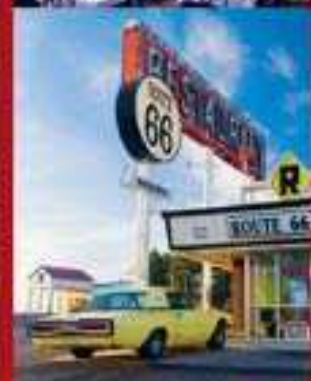




FOOD Lover's GUIDE TO THE WORLD

Experience the Great Global Cuisines



FOOD
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FOREWORD

Suppose I was already plotting my getaway even when I was a kid. Sprawled on the floor of my suburban California bedroom with a copy of the latest National Geographic magazine, I would disappear for hours into the photographs I saw between its glossy pages. The images that always held me captive the longest, though, weren't of exotic landscapes or archaeological digs. They were of people in distant places doing that most simple of things: eating.

There's one photo I remember particularly well. It showed a village in rural India, a woman in a turquoise sari using a stick to stoke a sparking fire, a blackened pot hanging over it. I remember closely inspecting the mysterious ochre-colored curry inside the pot, the meal she was preparing, enchanted. This place seemed so foreign but I wanted to be there, smelling that fire, hearing it crackle, eating what I thought must be the most unimaginably delicious, exotic food. The photo was a doorway into another world, a world far removed from the pot roast and frozen dinners that I grew up eating.

At 19, I had my first real opportunity to travel to a place like the ones I'd fantasised about since I was a kid. I was in college; it was 1982. One afternoon, Tanya, a fellow student who came from Indonesia, asked rather matter of factly, 'Why don't you visit my family in Jakarta sometime?' Within days, I booked a ticket. Within weeks, I was staying in Tanya's family's home.



AUSTIN BUSH :: LONELY PLANET IMAGES ©

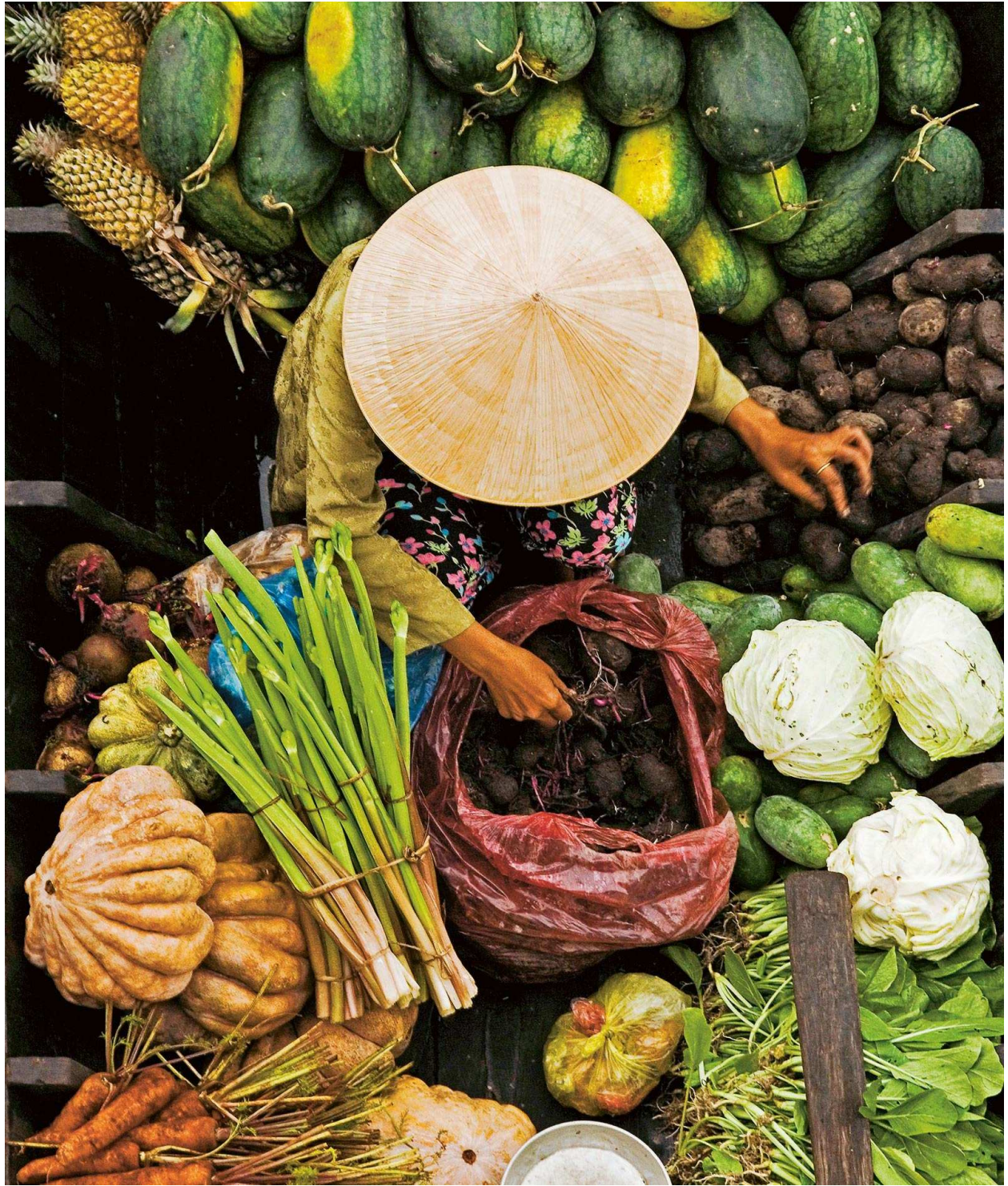
Then, as now, Jakarta was about as overwhelming as a place can be for a newcomer: crowded, hot, a cacophony of smells and sounds, none of them familiar or particularly friendly. My first few weeks were spent in a kind of sweaty stupor. One day, though, Tanya's mother, Ann, held a *selamatan*, a traditional Javanese feast, as a benefit for a charity organization she was involved in. 'It's our version of a potluck', Tanya told me. A parade of women soon arrived in silk sarongs with foods they'd prepared for the occasion. I counted 32 dishes in all. My jaw dropped. There were glistening coconut milk curries, pickled vegetables tinted yellow with fresh turmeric, whole grilled fish topped with lemon basil, sticky-rice sweets in every colour of the rainbow – and that's just what I saw on the first table. A woman in orange batik spotted me.

'Tell me, do you know any of these foods?' she asked.

Over the course of the next few minutes she took it upon herself to act as guide, steering me toward different dishes – a beef rendang, meltingly tender and scattered with finely shredded lime leaves, from West Sumatra; Javanese opor ayam, a chicken curry fragrant with cinnamon and cilantro – filling in my mental map of Indonesia with distinct flavours and aromas. Of a dish from the Spice Islands, of tuna braised with tomatoes and whole spices, she said, 'The locals use cloves and nutmeg in everything.' I began to tease out the layers of spice, chilli, lime leaf, and lemongrass in the dishes I was eating, and to grasp how a few simple, fresh foods like pineapple, cucumber, palm sugar, and peanuts can come together to make something that awakens your palate. I'd found a way to understand – and to love – Indonesia.

In the years since that trip I've travelled to more places than I can count in hopes of seeking out similarly revelatory meals. I've eaten rustic char kuey teow (wok-fried noodles with cockles and shrimp) at night markets in Malaysia. I've sampled thick, chewy huaraches (foot-long, handmade tortillas) covered with searing hot árbol chilli salsa and a tangle of sautéed cactus at street stalls in Mexico City. I've gorged on thalis of a dozen different dishes, including lentil dhals and salty pickles, in Kerala, India. For me, there is no better way to understand a place – to literally get it inside you – than by eating its food. Through food, I always find my way.

James Oseland is the editor-in-chief of Saveur magazine.



ALEX LINGHORN :: GETTYIMAGES ©

TRAVEL TO EAT

When we travel we discover a place – its people, land and culture – through its food. We bring back not just mouthwatering memories but inspiration. Mark Bittman explains.

There is a Japanese place in midtown Manhattan, of the kind we used to call a greasy spoon, whose name I barely know. I go there monthly at least, and I send friends there as well. Not everyone: just people who I think will appreciate the funky, playful, non-sushi side of Japanese food – for the most part, these happen to be people who've been to Japan. And, for the most part, they love it. Afterwards, they'll call me and say, 'It was amazing! We were the only non-Japanese people in the place! Everyone was speaking Japanese! The food was unlike anything else! It was just like being in Tokyo!'

Actually, no. It's not. I'm not a Tokyo expert, but I can tell you that as authentic as the representations of 'foreign' food have become in our native cities, the experience isn't the same. A bistro outside of France, a pho stand in a country other than Vietnam, a trattoria that isn't in Italy, a taco shack even 100 miles from Mexico ... without taking anything away from any of those places – and, really, the food itself can be just as good as it is in its home – the experience is different.

That's because food, of course, is only one of several keys to a fantastic restaurant experience in an unfamiliar place. What veteran traveller doesn't remember stumbling on an eatery that wasn't recommended by a friend (or a guidebook, for that matter), a discovery that's somehow owned by ourselves – that is, a real discovery? We all know that in those instances the food isn't even the most important thing; it becomes a representation, an integral and essential part of so much else, of an experience that cannot possibly be duplicated by eating at the most authentic Turkish, Moroccan or Argentinian place in your home city. Three examples:

- On the way back from an early morning run in a village (I never knew its name) near Soc Trang in the Mekong Delta, I came across a pho cart. I'd been eating pho daily for a week (and I never stop to eat when I'm in a post-run situation), but something about this cart – the aroma, the look, the older woman serving the hot broth – was alluring. I sat with my early-morning comrades and enjoyed that pho more than any other.
- Wandering on foot in Istanbul, lost – not hopelessly but seriously – I found myself quite befuddled, and recognised that I was beyond hungry. I stopped at the next restaurant I saw, a steam table joint, the type of place I'd never choose at home, and chose a soupy stew of overcooked rice, carrots, onions, and peas. Sounds abominable, right? Since then, I make it myself, all the time. In fact it's one of my favourite comfort foods.
- In East Berlin, on a snowy, blustery day, walking through oddly grey neighbourhoods at a time after reunification but before gentrification, I was in quest of something real, although I didn't quite know what that was. Without guidance (without a clue, really), I plunged down a few steps into an old bar and ordered the only dish offered with sauerkraut – Schweinshaxe, or pork shank (or 'knuckle') – and hunkered down with a couple of beers and a crew of new friends.

Was this the best food I've ever eaten, or even the best examples of these particular dishes? I can't say. They were enjoyable, serendipitous, wonderful experiences that created (as you can tell) lasting memories, memories comparable to a first day in Rome, that glimpse of Big Ben, the Golden Gate.

That stuff doesn't happen to me in New York (which is where I grew up, and where I live), and no matter where you live I'll bet it doesn't happen to you. It couldn't possibly: we never wander in our own cities the way we wander when we're in someone else's. We never set out to get lost, to make random discoveries, to go to restaurants that we haven't read or heard about. Those kinds of experiences are precisely why we travel.

It's not only that food tastes better when it's indigenous, it's the reasons why it tastes better when it's indigenous. And, as you probably know, those reasons are largely 'psychological': in other words, they're in your head. And, more and more – as international ingredients improve, as immigrants from everywhere wind up in all developed countries, as it becomes easier and easier to run a restaurant – they really are in your head. If you could judge it in a vacuum, the food often would be as good, as authentic, as rich, in your local pho joint as it was on the sidewalk that day when I ate it.



OLIVER STREWE :: LONELY PLANET IMAGES ©

But you can't judge it in a vacuum: the food is one of the very real ways in which you experience an unfamiliar place, as real as the landscape and the people, and intertwined with both. Food is one of the windows into culture, and the experience of getting to a restaurant, of ordering the food, or seeing those same ingredients you might have seen in the market that morning, of hearing citizens chat in a tongue you may or may not understand, or seeing what they order, of figuring out what you're going to eat, of relating to the waiter – all of this and much more, a list you can readily make yourself – means that what's in your head has a huge impact on the way you experience the food you're eating.

And yet another wonderful thing may happen when you bring memories of eating home from your travels: you may be inspired to cook it, or – perhaps more common – to use ingredients in ways you've not done previously, and to use them more frequently. (No one who's been to Vietnam, for example, can ever think of fragrant herbs in the same way they did before.) Of this I could give literally hundreds of examples (then again I've made a living doing this). Again, I'll settle for three:

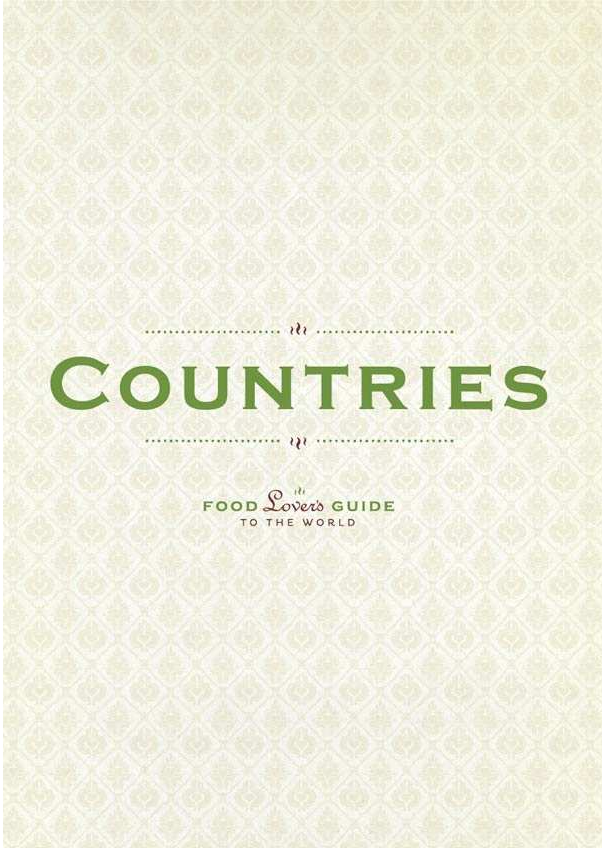
- On my first visit to Rome, now nearly 40 years ago, I dutifully ordered spaghetti alla carbonara, knowing that that was a dish that Americans had not yet experienced and which was reported to be amazing. (As practically everyone now knows, it is.) And yet that's not the story: the story is that a man at a neighbouring table had ordered a bowl of mussels, and the sight of those so excited me that I called my waiter over and, in fractured Italian and sign language, explained that I did not want carbonara but mussels. (We had to get past the point where he thought I was ordering 'mosquitos'.) Since that time, I have cooked mussels – just like that, with garlic, basil, and tomatoes – scores of times, never failing to thank that gentleman at the next table. (I ate carbonara at lunch the next day, of course.)
- In Progreso – the Gulf port of the Yucatán, and the primary outlet to the sea for Mérida – there is (or was, on my last visit), a huge variety of seafood. And yet, it's almost all prepared with the same flavours: lime, chilli, and cilantro. After a few days of eating this way, it's impossible to think of cooking fresh fish simply without considering 'lime, chilli, cilantro.' And you could do a lot worse.
- On a trip to northern India, meal in and meal out, I was served dhal; no two were the same. For me, a rich tourist, the dhal were usually served as side dishes. But it would've taken wilful ignorance to not recognise that the simple dhal, with roti or chapatti or rice, was the backbone, if not the whole of breakfast, lunch, and dinner, for millions of people surrounding me. I came home with a new appreciation for pulses, and have cooked them more often and far better in the years since that happened.



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As important as are these first two reasons to experience food in situ – the argument that it’s as powerful a vehicle for experiencing culture as any other, and that it creates experiences and memories that you can’t otherwise get – to me, a cook, I think that the third is really critical. As Western diets have moved in precisely the wrong direction over the course of the last couple of generations, our bringing back experiences, flavours, ingredients, cooking techniques (really, what I’m saying here is inspiration), is actually a means of salvation, yet another way in which the traditions of both the developed and so-called developing world can not only remind us about what’s really valuable but show us how to integrate it into our own lives. Every time every one of us introduces dhal, or corn tortillas and beans, or a stew of vegetables and rice, to our friends and family, we’re bringing the wisdom of the ancients back into the modern world, and perhaps saving a little piece of it.

Mark Bittman is the lead food writer for The New York Times Magazine and is the author of the best-selling book *How To Cook Everything*. His website is www.markbittman.com



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COUNTRIES

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FOOD *LOVERS* GUIDE
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PEET SIMARD :: CORBIS ©

CHINA

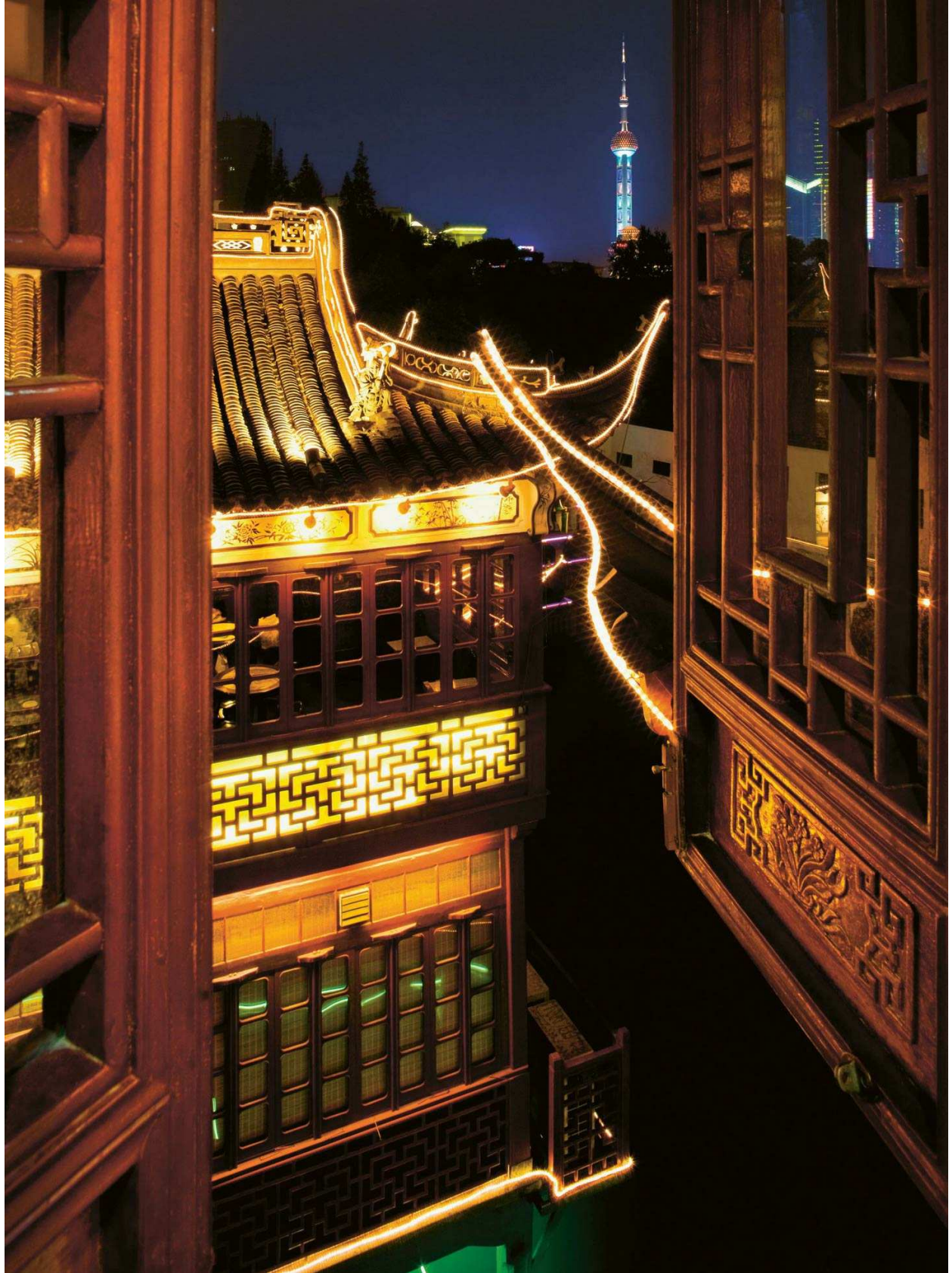
Tuck into tofu, heads and tails, spices that numb and eye-watering vinegars. In China, hardened foodies soar to new culinary limits and squeamish diners are seduced into leaving their comfort zones behind.

China covers too much territory to have a national cuisine. Instead, regional cuisines have developed over the centuries into eight specific styles: huicai from Anhui, yuecai from Guangdong, mincai from Fujian, lucai from Shandong, xiangcai from Hunan, sucai from Jiangsu, chuancai from Sichuan and zhecai from Zhejiang.

Each style has its own vocabulary of spices, herbs and sauces, particular to that landscape. In fact, eating your way around China can feel like a voyage to eight different countries. To simplify things, it helps to think of a north-south rivalry. Northerners are known as wheat eaters; southerners, rice eaters. People who eat wheat are physically large but provincial in their outlook. People who eat rice are small and soft-willed. Or so they say: the 'you are what you eat' concept is taken very seriously in China.

Both north and south claim superiority in their culinary heritage, and each is justified in its bombast. The north is home to imperial cuisine, dishes influenced by Shandong's lucai and refined to fit an emperor's palate. But the fertile south is where you'll find the great regional cuisines, such as the delicate seafood of yuecai, the mind-blowing hot sauces of chuancai and the elegance of sucai, the cuisine of the gastronomes. With such a rich food culture, one would think that Chinese diners are kept busy enough just exploring their own diversity.

But a love for world cuisines is blossoming and with it come restaurants serving Italian, French and Japanese crowd-pleasers, and the new fads of Ethiopian, Persian and Nordic food. In Beijing alone, there are 40,000 restaurants, although Hong Kong offers the world's lowest priced Michelin-starred restaurants. Wine is almost a must at upscale Chinese dining tables, no matter what's on the menu. Chinese drinkers consume an average of 300 million bottles of wine a year with a penchant for heavy reds. While the days of mixing a Bordeaux with Sprite are not entirely behind us, it is no longer a norm.



The view to central Shanghai from a traditional tea house
BRUNO EHRS :: CORBIS ©

RICE

THE GRAIN ON EVERYONE'S PLATES

Not everyone eats rice in China, but the grain plays a central role in Chinese food culture. In China, the word for rice means 'meal' in a general sense. The customary polite greeting of 'Chifan le ma?', used all over the country, literally translates as 'Have you eaten rice yet?'

Rice was once the hero of a meal, with other dishes merely adding flavour. Nowadays, the appreciation of rice has been taken to the next level, and some consider themselves rice critics. If the grains are fragrant, soft and retain their pearly white wholeness, guests will pay compliments. But if the rice is poorly cooked and of a low grade, it is shunned.

China produces more than a quarter of the world's rice, primarily along the fertile banks of the Yangtze River where it was first domesticated. The best place to see traditional rice cultivation is at the spectacular Unesco-listed Hani rice terraces in Yunnan Province. The Hani ethnic people in Yuanyang County still live a traditional way of life in this isolated area. Up to a thousand species of rice were once cultivated in their fields, and these days the Hani are partial to purple rice, which is said to have huge health benefits. It's typically used to make baba, a chewy rice cake wrapped in a banana leaf with cured meats.

Chinese-inspired fried rice is a well-loved dish around the globe. Luxurious ingredients like scallops, crab roe and an inauthentic dash of black-truffle oil elevate it from stomach-filler to a banquet-worthy dish. Every grain should be coated in oil but not greasy, and a wash of egg should be spread throughout. Fried rice tests the strength of a chef's wrist, as the heavy wok is continuously tossed to keep the rice separated and evenly cooked.



WHERE TO EAT SPRING PAPAYA DAI ETHNIC RESTAURANT 3 MENGHAI RD, JINGHONG, XISHUANGBANNA, YUNNAN

Yunnan is famous for stuffing rice into bamboo with slivers of mushrooms and for its pineapple rice, a whole pineapple stuffed with sticky rice and sometimes nuts.



A perfectly portable snack: rice wrapped in a dried banana leaf with noodles
DIANA MILLER :: CORBIS ©



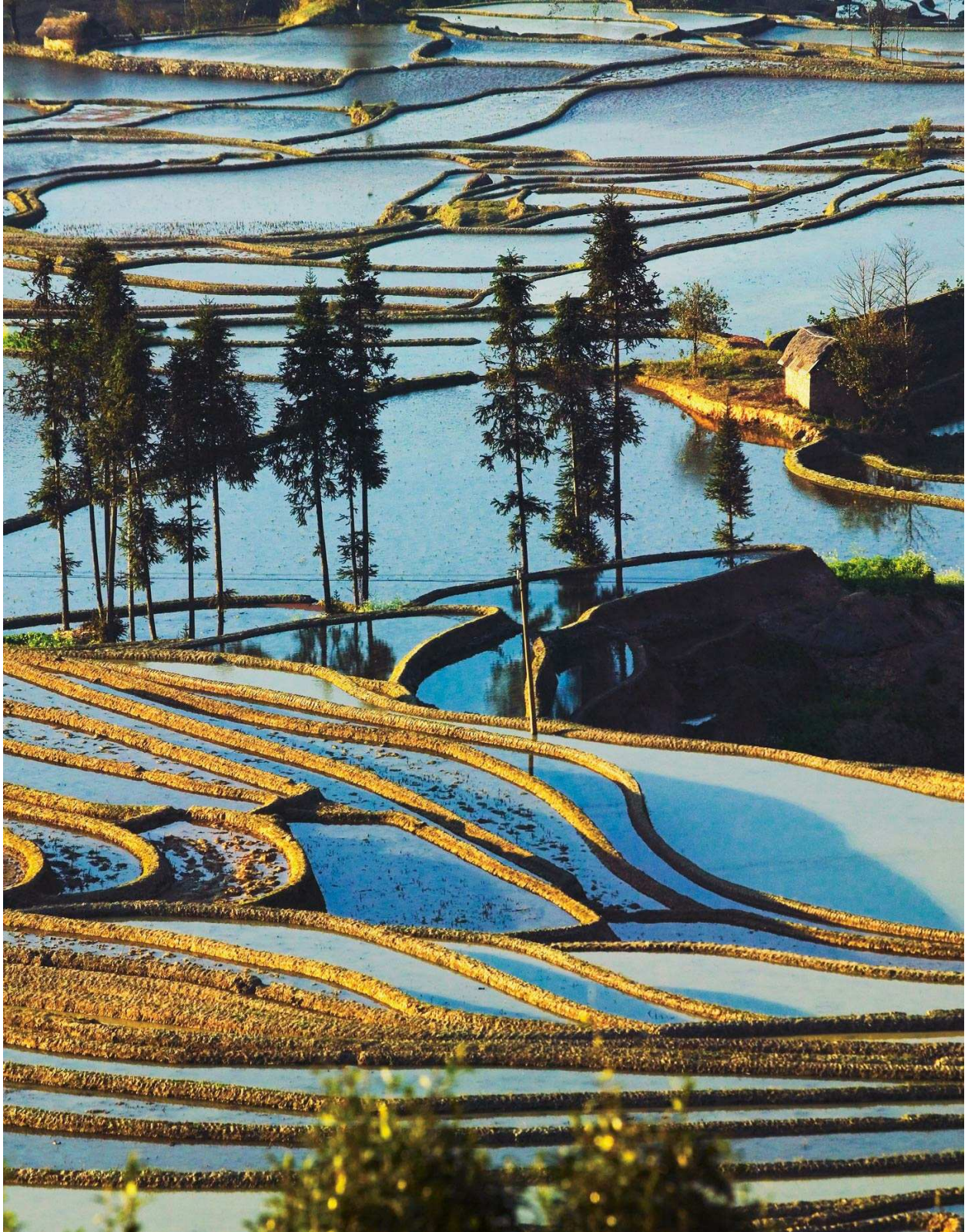
Congee for the soul
HARIKAN SIRIATTAMETHUS :: DIANA MILLER :: CORBIS © ISTOCKPHOTO ©

COMFORT FOOD

China's version of chicken soup for the sick and the soul is congee, a thin, easily digestible gruel made from rice boiled with plenty of water. For many, congee is also breakfast, a thin rice porridge served with fried youtiao (dough sticks), pickles and fresh soy milk. Congee can also be dressed up with all manner of additions to sate a gourmand's cravings, from slices of abalone to pidan, the preserved duck eggs with green yolks and black albumen. A luxurious congee should be boiled until the rice 'blooms', like fluffy popcorn. The resulting porridge is a viscous white wonder, resembling a cloud in a bowl.

EATING FOR HEALTH

According to Chinese tradition, all foods have a medicinal effect. When you are feeling unwell, your body is out of balance – too hot, too moist, too dry, too cold. Finding the food with the right elements can help remedy and rebalance the body. This practice is known as shiliao. Cooling foods such as bitter melon can nix a sore throat, a symptom of an overheated body. A medicinal meal, yaoshan, is a combination of nutritious foods and therapeutic herbs, such as ginseng or cordyceps, that Chinese believe prevents or heals illnesses and promotes longevity. The most typical are tonics boiled for hours, rich stews with a chicken base or the sex organs of animals.



Water-intensive rice terraces growing the most important ingredient in Chinese cuisine
KEREN SU :: CORBIS ©

XIAOLONGBAO

BITE-SIZED DUMPLINGS

Meaning 'little basket buns', xiaolongbao are Shanghainese pork dumplings traditionally steamed in the namesake baskets. They're also dubbed 'soup dumpling', for the rich pork broth that floods into your mouth as soon as you bite into the delicate morsel.

Essentially a triple-whammy pork experience, the tightly packed pork meatball and soul-warming pork soup are concealed in a wheat wrapper. Shaped like twisted domes, the dumplings are grasped carefully but firmly by xiaolongbao connoisseurs, as breaking the skin will mean losing the precious soup. The dumplings are then dunked into black Zhenjiang vinegar mixed with slivers of fresh ginger, the tear-jerking acidic sauce reviving the senses after an overload of delicious pork. Using a spoon to catch any spillage, xiaolongbao experts nibble off a piece of the wrapper and suck out the broth from the dumpling before eating the lot. If you're a xiaolongbao virgin, give in to your hedonistic instincts. First, allow the dumpling to cool off for a good five minutes, or the cascade of soup will scald your taste buds. Then just pop the whole thing in your mouth. Allow your tongue to bathe in the juices as you chew on the meat. Try not to moan.

The secret to getting that soup into the dumpling lies not in syringes or other surgical equipment. The rich pork broth is simply chilled to form aspic, which is then cut into small blocks and tucked into the dumplings together with the meat. The beauty of dumplings like xiaolongbao is that just about anything can be stuffed into a wheat dough casing, sealed, boiled and popped into the mouth, and China has come up with a huge variation.