landscape. From the seafood-forward cooking of Shandong and Fujian to the mushroom-rich flavors of Yunnan and the refined traditions of Jiangsu and Zhejiang, regional Chinese cuisines are capturing consumer curiosity and expanding the definition of Chinese food in America.

At the same time, a new generation of chefs and restaurateurs is reshaping perceptions of Chinese cuisine through contemporary interpretations, cross-cultural influences, and personal storytelling. Restaurants such as Bonnie's, Potluck Club, Lei, Mamahuhu, and Szechuan Mountain House are demonstrating that Chinese food can be simultaneously authentic, innovative, nostalgic, and globally relevant. These operators are introducing consumers to lesser-known ingredients, regional techniques, and modern dining experiences while remaining connected to their cultural roots. Their success reflects broader consumer interest in regional global cuisines and a growing desire for culinary exploration. Chinese cuisine is also benefiting from increased visibility across social media, where food creators and younger consumers are celebrating everything from traditional tea culture to modern Chinese fusion concepts. Trends such as "New Chinese" and even "China-maxxing" highlight how Chinese culture is influencing conversations far beyond the restaurant industry. As Chinese cuisine moves beyond a single narrative, it is emerging as one of the most dynamic and influential forces in American food culture. This report examines the cuisines, restaurants, consumer behaviors, and cultural trends driving this evolution and identifies opportunities for menu innovation inspired by modern Chinese food today.



Many Cuisines, One China

While certain dishes and flavors often rise to prominence and come to represent a country's cuisine, no nation can be defined by a single flavor, ingredient, or cooking technique. Regional differences in geography, climate, agriculture, and culture create distinct culinary traditions, each with its own ingredients, flavors, and methods. China is a prime example of this rich regional diversity. China is traditionally known for its Eight Great Cuisines (Cantonese, Sichuan, Hunan, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Anhui, and Shandong). Many modern chefs and



food researchers also recognize a ninth influential regional cuisine, often Beijing/Imperial Cuisine or another major regional style depending on the classification system. Beyond familiar favorites like Cantonese and Sichuan, which regional Chinese cuisines are capturing consumers' attention and shaping menus today? Consumers are showing the strongest interest in discovering lesser-known regional Chinese cuisines such as Shandong (53%), Fujian (52%), Shanghainese (52%), Zhejiang (51%), and Yunnan (51%), all of which generate greater trial interest than Cantonese (47%) and Sichuan (40%). The opportunity lies in introducing consumers to regions they know little about, as 59% to 67% of respondents report having never heard of these cuisines, suggesting strong curiosity for new Chinese flavor experiences beyond the familiar favorites.

The Eight Great Cuisines Plus Beijing (Imperial) Cuisine

1. **Cantonese:** Fresh, light, and varied; emphasizes seafood, stir-frying, and dim sum.
2. **Sichuan:** Known for its bold heat and signature mouth-numbing sensation (málà), featuring chili peppers, Sichuan peppercorns, and deep, complex flavors.
3. **Hunan:** Spicy and aromatic; emphasizes fresh chilies, smoked ingredients, and stir-frying.
4. **Jiangsu:** Light and refined; emphasizes freshness, seasonality, and knife skills.
5. **Zhejiang:** Fresh and delicate; emphasizes seafood, river produce, and vegetables.
6. **Fujian:** Light and nuanced; known for seafood, soups, and umami-rich broths.
7. **Anhui:** Rustic and hearty; features mountain ingredients and slow-cooking techniques.
8. **Shandong:** Savory and umami-rich, known for seafood, scallions, and soups.
9. **Beijing (Imperial):** Rich and refined; emphasizes court cuisine, roasting, and classic Northern Chinese flavors.

MORE OPERATORS ARE NOW SPECIALIZING IN REGIONAL CHINESE CUISINES, INTRODUCING CONSUMERS TO NEW INGREDIENTS AND FLAVORS. THIS COINCIDES WITH RISING CONSUMER INTEREST IN REGIONAL GLOBAL CUISINES OVERALL, RANGING FROM REGIONAL ITALIAN TO REGIONAL MEXICAN. -Datassential

What Does Modern Chinese Cuisine Look Like?

The next generation of Chinese restaurants in America is moving away from trying to represent “Chinese food” as a single cuisine and instead celebrates the depth, diversity, and regional identities found across China. Szechuan Mountain House (New York City and Los Angeles) helped elevate authentic Sichuan cooking by showcasing dishes built around the cuisine’s signature spicy and mouth-numbing flavors in a refined, contemporary setting. Bonnie’s (Brooklyn, NY), led by chef-owner Calvin Eng, has gained national attention for dishes like the Char Siu McRib, demonstrating how Cantonese-American cuisine can be both deeply personal and highly innovative. At Potluck Club (New York City), chefs reinterpret Hong Kong banquet and cha chaan teng traditions, Hong Kong cafe culture, the blended Cantonese cuisine with British colonial influences, through playful, social media-friendly dishes that connect with a new generation of diners. Lei (New York City) pairs regional Chinese home cooking with a world-class wine program, helping position Chinese cuisine alongside wine culture traditionally associated with European fine dining. Mamahuhu (San Francisco, CA) is helping redefine Chinese-American food through modern branding, high-quality ingredients, and a confident embrace of its cultural roots. Together, these restaurants illustrate how contemporary Chinese dining in America is becoming more regional, chef-driven, story-focused, and globally influenced while remaining firmly connected to the traditions, flavors, and communities that inspire them.

BY THE NUMBERS

79% of consumers who have tried Sichuan cuisine love or like it.

Chinese Cuisine has surpassed Italian as the most loved global cuisine by Gen Z. Mexican and Italian take the #2 and #3 spot.

47% of consumers want to try Cantonese Cuisine

48% of U.S. Consumers are interested in Chinese-Korean Fusion

“New Chinese” is how Datassential describes the evolution of Chinese cuisine in America. It looks beyond familiar dishes such as egg rolls and broccoli beef to embrace regional Chinese cuisines, cultural mashups, and modern interpretations of Chinese food.



Tinned Dace Fish Dip
Bonnie's - Booklyn, NY



Pineapple Bun Spicy Chicken Sandwich
Mamahuhu - San Francisco, CA



S&P Chicken w/ Scallion Biscuits
Potluck Club, New York City, NY



Chilled Celtuce with Kombu
Jelly, Shallots, and Red Vinegar
Lei - New York City, NY



BYO Hot Pot Bar
Szechuan Malatang Cuisine
Tang Bar - San Mateo, CA



Pork Belly Swing
Szechuan Mountain House
Flushing, NY



Potluck Club, New York City, NY

Sources: Datassential, Bonnie's, Mamahuhu, Lei, Potluck Club, and Tang Bar



Internet Words Entering Our Vocabulary

Maxxing.....What does it mean to maxx? Maxxing means extreme optimization, improvement, or maximization of a specific personal trait, habit or activity, often to an extreme degree. Originating from online self-optimization cultures and looks-maxxing it has expanded and can be added after any word. Today, maxxling appears in terms such as gym-maxxing, sleep-maxxing, protein-maxxing, fiber-maxxing, and even China-maxxing. Examples of “China-maxxing” content include drinking hot water instead of iced drinks, practicing tai chi or Chinese-style morning exercises, exploring regional Chinese foods and tea culture, and using the phrase “You met me at a very Chinese time in my life” as a humorous caption. The trend reflects a broader fascination with non-Western wellness practices and a desire to step away from conventional Western consumer habits.

INTERESTED IN MAXXING YOUR SAUCE MENU?

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