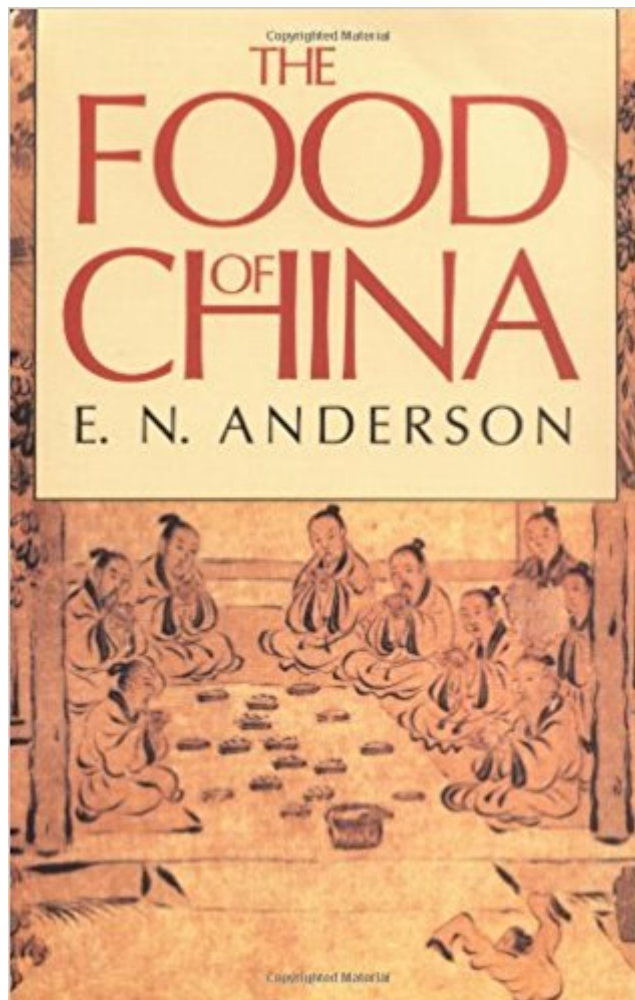


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# The Food Of China



## Synopsis

To feed a quarter of the world's population on only seven percent of the world's cultivated land and at the same time to have developed a renowned cuisine is perhaps the most exemplary achievement of the Chinese people. What accounts for their success? And what can be learned from it in this age of widespread hunger? E.N. Anderson's comprehensive, entertaining historical and ethnographic account of Chinese food from the Bronze Age to the twentieth century shows how food has been central to Chinese governmental policies, religious rituals, and health practices from earliest times. The historical survey of agricultural and culinary customs, in the first half of the book, offers a wealth of fact and interpretation on such topics as the effect of government policy on agricultural innovation; the relation of medical beliefs to appetizing cuisine; the recycling of waste products on the farm; the traditional absence of food taboos (including the practicality of eating one's pests, or feeding them to pigs and chickens, instead of poisoning them and the environment); and the key factors in the gourmet quality of Chinese food from the simplest to the most elaborate dishes. Without glossing over the occurrences of famine China's history, Anderson concludes that the full story is one of remarkable success in feeding maximum populations over the millennia. Underpinning this accomplishment, he cites China's traditional stress on food as the basis of the state and as fundamental not only to individual well-being but to the enjoyment of life. Anderson turns to present-day China in the latter half of the book, describing in rich and enticing detail the regional varieties in Chinese diet, food preparation, and rituals of eating and drinking. These lively, readable chapters as well as those in the first half of *The Food of China* make it a prime source for anyone's general readers and scholars alike with an interest in Chinese history or food.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A comprehensive, entertaining historical and ethnographic account of Chinese food, from the Bronze Age to the twentieth century. After showing how food has been central to Chinese government policies, religious rituals, and health practices from the earliest times, E.N. Anderson turns to present-day China, describing in rich and enticing detail the regional varieties in Chinese diet, food preparation, and rituals of eating and drinking.

E.N. Anderson is professor of anthropology at the University of California, Riverside.

This is not a cookbook, nor is it one of those armchair cookbooks that have become so popular of late, but rather a somewhat scholarly journal through the story of food in China from the first known agriculture (millet, in the north, approx. 6500-6000 BCE) to the appearance of rice (in the Yangtze Delta approx. 5000 BCE) through the discoveries and cultivation of other important crops...as well as seafood, animals, and as the Chinese themselves say, anything and everything the Chinese have ever found edible. And not only does it cover the discovery and growth of food production in a manner that is virtually page-turning, but because it also links these stories into the most interesting details of Chinese culture and history, it is much more than just a book about food. Author Anderson has scoured ancient texts to extract references to food (and medicine), meals and agriculture in his research, and thus you learn of the food described by the Japanese monk Ennin who visited China in the 840's, and how tea was an exotic drink from the Indian-Burma border regions that probably was introduced to China by Buddhist monks, to name just two examples. Original and secondary sources are referred to in the text itself making additional reading and research tantalizingly easy. My only problem now is the list of about thirty books I want to read culled from this amazing volume. Anyone with a serious interest in China will enjoy reading this book -- and yes, it does close with some very good chapters that include a fascinating survey of "Dinner at the Ngs". (And if you're looking for a good cookbook, there's no better place to start than the recommended list of titles on page 274 at the end of the book.)

This book was a great help when writing my term pape. Also had some excellent recipes.

Published in the late 1980s, *The Food of China* remains one of the key modern works on Chinese food history. This was the first book I read on Chinese food. That was a mistake, if only because the book is so dense with information that the reading experience was quite overwhelming at the time. So if you are a novice like I was, start with something lighter such as Francine Halvorsen's *The Food and Cooking of China* before taking the deep plunge with this more academic book. But E. N. Anderson remains one of the two or three authoritative references in my bookshelf that I know I will be reaching for many years to come.

Unique and exhaustive treatment of subject..matter.

good

Bland. Even for a text book. He doesn't even include a map! Not a single picture. Not that it would matter, if his words painted any kind of picture. He makes apologies for his terrible citations. So, at least he covered his ass.

This is a dense book. I was reminded of a much more detailed and obtuse expansion on the China sections of *"Guns, Germs, & Steel."* It's all difficult to absorb, really, which makes the style sometimes seem a bit off - it's an informal-ish work written by a scholar, and so footnotes and the like are kept to a minimum, and the author frequently goes off on tangents. Really it's all disingenuous, the work is clearly not going to be read casually on the beach, the author should have just written the book in a more scholarly style. I was particularly annoyed at his tangents. His recollections of meals in Hong Kong keep turning up like a bad penny. Maybe 25 years ago this was fascinating stuff, but now it's trite and feels forced into the work. He also uses these tangents to drop into unsubstantiated opinions, or even statements that are completely wrong. For instance, he goes off for a page or two about how Sweet & Sour Pork in the US is generally not authentic Cantonese food, how trite. He also claims it was a minor Cantonese dish (it isn't, it's an Eastern Chinese dish, one that to my mind tastes surprisingly like the US version). He also uses the opportunity to repeat the old wives' tale about glutamates giving "Chinese Restaurant Syndrome." (Double blind tests and common sense have long shown that it's psychosomatic.) Really the book is full of these guffaws that demand more explanation - he also goes off about the efficiency of pre-Open Door Chinese socialism, makes an impassioned claim that the world needs to imitate

Chinese agriculture, and constantly talks about the ancient superiority of Chinese civilization, although he never really explains the "why," besides that it had the third highest agricultural efficiency, behind Java and Japan. That said, there's a lot to learn here. Even if his explanation of the yin-yang food system is just about the driest explanation one could imagine possible, I still admired its extreme thoroughness. Really the same can be said for a lot of the book, and as long as the book is approached with that sort of mindset, and a willingness to forgive the author for talking about how his neighbors twenty years ago liked to eat fish (or what have you), this is five-star material.

After I read that Yangzhou fried rice comes from Yangzhou, I'm starting to believe everything in Wikipedia is true. This was an invention in Hong Kong and despite if you travel to Yangzhou and it says it on the tourist material it is not true. I also question that Fujian has the best soups while if you travel to China most people will say the Cantonese have the best soups. You try and travel in China and ask anyone.

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