

# Chinese New Year is great time to try making dumplings



Tina Cui, center, serves Kexin Chao and Kathy Moreno some traditional sweets served during Chinese New Year celebrations in China. (Judy Buchenot / Beacon-News)

[Judy Buchenot](#) Aurora Beacon-News

If they were at their homes in China instead of in their homes in Naperville, Tina Cui and Kexin Chao would be in the middle of celebrating Chinese New Year. Unlike New Year's Eve in the United States, Chinese New Year is a two-week celebration where many people travel home to be with family. Aurora resident Kathy Moreno is also familiar with the Chinese New Year since she and her husband lived in China for four years and in Thailand for 4-and-a-half years. Their children attended school there and the family grew to admire the many customs including Chinese New Year.

When Moreno moved back to the United States to settle in a home in Aurora, she joined Naperville Newcomers and Neighbors Club. At one of the organization's many

gatherings, she met Cui and Chao. The three became fast friends as they shared stories of China. They decided it would be fun to share the many traditions connected with Chinese New Year with others and planned a Know and Tell, one of the many NNNC activities where members share knowledge or expertise on a topic.

In trying to describe Chinese New Year, the three women say the event is similar to American Thanksgiving where families try to be together and share a traditional meal. But the celebration has many other facets. Families put up spring couplets which are good luck wishes written on red paper with black ink. They also post the Chinese symbol for luck upside down on the front door so that good luck will come pouring into the house.

A big family meal is held on New Year's Eve. "Most people have fish at the dinner," begins Moreno. "And when I say fish, I mean the whole fish. On my first day in China, I went to the grocery store and saw live fish jumping from one barrel to another barrel."

"We steam the fish and serve it with the head, the eyeballs, everything," says Cui. "Sometimes we fry it a little after steaming. When we finish the fish, we use the bones to make soup. It symbolizes the wholeness and completeness of things."

Another popular part of New Year's meals are dumplings. "Dumplings are an important part of the meal if you are in Northern China," explains Cui. "We have them steamed, fried or boiled. The dough is similar to pasta dough and the filling can vary. Traditional filling is pork and sauerkraut but you can add leek, egg, pork, dried shrimp. We had fish dumplings because we lived near the ocean."

Dumplings can be purchased but Chao likes to make her own from wrapper to filling. "I make the wrappers because the ones you buy are uniform thickness. I like the outside edges to be thinner and the middle to be thicker. I can do that when I roll them myself," she explains. Families eat dumplings at different times. "We ate dumplings in the middle of the night after the fireworks. One dumpling had a coin in it and it was good luck to get that dumpling," says Chao.

Instead of dumplings, people in southern China traditionally serve tang yuan which are glutinous rice balls that can be filled with chopped peanuts or black sesame paste. They are boiled in a sweet syrup or savory sauce and served. "There was also napa cabbage during the meal," notes Chao. "The Chinese character for napa means fortune so it was part of the meal."

"On New Year's Day, we put on new clothes and visit elderly relatives and our teachers," says Cui. "There is much respect for the elderly and for teachers. We go and show our respect and then the elderly relatives give us red envelopes with money," says Cui. The oldest and married members of the family give new bank notes in red envelopes to the younger and unmarried members of the family.

Color is very important during Chinese New Year's celebrations. "Red is good because it symbolizes happiness and good luck," says Cui. "White symbolizes death so it is not worn for New Year."

This year, Chinese New Year falls on Feb. 8. Moreno shares a recipe for dumplings for anyone who wants to join in the tradition of welcoming a year with hopes of good fortune. Chao shares a recipe for Nian Goa, a sweet glutinous steamed rice cake that is thought to bring improvement to the new year. The special ingredients can be found in the Asian section of grocery stores.

*Judy Buchenot is a freelance writer.*

## **Dumplings**

12 to 16 ounce package round dumpling or gyoza wrappers  
small head napa cabbage  
4 ounces fresh shiitake mushrooms  
1 pound ground pork  
1 egg  
2 tablespoons sesame oil  
2 tablespoons soy sauce (or salt and pepper to taste)  
water for boiling or olive oil for frying  
Red or black rice vinegar

Thaw wrappers if frozen. Finely dice cabbage and mushrooms.

In a large bowl, combine ground pork, cabbage, mushrooms, egg, sesame oil and soy sauce (or salt and pepper). Mix well. Place one wrapper in the palm of your hand. Place on tablespoon of filling in the middle of the wrapper. Do not place too much filling or wrappers will pop open during cooking. Wet the edges of the wrapper with water. Fold wrapper in half and squeeze the edges together firmly while crimping the edges to form pleats.

Dumplings can be placed in freezer bags and frozen at this point for later use. When ready to serve, dumpling can be boiled or fried. To boil, fill a large pot half full with water. Add a pinch of salt and 1 teaspoon oil. Bring to a boil and then place dumplings in a single layer in the pot. Allow water to come to a boil and then add one cup cold water. Bring to a boil again and add one more cup cold water. Bring to a boil again. Dumplings should be cooked and floating on top. Remove dumplings and drain. Serve with red or black rice vinegar or soy sauce.

To fry dumplings, pour a thin layer of olive oil in a frying pan and heat. Brown dumplings in the oil for 2 minutes being sure to flip them so they do not stick to the pan. When dumplings are beginning to brown, add 6 tablespoons water and cover pan with a lid. Cook for 6 to 8 minutes until dumplings are cooked through. Remove lid from pan and continue to cook until all the water is evaporated, flipping dumplings to keep them from sticking. Serve with red or black rice vinegar or soy sauce.

## **Nian Gao (New Year's Cake)**

2 cups water  
1 1/4 cup sugar (can use white or brown sugar or a mix)  
1 1/2 pounds glutinous rice flour  
9 ounces sweetened red bean paste  
2 cups cooked Chinese red beans  
optional  
2 eggs

Tina's Culinary Cue

To create a non-stick surface in a seasoned, iron wok, heat the wok and run fresh cut slices of ginger around the surface.

Additional soy sauce  
oil for frying

Mix together sugar and water. Bring to a boil over medium heat. Place rice flour in a mixing bowl and pour hot sugar and water mixture over it. Mix well. Add red bean paste and red beans and mix well. Grease an 8" round pan and spread mixture into the pan. Steam for one hour over hot water in a bamboo steamer. Cool.

If desired, cake can be fried for extra flavor. Beat two eggs. Cut cake into 2" squares. Dip into eggs. Heat a thin layer of oil in a pan. Fry cake squares until lightly browned.

Copyright © 2016, [Aurora Beacon-News](#)