

The Foods of a Singaporean Chinese New Year

By Rachel Khanna

Chinese New Year is celebrated on the first day of the first month of the lunar calendar, usually in January or February. This also marks the end of one seasonal cycle and the beginning of a new one – the planting season. Chinese New Year celebrations are full of customs and traditions that will ensure a good and prosperous start to the New Year.

Prior to celebrating the New Year, on the 23rd day of the last month, the Kitchen God is sent off to report to the Jade Emperor. The Kitchen God guards the family, observing its strengths and weaknesses and then reporting these to the Emperor. He is offered incense, his lips are smeared with honey, sugar or sweet wine (so that he will report only sweet things), and images of the Kitchen God are burned to release his spirit. He returns to the family on New Year's Eve and resumes his watch for the coming year.

Families visit one another and offer special gifts. Most of these gifts are sweets, which symbolise wishes for the year ahead. Celebrating Chinese New Year includes a feast on the eve of the New Year. Foods eaten during the feast symbolise health, wealth, happiness and longevity for the family during the year ahead.



Tossing the Yu Sheng salad

A typical Singaporean tradition is the *Yu Sheng* or 'Prosperity Toss' salad, which was created and made popular by Singapore's Chinese community in the 1960s. This is a salad made of raw fish, shredded vegetables and a variety of sauces and condiments. The leader amongst the diners adds ingredients to the salad while saying 'auspicious wishes' as each ingredient is added. The diners at the table then stand up and, with their chopsticks, toss the shredded ingredients into the air while uttering various 'auspicious wishes'

out loud. Diners are expected to toss enthusiastically as the height of the toss represents the diners' increase in fortunes in the coming year!



Dried ducks and fish



Candied fruit and vegetables

Some common foods served during Chinese New Year and their symbolism

Food	Translation	Symbolism
Juan He	New Year's cakes and candies	Peace, harmony, togetherness
Zhen	Candied melon	Wealth, virtue, growth, good health
Tang Guo	Persimmons	Fulfillment of wishes
Jin Ju	Mandarin oranges	Good luck or fortune
Sheng Cai	Lettuce	Wealth and riches
Yuan Yang	Duck	Happiness
Ming Li	Pair of carp	Fame and fortune
Shuang Shou	Shrimp	Wealth and abundance
Man Tou	Steamed buns	Good luck and fortune
Hao Shi	Oysters	Wealth and abundance
Fa Cai	Seaweed	Happy New Year
Yu Sheng	Raw Fish Salad (prosperity toss)	Abundance, prosperity and vigour

Some Trivia: Chinese New Year is typically celebrated over three days. Families clean their homes, buy new clothes and settle their debts before the year is over. It is crucial to start the New Year with a clean slate. Firecrackers, lion dances and clashing cymbals are used to scare away evil spirits. This tradition came about through a legend about a monster called the *nian*. In a particular village, at the end of each winter, the monster ate everyone in sight. A wise man told the villagers that the monster was afraid of noise, lights and the colour red. Therefore, people decorate their houses in red, light firecrackers and make loud noises to scare away the evil spirits.

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Photos courtesy of Benedict Lau