Peking Duck and Mongolian Hot Pot

by Joy Kimball Imboden '62

Joy Kimball Imboden

Eating soup and buns on the run in the People's Republic of China.

The following article arrived in the Wellesley *office simultaneously with "From Alumnae Kitchens." Since one features the cuisine of old China, the other of new, they are being used as companion pieces.*

En route to Beijing, July 20—After a day's orientation we're off! We are sixteen, including several nutritionists and dietitians (four of whom are considerably overweight), a school food service director from Colorado, two (chunky) experts in cattle and hog nutrition from Iowa, two home economists from Georgia, a corn grower and an agricultural economist from Missouri, a few spouses, and me, an ex-weight-loss seminar leader from California.

Beijing, July 21—I may not be an expert on China, but the subject of our inquiry, food, is near and dear to all our hearts. We've been here only a few hours, but already we're forming judgments, drawing conclusions. The nutritionists eye our waiter and hypothesize about his protein intake. The school food service director pokes suspiciously with her chopstick at the pickled vegetable appetizer as if testing to see if it is alive. Squeals and exclamations: "Eeeoouuu. . .what's THAT! You try it first!" The hospital dietitian and the school dietitian argue about the composition of a deep-fried chunk of pork, and whether or not the "product" would go over in the school cafeteria (institutional dietitians speak of products, not food). One of our farmers is distressed because there are no fortune cookies.

July 22—Tour group members eat most meals in their hotel dining rooms, a part of the pre-paid, pre-arranged package. We get no menu, no choice. We don't know what we'll be fed until the dishes arrive at the table, one by one, dish after dish after dish. The group appoints me taste-tester, since I'm the only one who seems to know the difference between bean sprouts and noodles. They've heard tell about beaver, dog,

Continued on page 29

Joy Kimball Imboden '62 last summer visited the People's Republic of China on a study for professionals in the fields of nutrition and agriculture.

Peking Duck

Continued from page 25

and armadillo and want no part of it. Our guide, Mr. Wu, who is traveling with us courtesy of the China International Travel Service, assures us that we won't be served a former family pet.

We are being fed on a scale that would make even the most dedicated trencherman reel—a banquet three times a day. The Midwestern farmers are in pig heaven. Pork (stir-fried, deep-fried, breaded-fried, roasted, glazed, or hidden in the depths of a steamed bun) is the major ingredient, with duck running a close second. We calculate that we're being fed an average of two pounds of meat (including fish and poultry) per person each day. Where are all those vegetables I'd dreamed of, the tofu?

The head dietitian at the Capital Hospital here in Beijing told us today that the usual Chinese diet consists of 65 percent grain and legumes, 25 percent vegetables and fruits, 4 percent meat and fish, 2 percent egg and milk, 2 percent fat, and 2 percent sugar. Government figures claim per capita meat consumption in 1980 was at an all-time high of 25 pounds. In the United States we consumed 222 pounds of meat a year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Extravagant as that figure is, it is far less than the 730 pounds we could be fed if we stuck around China for a year. We have some difficulty reconciling this abundance, given that China is still barely feeding her own people.

July 23—Three of us who are vegetarians asked if we could have a tofu dish included with the meal. The maître d' looked at us as if we were crazy—why would we want tofu when we could have pork? We assumed he forgot our request because the six appetizer dishes, the four pork and three duck dishes, the egg dish, the shrimp dish, and the whole fried fish had been served and we knew the soup wasn't far behind (watery soup was usually the last course before the fruit). We consoled ourselves by stuffing well on the eggs, buns, vegetables and rice, when the beaming waiter arrived with an enormous platter of braised tofu. Too embarrassed to send it back untouched we managed a few bites, then tried to redistribute the quivering soya mountains so they'd look smaller.

We are honored guests in China, and we are learning that when one is an honored guest here, the balance of the meals is dramatically altered. A good host in China demonstrates respect by serving the rarest, dearest foods, in quantities that cannot possibly be consumed. So we not only get a stupefying amount of meat, we also get our food nearly swimming in oil. (Vegetable oil is one of the few foods still rationed here, about a pint a month per person.)

Note to Dieters: China is *not* the place for you.

July 24—We're getting better at pacing ourselves although tonight we were thrown off guard at our "farewell-to-Beijing" banquet at one of the famous Peking Duck restaurants. Mr. Wu said we were lucky because our restaurant specialized in Mongolian Hot Pot as well as duck. Little did we realize that what he meant was that after feasting on the sixteen exquisite dishes included in the Peking Duck dinner, we would be presented with the Mongolian dinner in its equally ample splendor. Mr. Wu reasoned that it was better to have two dinners in one than to miss the Hot Pot.

Note to dieters—China is NOT the place for you.

Shanghai, July 27—On our visit to a farm commune outside the city limits we learned that the farmers make twice daily trips to the hotels and restaurants to collect food for the pigs and the compost. This partially answers our question about the fate of our mounting trail of leftovers. We had doubted that even the hungriest of kitchen workers could consume what we and several hundred other tourists wasted each day.

Note to cardiac patients and hypertensives—China is not the place for you. The food has been so salty and rich that I am having trouble maintaining any appetite for it. When only three or four dishes are served, as is the case for most Chinese family meals at home, the rice is the ballast and the salty or rich foods are served in small amounts, almost like flavorings, creating a nice balance.

Sodium consumption is a health concern here, with hypertension rates on the rise. I suppose if the Chinese government put its mind to it, it could drastically reduce sodium consumption, the way it got rid of prostitution, VD, and opium addiction. The U.S. government is too entangled with private interests to mount such campaigns against our fat intake, smoking habits, and alcohol consumption.

Joy Kimball Imboden

It's market time in Nanking—melons for sale in the stalls.

Nanking, July 30—Met up with the "thousand-year-old egg" today. Meandering around the side streets of Nanking, I spied a street vendor selling what appeared to be very crude bran muffins. After days of low-fiber white rice they were irresistible. I paid the woman five cents for one and was about to take a cautious bite when she lunged for the "muffin," clucking and shaking her head vigorously. Taking it from me, she cracked it on the counter and peeled away chunks of what turned out to be a mixture of mud, rice hulls, and heaven knows what else. She triumphantly produced a translucent BLACK egg which she handed back to me, urging me to taste. I was so nonplussed by the thought of what I'd almost eaten, and the ominous appearance of what I was now supposed to eat, that I could only murmur my thanks and back away as quickly as possible, still clutching the egg. When I finally tried it later, it wasn't half bad. It's made by burying a raw, uncracked egg in lime and mud for three months.

August 1—Tourists who don't get up at dawn miss China's morning rituals. Here in Nanking people conduct their daily lives out on the sidewalks in front of their tiny dwellings. As soon as it is light, family members emerge to brush their teeth and comb their hair, sitting on stools by the door. Children scurry off to the little stand across the street to buy a stack of long, feather-light, deep-fried crullers (a dozen for twenty-five cents) to be dunked in hot sweet soy milk. Other family members bring their bowls to a different stand to get broth with steamed dumplings, or glutinous rice balls. Some bring their food home to eat while others consume it on the spot, squatting on the curb.

A bustling market is set up on the corner. A new government experiment permits families to cultivate mini-gardens and sell any excess produce at these markets. The fledgling capitalists have hauled in their goods on bicycles, in handcarts, or baskets shouldered on a yoke. Shoppers pile their baskets with greens, great bunches of garlic with tops still attached, long melons, tomatoes, tofu, pork, and pork fat . . . none of it wrapped. Both men and women do the marketing although frequently grandma prepares the meals. By seven in the morning the market disappears without a trace—vendors, shoppers, and breakfasters are gone and the work day begins.

Back in the relative quiet of the hotel we tourists are served an ample Western breakfast of well-oiled eggs, toast or buns, jam, and weak coffee. To get a Chinese breakfast you gather eight adventurous eaters and let the hotel know the night before. Prepare to loosen your belt. There will be a steaming bowl of rice porridge (congee) plus several or all of the following: Chinese crullers, steamed buns filled with seasoned pork or sweet bean paste, stir-fried vegetables, assorted pickles, and perhaps sliced cold meats and eggs—both hard-boiled and the black thousand-year-old.

Guilin, August 7—The Chinese like a hot meal at noon, regardless of the weather (sweltering here) or whether they are at home, school, or work. It is usually similar to dinner, the three or four dishes based on the vegetables currently in season, plus rice or noodles. Soup, rather than tea, is the beverage to be sipped throughout the meal. The Chinese shun cold water because they believe it mixes poorly with the oil used in cooking. (Tourists get delicious beer with each meal, but the Chinese drink very little.)

Chinese government-run department stores feature candy counters to put Sears to shame.

With increasing frequency people are eating the noon meal away from home. Prices at the factories, farm commune dining rooms, and even the state-operated "restaurants for the masses" are cheap so that people will find it appealing to eat out. The government thereby creates more time for productive labor.

Eating on the run is also gaining in popularity, with snacks of buns, noodles, icy popsicles (rather flavorless, five cents), and hot tea for a penny a glass, readily available from street vendors.

Canton, August 9—So many of these beautiful children have rotten teeth. The Chinese may eat little sugar on the whole, but what they like is doing them in—hard candies and sickeningly sweet soda-pop. The government-run department stores feature candy counters to put Sears to shame. At the store in Beijing I measured some forty display feet of colorful candies under two giant posters of children blissfully munching chocolate. It seems that candy, sweet drinks, and tea are offered whenever one sits down for more than a minute.

August 11—Any excuse for a banquet here; tonight it's Farewell to Canton. For the first time since we've been here the restaurant decor is as elegant as the food. Usually the dining rooms have been institutionally plain at best—faded pea-green walls studded with coat hooks, a vase of dusty pink plastic flowers gracing each table. Regardless of the decor, however, when the food appears one forgets all else. Tonight we are having roast suckling pig. One pig per table.

August 12—We leave tomorrow. Those of us who paid attention to our inner hunger/fullness signals are still trim; those who tried to eat their money's worth are now wearing it.

I love this country, the people, the food, but I'd just about kill for a green salad lightly tossed with oil and vinegar. The Midwesterners want steak, they say. Our leader craves baked potato with butter and sour cream, the agricultural economist yearns for a decent cup of coffee, and our school food service director wants chocolate chip cookies and a glass of milk.

I wonder how soon I'll be ready for another Chinese dinner. □