Chinese Pastry School

What kinds of desserts did the ancient Chinese enjoy? Why does the Chinese word for sugar (*tang* 糖) have the character rice (*mi* 米) in it? Is there a scientific basis to traditional Chinese pastry techniques?

Find the answers to these questions and more in *Chinese Pastry School* with pastry chef Yeo Min. Pastries and desserts have long been an understated part of Chinese cuisine. Beyond mooncakes and pineapple tarts, the Chinese pastry repertoire involves a full range of techniques from sugar work to puff pastry; even jelly-making and medicinal soups. Given its long and rich history, however, the craft is also riddled with tightly-held secrets and age-old superstitions that can make it difficult for newcomers to fully grasp its nuances. Pastry chef Yeo Min demystifies the techniques and provides a comprehensive collection of recipes to guide you through the art of Chinese pastry- and dessert-making, just as a pastry school would. Emerge as a master of the craft with *Chinese Pastry School*!

visit our website at:
www.marshallcavendish.com

Yeo Min

Chinese Pastry School

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Yeo Min

Chinese Pastry School

Yeo Min

Marshall Cavendish Cuisine

This book is dedicated to my ancestors.
I hope I have finally brought honour to you,
after flunking Chinese all my life.

烘焙新星，
开始闪亮，
在夜空。

甜美的糕饼，
发出香味，
亮出彩色。

年轻烘焙师啊，
冲劲十足，
深信：
明天会更好。

杨逵

This is a poem by my paternal grandpa. Translated, it reads:

“A new pastry star begins to shine in the night sky. The sweet pastries are fragrant and colourful. Young pastry chefs, full of passion, believe in a better tomorrow.”

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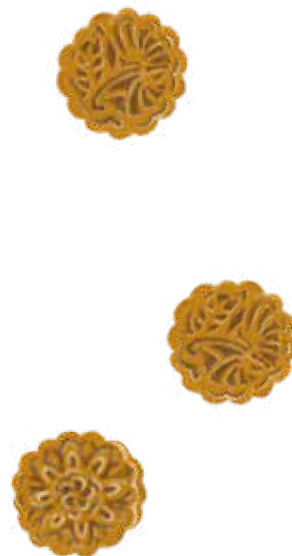
With my maternal grandmother. I was two years old.

With my paternal grandparents (and brother) on a family holiday. This was the only time my grandfather spared my brother and me from our daily routine of reading Chinese dictionaries.



Author's Note

Some nights ago, I dreamt of my late maternal grandmother. Perhaps it was from the fatigue of writing or from the provocative storyline of the Korean drama that I was binge-watching — I dreamt that I was in an alternate universe. My maternal grandmother had not passed but had been in a deep coma for 14 years, and recently awoken from it. I rushed to ask her about her food and cooking, and about the pastries she used to make. But before she was able to tell me her secrets, my alarm clock sounded and I found myself awake — no recipes, just teary eyes.

Unlike chefs who have fond memories of helping out in their family kitchens, my childhood was more typical of a millennial's. My days revolved around school and my years around examinations. It's not as sad as it sounds though: I am thankful to belong to a fortunate generation that believes in the equality of education regardless of gender — even if it meant that I stepped into a kitchen for the first time only at age 14 for a home economics class. My mother, too, was raised to have an education and a career. So even though my maternal grandmother was an amazing cook, neither my mother nor I had the opportunity to learn the ropes from her.

But what I lacked in experience, I made up for by hitting the books. My parents are both physics teachers, and my paternal grandfather a language teacher before he retired. I spent much of my childhood poring over dictionaries with him. (Read: my upbringing was more academic than culinary.) But my family of educators have empowered me to process information across ancient Chinese texts, food science materials and history books — all of which are necessary sources for writing this book. I recall my parents being extremely thrilled when I first told them about my idea for this book — not because they are huge foodies or remotely interested in trying out my recipes, but because I told them that I'd be testing my recipes almost as if they were scientific experiments.

This book is about making the craft of Chinese pastries accessible to the next generation of home bakers and pastry chefs. For anyone who, like me, has not had the fortune of inheriting family recipes or kitchen heirlooms, I hope this book will be a resource that will allow you to pick up the skill of making Chinese pastries — and perhaps begin your own food traditions in your family. And that's so important: unlike pastries from the Western world, which have tons of resources — both in print and online — there is a dearth of material for Chinese pastries and desserts, especially for those who do not understand Chinese.

I took two years to write this book. The research process was an endlessly fascinating one: I thoroughly enjoyed chasing down each rabbit hole and travelling back in time in search of pastry roots. It was especially amusing to learn how much of a foodie Confucius was and realise how his teachings about eating, dining and cooking are still relevant today.

So, I have the ancients to thank for leaving their legacy in the form of wall carvings, well-preserved tombs and ancient texts, as well as the many historians who spent their lives interpreting and translating these sources. If at all I may take a smidgen of credit, it is for the cross-referencing of folk knowledge to food science, and for the use of my training as a pastry chef to make sense of Chinese pastry techniques, recreating them for the modern home kitchen. I hope that this cookbook will lend fresh insights from centuries of past knowledge, and that Chinese pastries like *tau sar piah* will become as familiar in the home-baking repertoire as the chocolate chip cookie.

Chapter 1

"There Is No Such Thing As Chinese Pastry"

Welcome to Chinese Pastry School! "What? Chinese pastry? But there's no such thing as Chinese pastry," you say. The word "pastry" emerged sometime in the 16th century. It comes from the old French word "pastaierie", which describes foods made from a paste of flour and liquid: simply put, dough. What most people think of as pastries today includes a whole repertoire of confectionery and other sweet desserts taught at French pastry schools.

Chinese cuisine has its own dough-based products, confectionery and desserts, though its naming conventions and classification methods come from the cuisine's history that spans over 4,000 years. Chinese food started humbly with just five types of grains, each cooked into a gruel for the lack of cooking inspirations. With time, food resources expanded and new techniques were invented or incorporated from other civilisations. New ingredients previously considered "foreign" came to be accepted as essential ingredients in Chinese homes and kitchens. And instead of offering basic grains to the gods in return for their blessings, specially shaped foods began to emerge, forming the basis of many Chinese pastries that we eat today.

Strictly speaking, there isn't a category in Chinese cuisine that refers to its buns, biscuits, cakes, confectionery and desserts. There are numerous ways in which Chinese foods are classified: by ingredients, medicinal properties, regions, seasons, festivals and even the social status linked to them. Chinese pastries can be found at the intersection of these categories — just never as a category of its own.

Over the course of Chinese history, each generation saw its philosophers, historians and civil servants offering their attempts at recording the agriculture, food habits and recipes of their time. Before we explore the realm of Chinese pastries, let's consider some ways in which Chinese food is classified.

Classification: Regional

The range of Chinese cuisine is massive. China alone spans approximately 9.6 million square kilometres, making up more than 90% of all of Europe. Climate conditions across the country and differences in access to trade routes have influenced each region's style of cooking and flavour profile. Outside China, the Chinese diaspora have developed their own styles of Chinese cuisine across locales and regions, sometimes marrying them with the local food practices.

A Chinese saying, "*Nanfang ren chi mifan, beifang ren chi mianshi* 南方人吃米饭, 北方人吃面食", Southerners eat rice, Northerners eat noodles, speaks of the north-south division of wheat-based versus rice-based foods, and is one of the broadest ways by which Chinese food is classified. The division arises from climate differences that allow wheat to grow better in the north and rice plantations to be more feasible in the south. This gives a clue as to why rice-based pastries (*guo* or *kueh* 粿) are not traditionally found up north and why rice noodles (*guotiao* or *kueh teow* 粿条) are commonly used in southern Chinese cuisine.

Chinese food is also divided into eight regional styles: Anhui, Cantonese, Fujian, Hunan, Jiangsu, Shandong, Szechuan and Zhejiang. Each style has its own unique flavour profile and its own signature cooking methods. For example, Cantonese food is known for its light use of seasonings, highlighting the freshness of its ingredients whereas Szechuan food is known for its tongue-numbing *mala* spices. Pastries from the eight regions also vary, although the differences are not as well-defined as they are across savoury foods.

Classification: Cross-Cutting

Indeed, classifications are not confined to regions. There is context as well, such as when and how a type of food is eaten. These categories include everything from staples to tea snacks and medicinal foods as shown in Figure 1.

On Authenticity

If there's one thing I have learnt in my journey of writing this book, it is that "authenticity", taken in its extreme, would leave us with nothing but boiled grains.

Chinese pastry is a craft that has morphed over 4,000 years, influenced by trade, technology and migration. It has been fascinating to see how some practices and foods have withstood centuries of change

Classification of Chinese Food

Figure 1. *Classification of food based on context.*

Historical Context

Food historians and Chinese chefs typically begin their narratives of Chinese cuisine with the legendary figure Shen Nong 神农, the divine farmer. Shen Nong is said to have devoted his life to sampling all sorts of raw ingredients to find out which were safe for consumption. Though his existence has not been proven, he is widely recognised as the father of Chinese cuisine. Shen Nong's successors are believed to have ruled the Xia Kingdom, which is thought (but also not proven) to have been the first dynasty in traditional Chinese historiography.

The 4,000-year history of Chinese cuisine covered in this book ranges from the Xia Kingdom (2000 BC) to the present, covering a succession of dynastic regimes in China, and the establishment of Chinese diaspora communities across the world. Of these, five dynastic periods stand out in how they impact Chinese pastry-making. Refer to Figure 3.

Zhou Dynasty (1030–221 BC)
The *Shi Jing* 诗经 (*Book of Odes*), details early food resources and methods of cookery. It was during this dynasty that Confucianism and Taoism took root — both of which have a huge influence on Chinese cuisine. Ritual systems were established in the *Rites of Zhou*, which set out frameworks for ethics, social hierarchy and material wealth.

Han Dynasty (202 BC–AD 220)
The Silk Road opened, and numerous raw ingredients such as garlic, coriander and sesame — now synonymous with Chinese cooking — made their way to China. The rotary quern millstone became popular in this period, allowing for flour to be extracted from wheat and contributing to the rise of wheat-based products. The word *bing* 饼, loosely translated as "biscuit", made its first appearance in the *Mozi* 墨子 (*Book of Master Mo*). During the late Han era, people began to press seeds to extract oil. Another important text from this time is the *Shen Nong Bencao Jing* 神农本草经 (*Classic of Materia Medica*), which was concerned with food as medicine.

Song Dynasty (960–1279)
This was the zenith of Chinese food. Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty, saw some of China's first restaurants that specialised in regional cuisines — northern, southern and Szechuan food. It was also when the candy department (*mijian ju* 蜜饯局) existed to make candied fruits and sweetmeats for upper-class families.

Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)
An open maritime policy characterised this period: China opened itself to the rest of the world. Migration, colonisation and trade became the hallmarks of that policy. Events such as Admiral Zheng He's expeditions to Malacca (1405–1433), the leasing of Macau as a trading post to Portugal (1557) and Taiwan's colonisation by the Dutch (1624 and 1662) all cross-fertilised the making of Chinese cuisine and pastries. The Columbian Exchange in the 16th century brought ingredients like peanuts, sweet potatoes, maize, cassava and chilli to China.

Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)
The Qing (Manchurian) was the last dynasty in the imperial history of China. British settlements in Penang in 1786 and Singapore in 1819 triggered en masse emigration. In 1785, the first three Chinese men arrived in America as sailors. In the 1800s, Chinese seamen started to settle in Liverpool and London, England. The first Chinatown of Europe was established in the Limehouse area in London. Again, these events impacted Chinese cuisine, adding layers to an already rich cooking pot.

Figure 3. *A brief timeline of Chinese pastries. See page 266 for an expanded timeline.*

"王者以民人为天，而民人以食为天。"
Wang zhe yi min ren wei tian, er min ren yi shi wei tian.
To the emperor, the people are heaven;
and to the people, food is heaven.

Excerpt from *Han Shu · Li Lu Zhu Liu Shusun Zhuan*《汉书・郦陆朱刘叔孙传》*Book of Han, Biographies of Li Yiji, Lu Jia, Zhu Jian, Liu Jing and Shusun Tong,* Li Lu Zhu Liu Shusun Zhuan, Han Dynasty

Cultural Context

The notions of Chinese food culture cut to the core of the Chinese civilisation: indeed, empires hinged on how well an emperor could feed the people. Dynasties flourished when the people were well-fed but starvation signalled that the emperor had lost his god-given royal status known as the "mandate of heaven".

At the household level, it was believed that a family's kitchen acted as a window through which one could gauge how well its members got along. And food played a part in keeping familial secrets. The story of Zao Shen 灶神 (Kitchen God) has been passed down since the 2nd century BC, and he still is widely celebrated today. *Nian gao* 年糕 (sticky rice cakes) are left anywhere in the kitchen on the 23rd day of the 12th lunar month. It is said that on that day, the Kitchen God visits every family's kitchen, takes note of their activities in the past year and reports his observations to *Yu Huang Da Di* 玉皇大帝 (Jade Emperor). Based on these reports, Jade Emperor then decides whether to reward or punish the family. Sticky rice cakes are meant as a bribe for the Kitchen God, who simply cannot resist them: the sweetness makes him say only good things about the family while the stickiness keeps his lips sealed if he tries to report anything unfavourable.

Food is so important to the Chinese that etiquettes surrounding food preparation and dining were established way back during the Confucian era. Confucius (551–479 BC) espoused these rules in classics like the *Li Ji* 礼记 (*Book of Rites*). Traces of these rules remain deeply ingrained in Chinese food culture. For instance, meat served in a Chinese restaurant is usually sliced prior to cooking or serving because it's considered barbaric to use a knife at the dining table.

Food rules are not only for the living: they very much apply to the deities and to the deceased. The familiar food offerings of today started out as simple, sacrificial gifts used by the living to seek protection from the deities and their ancestors. These ritual systems were well-recorded in the *Rites of Zhou*. Sacrificial offerings morphed into more complex dishes and pastries, with vegetarian options becoming popular when Buddhism spread to China. During the seventh lunar month, you may also find food offerings left by the roadside to appease wandering spirits.

Flavours of Language

Our love for eating is evident in the Chinese language which references food almost excessively. I grew up hearing from my grandparents — usually when I was acting in defiance — that they've eaten more grains of salt than I have grains of rice (*Wo chi de yan bi ni chi de mi hai duo* 我吃的盐比你吃的米还多). It implies that they have lived longer than I have and are, therefore, wiser.

Flavours also express emotions: *tian mi* 甜蜜 (sweetness) is a way to describe affection, *chi cu* 吃醋 (eating vinegar) means "jealousy" and *chi ku* 吃苦 (eating bitterness) means to "endure hardship".

Language gives a clue as to what's included in an ingredient. Understand the component characters in a Chinese word, and unlock the meaning of what's contained in a food item. Take the character for raw

rice grains: *mi* 米. It appears in all the words for rice-based foods. Similarly, the character appears as a left radical of the Chinese word for sugar: *tang* 糖. Why the inclusion of *mi* in *tang*? It's because one of the first man-made sweeteners used in ancient China — maltose — was made from rice!

Another character often seen is *shi* 食, which means either "food" or "to eat". In simplified Chinese, this component looks like this: 饣 and is seen in words such as *fan* 饭 (cooked rice), *bing* 饼 (biscuit) and *e* 饿 (hungry).

Symbolisms in Pastry Craft

Many Chinese pastries originated as oblations and festive foods, making symbolisms an essential part of the craft.

Colours

Generally, bright colours are considered auspicious whereas plain and dark colours are inauspicious. Red signals celebration, joyous occasions (Lunar New Year, weddings, birthdays) while yellow and gold are the preserve of royalty. White symbolises poverty. So, plain white foods are not usually eaten during Lunar New Year. It is standard practice to garnish the surface of a pastry with seeds, egg wash or a red stamp.

Fauna

The tortoise symbolises longevity. Phoenix and dragon are the most sacred animals, used as emblems for the emperor and empress. They also symbolise harmony between a couple. Koi fishes denote wealth (*yu* 裕, which sounds like abundance). Lions, usually a male and female pair, are "protectors" of a house or temple. Cicadas (*chan* 蝉) represent immortality and youth.

Flora

The lotus stands for honesty and purity while the peony symbolises wealth and prosperity. The chrysanthemum denotes happiness and vitality (but is also associated with prayers and used in wreaths). Jasmine, which stands for abiding love, is also the holy flower of Buddhism.

Homophones

- Numbers: *ba* 八 (eight) is an auspicious number because it sounds like *fa* 发 (to prosper). *si* 四 (four) is a taboo number because it sounds like *si* 死 (to die).
- Food: *Nian gao* 年糕 (sticky rice cakes) are eaten during Lunar New Year because the name sounds like *nian gao* 年高, which signifies growth and prosperity in the coming year. *Tang yuan* 汤圆 (sweet rice dumplings) are eaten on special occasions to signify the reunion of families because it sounds like *tuan yuan* 团圆 (reunion).

Principles from Chinese Proverbs

Though I paid scant attention to the plethora of age-old Chinese sayings in school, I have found fresh appreciation for them through my journey in preparing Chinese pastries. Thanks also to my mentor, 72-year-old chef Pang Nyuk Yoon, who has 61 years of experience in the art of Chinese cuisine.

- *jiudi qucai* 就地取材 — to make the most of local resources. Chinese pastries have evolved over time as they were brought to different parts of the world, where the original traditional ingredients were not always available. If need be, replace those ingredients with similar local produce while staying true to the essence of the recipe. Take Singapore's version of *soon kueh*, traditionally filled with bamboo shoots. But bamboo shoots were a rare find and far more expensive than the jicama. So decades later, the jicama-filled version has become the standard in Singapore.
- *wengu zhixin* 温故知新 — learn from the past. Recorded over thousands of years, the long history of Chinese pastry presents a gold mine of knowledge. A look back at how pastries were first prepared gives a good idea of how one can start to approach making them. That is, while the precise recipe you want may be hard to pin down, techniques and ratios of ingredients have been well- preserved. So, take time to get to know the history of the cuisine.
- "*Chu he ri dang wu, han di he xia tu. Shui zhi pan zhongcan, li li jie xinku.*"
  锄禾日当午，汗滴禾 下土。
  谁知盘中餐，粒粒皆辛苦 。
  (While hoeing in the field,
  a farmer's sweat falls to the ground.
  Who would realise that every grain on a plate is produced with such hard work?)

This poem, entitled *Min Nong* 悯农 (*Sympathy for the Farmer*) was written by Li Shen 李绅 from the Tang Dynasty. Children from Chinese families might recall their mothers nagging them to "eat up every last grain of rice on your plate. Don't waste food." The same principle applies to Chinese pastry: the odds and ends are not wasted but used creatively. For example, orange peel is dried and used as a flavour enhancer in dessert soups while pomelo piths are made into gummies.

Chapter 3

The Chinese Bakery Pantry

Half of what it takes to be a good pastry chef is knowing how to work with your ingredients. The repertoire of ingredients used to make Chinese pastries may appear daunting at first, but it gets less scary once you are acquainted with it. Some ingredients are processed in a standardised manner that makes classifying easy. For instance, the protein content of wheat flours fall within a universally accepted range that differentiates between cake, all-purpose and bread flours. But other ingredients may not be classified to any industry standards. For example, the amount of water needed to cook rice can vary depending on the age of the rice while the saltiness of soy sauce varies according to the manufacturer. To overcome this, rely on your tastebuds, trust your intuition and tap on the wisdom of your ingredient suppliers. They would know best how to use the ingredient.

The ingredients can be found at wet markets, supermarkets, Asian grocers, Chinese medical halls and online. I have included the Chinese names of each ingredient as some of these names are often mistranslated. For instance, carrot cake and turnip cake are common mistranslations of cai tau kueh 菜头粿 *and* lor bak gou 萝卜糕 respectively *— both of which are made from winter radishes. So having their Chinese names on hand will be helpful when you shop.*

Sugars and Sweeteners

Honey (fengmi 蜂蜜)

Beekeeping began around 10,000 years ago and was first recorded in Chinese history during the Chun Qiu period (722–480 BC).

Honey was first mentioned in the *Shi Jing* 诗经 (*Book of Odes*). Eat it neat, use it to sweeten dessert soups, brush it on roasted meats or use it to candy fruits. Chinese medicine taps on it to soothe, moisten and nourish the lungs. For baking purposes, avoid using honey that has been infused with other flavours.

Maltose (maiya tang 麦芽糖)

Maltose was the first man-made sweetener used in ancient China. Now referred to as wheat sprout sugar (*maiya tang* 麦芽糖), it used to be called *yi* 饴 — a word still referenced in Japan for rice-based confectionery. The word *yi* was first mentioned in the *Shi Jing* 诗经 (*Book of Odes*).

Maltose is produced when rice is broken down and natural sugars are then extracted as a liquid (hydrolysis). This liquid is cooked down to produce malt sugar, a thick, sticky syrup. It has a mild sweetness with a light malty aroma.

Sweet Fermented Rice Wine (jiuniang 酒酿)

Jiuniang is a sweet, fermented rice wine. Its sweetness comes about when cooked glutinous rice is converted to sugar (in a process known as saccharification) using the yeast starter known as *jiu qu* 酒曲.

Jiuniang has a small percentage of alcohol as a by-product of the fermentation process. The technique for making this type of grain-based wine has existed since the Han Dynasty. Because of its subtle sweetness, *jiuniang* is often used as a sweetener for desserts such as the soup for sweet rice dumplings or as a starter for leavened pastries.

Preserved Fruits (mijian 蜜饯)

Before refrigeration was possible, fruits had to be preserved by drying to prevent mould and bacterial growth. Or, they were saturated with honey or sugar to draw out moisture. These preserved fruits are referred to as honeyed sweetmeats (*mijian* 蜜饯) or salty-sour-sweet (*kiam sng ti* 咸酸甜) in Hokkien. Enjoy them as candy or use to sweeten pastries and dessert soups.

Cane Sugar (zhe tang 蔗糖)

During the reign of emperor Harsha (606–647) in northern India, Indian envoys introduced sugarcane cultivation methods to the Tang Dynasty. China established its first sugarcane cultivation in the 7th century.

Sugar cane is ground or pounded to extract juice, then boiled down or dried in the sun to produce sugar crystals. A record of the discovery and production of rock sugar is found the *Tang Shuangpu* 糖霜谱 (*Cane Sugar Handbook*), written by Song Dynasty historian Wang Zhuo. It describes how a Tang Dynasty monk made rock sugar by boiling sugar cane juice and letting it flow down a bamboo pipe into an urn, where crystals formed over time.

Cane sugar can be clarified to different degrees, producing the three common types: white sugar (*bai tang* 白糖), brown sugar (*hong tang* 红糖) and black sugar (*hei tang* 黑糖). Less refined sugars contain more impurities and take on a darker hue while more refined sugars are light-coloured. Most of the recipes in this book use white castor sugar by default. Recipes will call for icing sugar when sugar needs to combine with other ingredients quickly. Icing sugar is also used in high-fat doughs where there is insufficient moisture to dissolve the sugar. Rock sugar and brown slab sugar are favoured in sweet herbal desserts. Black sugar is used for its caramel-like flavour and medicinal properties.

Golden Syrup (zhuanhua tangjiang 转化糖浆)

Golden syrup is a type of invert sugar that remains in liquid state. It does not re-crystallise because part of the sucrose has broken into its component glucose and fructose molecules when cooked with an acid. This sweetener is mainly used when making Cantonese-style mooncake skin. Golden syrup can be found in most supermarkets as it is widely used in other cuisines as well.

Salt and Sauces

Salt (yan 盐)

People have produced salt since the neolithic period. During the Han Dynasty, the Chinese government used salt production as a way to impose an indirect tax on the item to generate revenue for the state. Not surprisingly, people stretched its usage and you find fermented beans, soy sauce and salted fish in Chinese cuisine.

Saltiness is the taste you get when salt molecules interact with the tongue. Tip: use a weighing scale instead of a measuring spoon to gauge the amount of salt you need (because the mass of salt is a more accurate gauge of saltiness than its volume).

Most salts can be used interchangeably but do consider things like how quickly types of salt are absorbed by other ingredients when switching between varieties. For example, fine salt dissolves quickly in water, making it ideal for water-based doughs and batters. Kosher salt comes in larger grains, which works well for pickling and marinating as the salt slowly penetrates the ingredients, yielding a more evenly salted end product.

Salt flakes are great as a garnish and in shortcrust doughs, where you want the flakes to stay whole, giving that lift in both taste and texture.

Soy Sauce (jiangyou 酱油)

Fermenting soybeans and straining it to extract the liquids yields soy sauce. This process started in the Han Dynasty, with the term "soy sauce" (*jiangyou* 酱油) widely accepted from the Song Dynasty onwards.

Light soy sauce is an oft-used condiment. It is referred to as the "first draw" (*shengchou* 生抽) from the fermented beans. Dark soy sauce, on the other hand, is called "old draw" (*laochou* 老抽). It is produced after a longer ferment and contains added sugar. Use dark soy sauce in braises where some sweetness and colour are needed.

Fish Sauce (yulu 鱼露)

Fish sauce is made by salting and fermenting fish — much like salted fish, only in a concentrated liquid form. It gives a flavour punch and savouriness to a dish and is key to bringing about the taste balance in some meat dishes.

Our markets typically sell fish sauce from Thailand, Vietnam and Korea, each with a slightly different flavour profile. Fermented pineapples produce a surprisingly similar flavour profile, making them a good vegan alternative to fish sauce.

Hoisin Sauce (haixian jiang 海鲜酱)

Hoisin sauce is sometimes called "Chinese barbecue sauce". This is unsurprising given the similarities in the two flavour profiles and the heavy use of hoisin sauce in Chinese barbecue meats like *char siew*. Combining sugar and spices with fermented soybean paste as a base yields the thick, dark sauce.

Oyster Sauce (haoyou 蚝油)

When oysters are reduced, the result is a thick, flavourful extract: oyster sauce. It adds umami to braised meat and is good used in stir-fries. A vegetarian version is available, derived from a concentrated mushroom extract.

Sweet Flour Sauce (tianmian jiang 甜面酱)

Despite its taste, sweet flour sauce is paired with savoury dishes such as fresh spring rolls or Teochew *kueh*. Its sweetness is derived from fermented wheat flour, hence its name, sweet flour sauce.

Monosodium Glutamate (weijing 味精)

Weijing 味精 (literally, essence of flavour) or monosodium glutamate (MSG) appeared on our plates in the last 100 years or so. Adding just a dash of MSG powder to savoury dishes and pastry fillings lifts their flavour. If you prefer not to use MSG, a good alternative is chicken stock powder.

Acids and Alcohols

Wine (jiu 酒)

Wine was an important feature of rituals and feasts in ancient China. It still is today. Each region specialises in a different type of wine and flavours differ by brand. Most Chinese kitchen wines are made by fermenting rice or sorghum and have three main uses: to clean ingredients and remove unpleasant odours, to prevent bacterial growth and to add flavour to a dish. For the first two functions, use either a white rice wine (*mijiu* 米酒) of sufficiently high alcohol content (20–50%) or rose wine (*meigui lu* 玫瑰露). For flavour, use good quality *shaoxing jiu* 绍兴酒 (*shaoxing* wine), an amber-coloured, fragrant wine. Most cooking wines are not made for drinking, so check the label before pouring yourself a glass.

Rice Vinegar (mi cu 米醋)

Vinegar is produced when alcohol is exposed to air and is oxidised by acetic acid. Three main types of vinegars are used in Chinese cooking, all of which are made by fermenting rice. These are: white, black and red rice vinegars.

White rice vinegar is the most neutral of the three, with pickling or cleaning foods its main mission. Add a tablespoonful of it to steaming water to make whiter *bao*. Black rice vinegar has a complex flavour profile and is enjoyed as a dipping sauce for savoury dumplings. Red rice vinegar is the least common of the three, made using red yeast rice. Some Chinese restaurants offer red rice vinegar as a condiment to drizzle over thick soups.

Preserves

Preserved Meat (la wei 腊味)

Traditionally, meat was preserved by marination and drying before Lunar New Year. Chinese-style meat preservation started out for practical purposes but the meats are now enjoyed as a treat for their burst of flavour. Chinese sausages (*lachang* or *lap cheong* 腊肠) and preserved pork belly (*larou* or *lap yoke* 腊肉) can be added to savoury rice cakes and yam cakes in place of fresh meat. Chinese ham is a common mooncake filling found in northern China.

Dried Seafood (haixian ganhuo 海鲜干货)

Dried seafood has a far more concentrated flavour than fresh seafood. They add depth and umami to both savoury dishes and pastries. Dried shrimps are one of the most commonly used additions among the variety of dried seafoods, preferred for their strong and fragrant but not overpowering flavour. Plus, they are usually cheaper than fresh seafood. Fry or add them to a chilli paste for oomph. Dried scallops are also a popular choice, although they tend to be pricier than dried shrimp. Dried sole fish add both flavour and a crunchy texture to dishes.

Pickled Vegetables (xiancai 咸菜)

Pickled vegetables are common in Chinese cooking. Pickling ensures that the vegetables do not attract bacteria or become mouldy, preserving their shelf life through the seasons. Most preserved vegetables need to

Maltose

Maiya Tang 麦芽糖

One of the earliest man-made sweeteners, maltose is made by breaking down starches in cooked glutinous rice, creating a sweet syrup. Ready-made maltose can now be found in supermarkets and baking specialty stores but none of those can compare with the fragrance of a homemade tub. It does take a bit of patience to make maltose from scratch but it's a rewarding process that also makes a fun weekend experiment.

Makes about 500 g syrup

100 g sprouting-grade wheat berries
600 g glutinous rice

Note

- The ideal conditions for sprouting wheat berries are, unfortunately, also the ideal conditions that encourage mould and other microorganisms to grow. Ensure that the sprouting wheat berries get enough airing, so that they do not end up moulding instead. Check for mould growth when watering the sprouts: remove any odd-looking bits.
- Keep the sprouts away from direct sunlight as excessive exposure to light may yield an undesired grassy flavour.
- It can be tempting to use a food processor to mince the sprouts but because they are tough and stringy, your kitchen appliance will not be able to break them down well. The best way to mince them is to chop them in small batches using a heavy cleaver.

1. Rinse wheat berries well. Soak in water overnight. Discard any berries that float to the surface as these will not sprout.
2. The next day, drain soaked wheat berries and place on a perforated tray or basket. Cover with a damp tea towel and spray towel with water a few times daily to keep berries from drying out.
3. The wheat sprouts are ready when they are 4–5 cm tall. This will take 4–6 days, depending on the temperature.
4. Soak glutinous rice in water the night before the sprouts are ready. The next day, drain the water and spread the rice in a shallow pan, adding enough water to just cover the rice. Steam rice on high heat for 40 minutes, then allow it to cool to 60°C.
5. Mince sprouts using a kitchen knife. Mix chopped sprouts with warm rice and set mixture aside at 50°C–60°C for 6 hours. To do this, either leave the mixture in a rice cooker on the "keep warm" function or put it in a pot and place in a warm oven.
6. During this time, the wheat sprouts are digesting the starches and extracting a sweet liquid. The extraction is complete when the rice looks like soupy congee.
7. Strain liquid into a large wok and bring to a rolling boil over medium-high heat. The boiling should slow after about 20 minutes, which is when most of the water has evaporated. Lower heat and continue cooking until syrup is thick enough to form a little "flag" when dripped from a spatula.
8. Pour maltose into a clean heatproof jar. Cool before capping. If done properly, maltose can be kept at room temperature for up to a year. Look out for mould or any unpleasant smells before using.

Dragon Beard Candy

Long Xu Tang 龙须糖

Also known as handmade cotton candy, Dragon Beard Candy is a type of pulled sugar that yields a soft, melt-in-your-mouth texture. The thin strands are coated in cooked glutinous rice flour to prevent clumping, then wrapped around fragrant crushed peanuts.

Makes 3–4 servings

Filling

50 g peanuts, roasted and crushed

10 g white sesame seeds, toasted

Sugar Syrup

120 g castor sugar

65 ml water

20 g maltose or corn syrup

2 drops white vinegar

300 g cooked glutinous rice flour (*gaofen*) for coating

Note

- This is probably one of the most technical recipes in this chapter and requires great finesse to succeed. I have had the most success making this at room temperature — any colder and the sugar may harden prematurely, making it difficult to stretch.
- Always wear gloves when working with sugar because hot sugar tends to be sticky and can cause burns. Vinyl gloves work well but if you have sensitive skin, the option is a pair of clean, latex washing-up gloves.

1. Combine peanuts and sesame seeds and set aside.
2. Place cooked glutinous rice flour in a large tray and set aside in a warm oven.
3. In a pot, cook sugar, water and maltose or corn syrup to 120°C, then add vinegar. Cook to 135°C, then dip bottom of pot briefly into a bowl of tepid water to stop the cooking process.
4. Pour syrup onto a silicone mat, then carefully fold silicone mat onto itself to agitate the sugar. Do this continuously until the sugar is warm to the touch and feels like a firm dough.
5. Stretch and fold the sugar to make it pliable. When the sugar turns white, coil it into a circle and make a hole in the middle. It should look like a doughnut.
6. Place sugar onto the tray of cooked glutinous rice flour and slowly stretch it from the middle outwards. The sugar should remain flat on the tray to allow it to stretch more evenly.
7. Once sugar ring is stretched out to about 40 cm x 10 cm, twist it into a figure 8 and bring the two sides together, effectively halving the ring. Continue stretching and halving the sugar for at least 14 times, ensuring that the sugar strands are evenly coated with cooked glutinous rice flour so they do not stick together.
8. Once the sugar strands become as thin as threads, stop pulling and spread the threads out. Cut the candy into 10-cm long pieces.
9. Wrap each piece around a teaspoonful of peanut-sesame filling, making sure to be gentle so as to maintain the fluffiness of the candy.
10. Serve immediately.

Candied Kumquat

Tang Zi Jin Ju 糖渍金桔

Candied kumquats are a Lunar New Year favourite. The small citrus fruits are only slightly sour but extremely fragrant. They are naturally bite-sized and fit well in an "eight treasure box" — a candy platter families prepare for guests who visit during Lunar New Year.

Makes about 300 g

300 g kumquat
2 Tbsp kosher salt
1 tsp baking soda
60 g rock sugar
100 ml water
100 g castor sugar

Note

- Kosher salt works best for cleaning citrus skins as it acts as an exfoliant. Opt for other salts if kosher salt is not available but avoid using fine salt as it does not exfoliate well.
- Kumquat do not completely recrystallise like other fruit candies because its acidity causes the sugars to invert, a process which makes golden syrup (p50). In this case, you want to just flavour the kumquat and preserve it with sugar, then dehydrate them. Coat in castor sugar to ensure that the kumquat do not stick to each other.
- Stop at step 2 for a juicier version of this candy. Allow the kumquat to cool and store in an airtight container in the refrigerator.

1. Clean kumquat. Rub skin with kosher salt and baking soda, then add enough water to cover and soak for 10 minutes. Rinse kumquat. Cut into halves and remove any seeds.
2. Place kumquat, rock sugar and water in a pot. Bring to a boil, then lower heat and cook until pot is almost dry.
3. Place kumquat cut-side down on a baking tray lined with baking paper. Dehydrate them at 100°C for 2–3 hours, occasionally opening oven door to let moisture escape.
4. Remove from oven and set aside to cool before coating with castor sugar. Store refrigerated in an airtight container for up to a week.

Hong Kong-Style Egg Tarts

Daan Tat, Danta 蛋挞

There are two varieties of the Hong Kong egg tart, both of which use a smooth, barely-set custard as the filling — unlike its Portuguese cousin that features a well-caramelised custard. The secret to a soft custard lies in diluting the egg proteins. Hong Kong-style egg tarts use either a shortcrust pastry or a flaky puff pastry. This recipe is for the former.

Makes 10 pieces

150 g eggs
195 ml water
60 g sugar
55 ml evaporated milk
A pinch of fine salt

Tart Shells

165 g all-purpose flour
40 g castor sugar
1 g salt
5 g milk powder
90 g butter, chilled, cut into cubes
12 g egg
½ Tbsp cold water

1. Prepare egg custard at least 4 hours ahead. Whisk eggs and set aside. Boil water and sugar in a pot. Stir in evaporated milk and salt, then stream mixture into eggs while whisking.
2. Pass custard through a fine sieve. Cover with cling film and refrigerate for 4 hours. Whisk mixture before pouring into tart shells.
3. Prepare tart shells. Place dry ingredients in a bowl. Add butter and rub into dry ingredients with fingertips until small flakes form.
4. Add egg to form a rough dough, then turn it out onto a floured work surface. Use the heel of your palm to push the dough, working until it comes together into a ball.
5. Shape dough into a thick log and refrigerate for 30 minutes until firm. Slice into 10 equal portions, each 30–35 g.
6. Press dough into egg tart moulds using your thumbs. The dough should come above the mould by about 0.5 cm, so it can hold more custard. Use a toothpick to prick any air bubbles. Smoothen dough with your fingers.
7. Cover tart shells with cling film and place in the freezer for 30 minutes.
8. When ready to bake, preheat oven to 230°C. Place tart shells on a baking tray and fill 90% full with egg mixture.
9. Place tarts on the bottom rack of the oven and bake for 13 minutes. Lower heat to 200°C and bake for another 5–8 minutes. When ready, the custard should jiggle slightly but not form ripples when disturbed.
10. Remove tarts from oven and let cool on tray for 10 minutes. Remove tarts from moulds and transfer to a cooling rack to continue cooling.
11. Serve tarts slightly warm.

Note

- If you find this egg custard too sweet, replace part of the sugar with water. Or, omit the evaporated milk, replacing it with water or other liquids of choice. Remember that the custard will be soft and smooth only if the eggs have been diluted. Eggs alone coagulate from 63°C onwards but diluting them can bring this temperature up high enough for the tart dough to cook through too.
- It is important to chill the tart shells before filling them with egg custard. Cold flour does not absorb liquids well, so chilling the tart dough prior to filling it will prevent a thick, soggy layer of dough from forming.

Yam Paste

Yu Ni 芋泥

This yam paste filling is an adaptation of the traditional Teochew dessert of the same name — except that it is cooked until firm enough to use as a filling. In recent years, many pastry chefs from the Chinese diaspora have also adapted and paired this paste with cakes and tarts — the possibilities are endless.

Makes about 700 g

- 500 g yam, peeled and thinly sliced
- 30 g purple sweet potato, peeled and thinly sliced
- 125 g sugar
- 80 ml pandan oil (page 101) or shallot oil (page 100)

1. Steam yam and sweet potato for 25 minutes or until they can be easily mashed with the back of a spoon.
2. While yam and sweet potato are still hot, transfer to the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment. Beat on low speed, then increase speed slightly to mash mixture. Scrape down the sides of the bowl to ensure that the yam and sweet potato are evenly mixed.
3. Press paste through a sieve to remove any lumps.
4. Place paste, sugar and oil in a wok and cook until paste can hold its shape and is not sticky to the touch.
5. Spread paste on a tray and cover with cling film. Allow paste to cool completely before using.
6. To store, place paste in an airtight container and cover with cling film. Keep refrigerated for up to 2 weeks.

Note

- A stand mixer will greatly ease the process of mashing the tubers. But if you don't have this appliance, a potato masher or fork will do.
- Do the mashing while the tubers are still hot so that it pulps easily and forms a smooth paste. Reheat before mashing, if needed.
- The purple sweet potato is used to add colour to the yam paste. Omit if desired or adjust the quantity added to get a purple hue that you like.

From top: Yam Paste, Red Bean Paste (page 119), Lotus Seed Paste (page 118)

Tau Sar Piah

Mung Bean Pastry, *Dousha Bing* 豆沙饼

Puff pastries filled with some variety of mung bean paste are commonly found in Southern China, Taiwan and Southeast Asia, where the Chinese diaspora mostly have southern Chinese roots. This humble version is found in Singapore's Teochew and Hokkien pastry shops. In Malaysia, the bite-sized versions are known as tambun *biscuits. The bean paste is cooked with shallot oil and can be flavoured sweet or savoury. Differentiate the flavours by the pattern or word stamped onto the surface of the pastry.*

Makes 12 pieces

300 g mung bean paste

Water Dough

100 g all-purpose flour
25 g icing sugar
1 g salt
20 ml vegetable oil
40 ml water

Oil Dough

80 g all-purpose flour
40 g ghee

Embellishment

Red food colouring powder
Water, as needed
1 egg
A pinch of salt

1. Prepare mung bean paste (page 122), water dough (page 128) and oil dough (page 129).
2. Portion mung bean paste into 25-g pieces, water dough into 15-g pieces and oil dough into 10-g pieces. Laminate dough individually.
3. Roll out dough into circles, each 8–10 cm in diameter, with the edges thinner than the middle.
4. Place a portion of filling on each dough circle and enclose. Pinch seams together and place seam-side down on a baking tray. Flatten pastries slightly using your palm, then use a toothpick to make a small hole at the side of each pastry.
5. Mix food colouring with some water and pour it onto a paper towel on a saucer. Press a pastry stamp onto the paper towel and ink each pastry.
6. Preheat oven to 200°C and bake pastries for 10 minutes.
7. Meanwhile, prepare egg wash with egg and salt.
8. Remove pastries from oven and leave oven on. Brush a thin layer of egg wash onto each pastry and bake for another 15 minutes.
9. Allow pastries to cool completely before serving. Store in an airtight container for up to a week.

Taiyang Bing

Sun Cake, *Taiyang Bing* 太阳饼

Originally from Taiwan, taiyang bing *are known for their extremely flaky, milky skins, and sweet, malty and slightly chewy filling. The pastry is named after the first bakery that created them, and not so much because they look like the sun.*

Makes 10 pieces

22 g maltose
22 g ghee
90 g icing sugar
A pinch of salt
10 ml evaporated milk
20 g tapioca starch
10 g cake flour

Water Dough

105 g all-purpose flour
5 g full cream milk powder
12 g icing sugar
45 ml water
15 ml neutral cooking oil
25 g ghee

Oil Dough

100 g cake flour
50 g shortening

Note

- *Taiyang bing* are particularly tricky because the molten filling may leak during baking. The process of cooking the filling gelatinises its starches, so that it becomes more firm and less prone to leakage. (Read more on gelatinisation in Chapter 8.) Make sure to pinch the seams together tightly when shaping.

1. Prepare maltose filling. Heat maltose and ghee in a pan over medium-low heat. Add rest of ingredients except cake flour and cook for 1–2 minutes. Fold in cake flour and set aside to cool.
2. Portion filling into 18-g balls.
3. Prepare water dough (page 128) and oil dough (page 129).
4. Portion water dough into 20-g pieces and oil dough into 15-g pieces. Laminate dough individually.
5. Roll out dough into circles, each 10–12 cm in diameter, with the edges thinner than the middle.
6. Place a portion of filling on each dough circle and enclose. Pinch seams together and place seam-side down on a baking tray. Flatten pastries slightly using your palm and let rest for 5 minutes.
7. Use a small rolling pin to roll each pastry until it is about 10 cm in diameter.
8. Make 3 small piercings on top of each pastry using a toothpick.
9. Preheat oven to 185°C and bake pastries for 20 minutes.
10. Allow pastries to cool completely before serving. Store in an airtight container for up to a week.

Peach Blossom & Chrysanthemum Pastries

Taohua Su 桃花酥, *Juhua Su* 菊花酥

These pastries are shaped to look like the flowers that inspired them. They were first made in the imperial kitchens for the women of the royal family. This is an example of a "half-half" lamination, where the layers of dough are first concealed but incisions in the pastry give a peek into what's inside.

Makes 6 pieces

150 g red bean paste

Water Dough

60 g all-purpose flour
15 g icing sugar
25 ml water
Red food colouring
20 ml vegetable oil

Oil Dough

50 g all-purpose flour
25 g lard or shortening

Embellishment

1 egg yolk
20 g raw white or black sesame seeds

Note

- To colour the dough, both liquid and powdered food colouring work well. Bear in mind though that a small amount of colouring goes a long way.

1. Prepare red bean paste (page 119), water dough (page 128) and oil dough (page 129).
2. Divide red bean paste into 25-g portions and roll into balls.
3. Portion water dough into 20-g pieces and oil dough into 15-g pieces. Laminate dough individually.
4. Roll out dough into circles, each 10–12 cm in diameter, with the edges thinner than the middle.
5. Wrap a portion of filling in each dough circle. Pinch seams together and place seam-side down on a baking tray. Flatten pastries slightly using your palm, then use a small rolling pin to roll each pastry until it is about 8 cm in diameter. Cover and rest pastries for 10 minutes.
6. Shape pastries as detailed below.
7. Preheat oven to 160°C and bake for 25 minutes.
8. Allow pastries to cool completely before serving. Store in an airtight container for up to a week.

Peach Blossom Pastries

- Make 6 even cuts around pastry to form petals, then pinch tips to shape. Make 2 small cuts on each petal.
- Make an indent in the centre of each pastry with your finger or a chopstick. Brush crevice with some egg yolk and top with sesame seeds.

Chrysanthemum Pastries

- Make 10 even cuts around the pastry to form petals, then twist each petal to its side to expose filling.
- Adjust and shape petals so petal tips are round.

Scallion Pancakes

Cong Youbing 葱油饼

The scallion pancake takes several forms. This recipe is for the Taiwanese version also known as shou zhua bing 手抓饼*, hand-clawed pancake. The structure of this pancake is oddly similar to Indian* roti canai*, except that the fat used in this case is scallion oil, not ghee. The laminated dough is shaped into individual pancakes and fried. Upon cooling, the pancakes are crushed by hand to reveal a heavenly flakiness.*

Makes 6 pieces

Water Dough

200 g all-purpose flour
2 g salt
150 ml hot water
4 tsp shallot oil (page 100)

Scallion Oil

10 scallions (spring onions), thinly sliced
45 ml vegetable oil

Vegetable oil as needed

Note

- Adjust the amount of scallions used to your liking. Incorporate more flavours by adding other spices as desired.
- To make in advance, stop at step 6. Slip a sheet of baking paper between each pancake and place in a resealable food bag in the freezer. Consume within 3 months, Cook without defrosting.

1. Prepare water dough. Combine flour and salt, then add hot water and shallot oil. Mix with chopsticks to form a rough dough. Cover and let rest for 15 minutes, then knead until dough is smooth.
2. Coat dough with some oil and let rest for 30 minutes.
3. Prepare scallion oil. Place scallions in a heatproof bowl. Heat vegetable oil in a pot until it is smoking hot, then pour it quickly over the scallions. Set aside to cool.
4. Roll out water dough into a thin sheet roughly about 60 cm x 50 cm. Brush with spring onion oil, then roll up into a log.
5. Rest dough for 5 minutes, then stretch it out lengthwise. Cut into 6 even pieces.
6. Cut 3 slits along each piece of dough. Twist dough and roll it up in a spiral, revealing the layers. Flatten dough with your palm.
7. Heat some oil in a frying pan over medium heat. Place pancake in pan and cook until both sides are crisp and golden brown. Push pancake down using a spatula as it expands while cooking.
8. Let pancakes cool slightly, then place on a clean work surface and crush it inwards using your palms. Serve immediately.

Lotus Pastries

Hehua Su 荷花酥

Lotus pastry may be one of the most technically challenging recipes in this chapter but the results are definitely worth the effort. To get puff pastry looking like a flower — rather than food — requires imagination, especially if you want a 3D result. Like the peach blossom and chrysanthemum pastries, the lotus pastry also originated from the imperial kitchen.

Makes 8 pieces

120 g mung bean paste for *ang ku kueh*

1 litre vegetable oil, for deep-frying

Pink Water Dough

50 g all-purpose flour

2 tsp peanut oil

25 ml water

A pinch of salt

Red food colouring

Yellow Water Dough

25 g all-purpose flour

1 tsp peanut oil

10 ml water

Yellow food colouring

Oil Dough

60 g cake flour

30 g lard or shortening

1. Prepare mung bean paste for *ang ku kueh* (page 123). Divide paste into 15-g portions and roll into balls.
2. Prepare water dough (page 128) and oil dough (page 129).
3. To make pink puff pastry, portion pink water dough into 10-g pieces and oil dough into 7-g balls.
4. To make yellow puff pastry, portion yellow water dough into 7-g pieces and oil dough into 3-g balls.
5. Laminate doughs individually. At the second lamination, make a single turn instead of rolling up the dough.
6. When doughs have been laminated, stack a piece of yellow dough onto a piece of pink dough, seam sides up. Roll dough into circles, with the edges thinner than the middle.
7. Wrap 15 g mung bean paste in each dough circle. The yellow dough should be in the middle and the pink dough outside. Pinch off excess dough at the bottom.
8. Using a bread lame, make 3 cuts across the top of the pastry to form 6 petals. Cut each petal deep enough to expose the filling, leaving sufficient dough at the bottom to hold the flower together.
9. Heat half the frying oil to 140°C. Place remaining oil in a heatproof bowl with a ladle to temper the oil as needed.
10. Place pastry on a spider and lower into the hot oil. The petals will slowly open up. Lift pastry to the surface of the oil a few times to coax the petals to open more. The petals are ready when they appear slightly translucent and have set into shape. Lift pastry to the surface of the oil and hold it there for 2–3 minutes to cook the bottom of the pastry.
11. Remove pastry and set aside to drain on paper towels.
12. Serve immediately.

Note

- This recipe calls for very delicate lamination. The layers have to be even for the flower to "bloom" well. Use the smallest and lightest rolling pin you have to prepare this puff pastry.
- The water doughs in this pastry do not use sugar. This is to avoid discolouration when frying as sugar will caramelise and cause the pastry to brown.
- Although 140°C seems low for deep-frying, it isn't — any hotter and the flower will not "bloom". Control the temperature of the oil by transferring a ladle of hot oil into the bowl on standby and transferring a ladle of cool oil back into the pot. Repeat until the temperature returns to 140°C.
- If the flower petals don't open well, prise them open very gently with a pair of fine tweezers or chopsticks when frying.