

- Chinese New Year

## Eat your way to fortune

From dumplings shaped like gold ingots to noodles symbolising long life, these eight traditional, flavourful Lunar New Year dishes invite good luck and prosperity for all

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Searching for luck in the new year? We know exactly how to get it, and it is through your stomach.



For generations, Chinese families have believed that the most direct and foolproof way to ensure fortune and prosperity is to eat it.

Each dish served during the Lunar New Year is the result of a conscious decision, as every ingredient is a recipe for prosperity, woven with homophones, shapes and colours that symbolise blessings and wishes for the year ahead.

The following list is common foods you might see during the festive season, why they are so popular and what they could bring to your life.

### Dumplings

Dumplings are a powerful symbol of wealth and prosperity. During Lunar New Year, families gather to meticulously fold these pockets of dough into the half-moon shape that resembles ancient Chinese gold ingots.

The process itself is an act of crafting good fortune for the coming year, and eating the dumplings brings the promise of financial abundance. Always a communal, multigenerational activity from preparation to the shared feast, dumplings represent unity and collective hope for the future.

In some areas of China, there is a tradition to conceal a clean coin, a sweet confectionery or special nut inside a random dumpling during preparation. Whoever discovers this treasure in their bowl is prophesied to have an extra portion of good luck, whether it be unexpected wealth, a sweet life or the blessing of a child.

### Gao (cake or pudding)

Gao, also referred to as cake or pudding, is a common food during Lunar New Year because of its homophonic meaning. In Chinese, the word sounds identical to that of “tall” or “high”, transforming the name to mean “reaching new heights each year”.

There are three main versions eaten during the Lunar New Year. The first is called nian gao, which translates to “year cake”, and eating this sweet and sticky rice pudding invokes upward

mobility and progress in the coming year, whether that be in academics, business, careers or social status.

The second is radish cake, and its primary ingredient, the daikon, is known in Cantonese as lo bak. The word “lo” sounds like another character that depicts catching something with a net, while “bak” sounds like the word for “prophecy” or “fortune”, evoking the meaning “to gather good omens”.

Often packed with additional auspicious ingredients such as Chinese sausage for wealth, dried shrimp for happiness and laughter, and shiitake mushrooms for longevity, it becomes a concentrated vessel of blessings.

The last one is water chestnut cake, whose Chinese name derives from its resemblance to a horse’s hoof, drawing on this connection with an animal traditionally associated with speed, vigour and success.

It is also cherished for its properties of resilience as a crunchy, sweet tuber that, despite growing in muddy water, emerges with a crisp and refreshing quality. It is seen as a metaphor for vitality and principles, rooting in fertile ground and maintaining integrity to rise above with clarity.

#### Poon choi

One of the most iconic shared dishes during Lunar New Year is poon choi, which translates to simply mean “basin dish”, but it is far from simple.

It is a literal feast of layers, assembled with premium ingredients such as abalone for wealth, other seafood for good fortune, meats for strength and vegetables for health, all served in a single large communal pot.

Ingredients are carefully arranged in layers with prized delicacies such as abalone or king prawns often placed on top. Digging downward through the layers illustrates the uncovering of hidden treasures and the revelation of successive levels of good luck throughout the year.

The abundance of components in poon choi visually embodies the wish for overflowing surplus in prosperity. Completing the meal by consuming every layer is seen as “finishing the year with a full basin”, ensuring that no luck is left behind.

Its origins are popularly traced to the Song dynasty, created as a communal feast for villagers and soldiers to celebrate victory and unity. Gathering around this shared vessel signifies harmony, erasing social boundaries and fostering a spirit of equality.

#### Steamed whole fish

Fish is often a required dish for Lunar New Year celebrations. The Chinese word for fish is yu, which is also the homophone for the word meaning “surplus” and used in the phrase “nian nian you yu”, a common blessing for abundance year after year.

It is crucial that the fish be served whole, with head and tail intact, reflecting a complete and unbroken cycle of prosperity from the beginning of the year to its end that ensures the luck remains unbroken.

The method of preparation – steaming – is significant, as this gentle cooking technique portrays a smooth, uncomplicated and harmonious year ahead, free from turmoil or “overcooking”. The traditional presentation shows a garnish with slivers of ginger and spring onion, which not only add freshness but whose colours – yellow and green – are associated with growth and vitality.

It is customary to leave a portion uneaten – specifically, some of the flesh along with the head and tail skeleton. Leaving an “excess” on the plate enacts the hope of “nian nian you yu”, ensuring that abundance carries over into the future.

### Spring rolls

Spring rolls are regarded as a symbol of wealth and prosperity, mainly attributed to their iconic golden colour and physical resemblance to gold bars. Serving a platter of these golden cylinders is like presenting a stack of precious bullion on the dining table.

Called chun juan in Mandarin, the English name is a direct translation meaning “rolling in” fresh energy, vitality and potential of the coming spring, which is inherently tied to renewal and growth.

Wrapping the filling tightly with a thin skin represents the containment and securing of good fortune for the months ahead. The circular motion of rolling is a positive, forward-moving action, helping to “roll away” any lingering misfortune from the old year.

### Longevity noodles

Longevity noodles are the most direct symbol of a long and healthy life in Chinese culture.

Their primary auspicious power is derived from their name and form, where the dish is intentionally prepared as a single, unbroken strand that can stretch up to several feet. This is a metaphor for the uninterrupted continuation of life, from the present far into the future.

The long noodle must be slurped whole into the mouth without being cut or bitten into shorter pieces, as breaking the strand would symbolically “cut short” one’s life.

It is typically served in a clear savoury broth or stir-fried, accompanied by ingredients that reinforce the theme, such as leafy greens for vitality, shiitake mushrooms and eggs for rebirth and completeness.

### Braised mushrooms with fat choy

The star ingredient fat choy is a black, hairlike moss whose name in Cantonese is a homophone for making a fortune and hitting a jackpot.

The word for mushroom, gu, on the other hand, is a homophone for the character that can mean “to encourage” or “to drum up”, but more importantly, it sounds similar to the word for “ancient”, embodying longevity and endurance.

Together, the name means to collect and keep good luck.

The mushrooms are typically high-quality dried shiitake prized for their rich, savoury depth. They are more expensive and prized than fresh ones as drying concentrates their umami flavour.

They are rehydrated until plump and meaty, then slowly braised with the fat choy, a process that represents patience and the accumulation of wealth.

An alternative dish pairs fat choy with dried oysters, or ho si, which sounds like the phrase for “good market”. It is favoured by business owners who wish for economic success in the new year.

### Golden salted egg prawns

The word for prawn in Cantonese, ha, sounds like laughter and joy, and its transformation in this dish is key: each prawn is lavishly coated or wok-fried in a rich, glistening sauce of salted egg yolk.

Not only does it turn the prawns into gold nuggets that portray serving financial fortune and liveliness on a platter, the egg also adds layers of meaning. It symbolises new beginnings, while its colour signifies wealth.

The preservation process of salting and curing the eggs is akin to storing and concentrating this value over time, so the sauce is not just a sign of surface-level wealth, but of matured, accumulated and richly concentrated prosperity.

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