

IT'S one week to Chinese New Year. I wish all of you a healthy year of the boar. It will be a time for celebration and merry making with families and friends.

Firstly there will be the traditional reunion dinners that family members look forward to, usually on the night of new year's eve. The next day, or rather the following several days, there will be visits to friends and relatives. Food plays an extremely important role in this festival.

In this instalment, I would like to share with you my thoughts about the nutritional value of some of the foods commonly consumed during the Chinese New Year. Some of these are considered delicacies by the Chinese community and are highly priced. Let us also discuss the cultural significance of eating these foods.

### Mandarin orange

I will start with the ubiquitous *kam* that you see everywhere, given together with other gifts and consumed throughout this joyous occasion.

*Kam* is the Cantonese word for mandarin orange. It also sounds like "gold". Hence it is an auspicious fruit to consume during this festive season, symbolising riches and good fortune. Selected varieties from specific provinces in China are said to produce the best *kam*.

Nutritionally, the mandarin orange is similar to other citrus fruits. As with other fruits, the main nutrient of interest would be vitamins, especially vitamin C or ascorbic acid.

Mandarin orange has a moderate amount of vitamin C (28 mg/100 g\*). This level is five times higher than that of watermelon (5.5 mg) but half that of papaya and one-seventh that of guava (152 mg).

In addition, there is a small amount of carotenoids (the orange coloured pigments in fruits and vegetables, some of which can be converted to vitamin A). The level is much lower than that of other coloured fruits such as papaya or mango.

An interesting additional note about this fruit is its peel. It can be air dried and used when braising or simmering dishes. When added to red bean soup dessert for example, the peel of the mandarin orange gives it a very pleasant zesty flavour.

### Yee Sang

This dish is like a "must-have" when attending lunches and dinners during the Chinese New Year period. The main ingredients are multi-coloured small pieces of crunchy rice crackers, and of course, a small serving of raw fish, hence the name of the dish, *yee sang*.

Other condiments in the dish vary considerably and may include jelly fish, shredded carrot, turnip, pomelo, peanuts, sesame seeds, plum sauce, lime juice, pickled leek and a small bowl of oil.

This is basically a carbohydrate dish and the amount of fish in it does not contribute significant amounts of protein. Nutritionally it may not be a great dish. It is however believed to be an auspicious dish, symbolising abundance, prosperity and vigour. In the business community, it is believed that the tossing of *yee sang* will bring an abundance of good business and prosperity. You might not want to overdo this though and use only a small amount of the oil provided.

### Fish

Pronounced in mandarin, fish is "yu" and it sounds like another word that means "more than enough" or "having enough to spare". Hence, fish is another "must have" food item when preparing dishes during this festive period. Families will go to great extents to serve expensive fish for the reunion dinner, for example, large pomfret. The fish is usually served as a whole fish, steamed or deep fried.

Fish has always been high recommended by nutritionists because of its nutritional value. It provides amounts of protein (20g per 100 g) similar to that of chicken or beef.

The fat content of fish (generally below 5g per 100g), on the other hand, is lower than the usual cuts of meat and poultry. The cholesterol content of fish is also generally lower than that of other meat. Certain fishes, especially the deep sea varieties (for example, cod and salmon) contain significant amounts of

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## Chinese New Year foods – nutrition facts and trivia.



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omega-3 fatty acids. These are long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids essential to the body. Moderate amounts of iron and vitamin A are also present in fish.

It is quite unnecessary to always look for expensive fish for daily consumption. The nutritional value of the various varieties of fish are rather similar. The cheaper *ikan kembong* is just as nutritious as the much higher priced *bawal putih*. Fresh water fish too are as nutritious as marine fishes. The fat content of the former is generally higher than those of marine fishes.

### Other seafood

Several other seafoods are popular dishes during this festive season. Fish maw, known in Cantonese as *yi piu*, is yet another expensive Chinese delicacy. It is said to symbolise good luck. It is actually the swim bladder or air bladder that enables the fish to control its buoyancy.

Fish maw is often fried in oil and then braised or stewed. It is sometimes cooked in soup. It is rather tasteless by itself, but it is enjoyed more for its slightly rubbery and crunchy texture. In the dried form, it is high in protein and low in fat.

Sea cucumber or sea slug is yet another much sought after delicacy, and highly priced too. It is often sold dried and requires many days of soaking and repeated scrubbing to clean out its digestive system.

There are varying sizes and qualities. The Chinese name in Mandarin, *hai-shen*, translates as "sea ginseng" because of its supposed aphrodisiac qualities. This accounts for the centuries of enthusiastic harvesting of this unattractive sea creature. It has no flavour by itself, only a gelatinous texture. This may be cooked in a stew, combined with pork trotter or ribs. Sea cucumber has much lower amounts of protein and fat, compared with fishes. It contains several minerals and vitamins.

Known as sea slug or as *gamat* in Bahasa Malaysia, sea cucumber is said to have medicinal properties – it is believed to be a remedy for cuts, wounds and inflammation. There are also reports that *gamat* contains rejuvenation properties.

### Mushrooms

Edible mushrooms are used extensively in Chinese cooking. Particularly during this festive season, the black Chinese mushroom is widely used. The food item signifies the reunion of family members, sharing things together; it signifies happiness.

Mushrooms in general have low nutritional value. Some varieties contain fair amounts of dietary fibre, protein and the B vitamins.

Nevertheless, the Chinese and other communities around the world have believed that mushrooms have medicinal properties for a long time. Certain ancient religious scriptures have mentioned their medicinal importance; the Romans considered mushrooms to be the



foods of the gods and the Chinese declared them to be the elixir of life. A great deal of modern-day research has been conducted on mushrooms, such as the potential anti-tumour, anti-viral and hypolipidaemic effects.

### Nian gau

I would like to end this write up of Chinese New Year foods with a very important dish for all of you. This is the *nian gau*, a sticky rice pudding cake. You do not want to take too much of this snack as it is basically a high carbohydrate (and hence calorie) food and is very sweet too.

It is nevertheless a very auspicious food and its name gives the connotation of *nian nian gau*, which suggests "advancing further in your career year after year". It is also taken to suggest *bu bu gau sheng*, which means "advance toward higher positions with every step you take".

I wish you all exactly that. More importantly, I wish you health in order to be successful and be able to enjoy the fruits of your labour.

There are of course numerous other dishes and delicacies consumed during the Chinese New Year period. From this write up of a few of such food items, we can note that mankind

does not eat merely for nutrition reasons. Eating is an important social and cultural event. Eating is a pleasurable occasion.

Balancing between the different needs of eating and following the healthy eating principles, we can all enjoy eating during festivities without the detrimental effects. Do remember the tips I have shared with you on the January 14 instalment of this column. I had emphasised that you should remember to practise some simple healthy eating discipline, namely, selecting food wisely and consuming the right proportions of food.

\* Data on nutritional value of local foods cited in this write up are based on Nutrient Composition of Malaysian Foods, Tee et al., 1997, Institute for Medical Research. These data may also be accessed from [www.nutriweb.org.my](http://www.nutriweb.org.my)

■ NutriScene is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail [starhealth@thestar.com.my](mailto:starhealth@thestar.com.my).

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