

UNKNOWN PLEASURES

15 CHINESE RESTAURANTS YOU NEVER KNEW YOU HAD TO TRY

by Tom O'Malley and Emily Young

A city of 40,000 eateries, but so much of it remains uncharted culinary territory.

How to discover new gems? How to avoid the imitators? We asked the people who know best: ten local Chinese experts passionate about good eating in Beijing.

We asked our experts to each nominate their five favorite restaurants in Beijing. We visited them (often more than once), ate our fill (often more than was sensible), and settled on these.

For an interactive map of all the featured venues, go to www.thebeijinger.com.

OUR EXPERTS



GAO KANG

A legend on Dianping.com (China's foodie social networking site), Gao Kang writes Beijing restaurant reviews that thousands of fans devotedly follow. He told us he sees Cantonese and Huaiyang food "like a druggie sees opium." Enough said.



DONG MENGHAO

Originally from Taiwan, Dong Menghao is a critic for Chinese food magazines and runs a popular blog through which he bestows awards on local restaurants. The owner of a cafe/restaurant in Houhai, he never eats out without Danzhu, his toy dog.



LI TAO

As HR manager for Da Dong's restaurants (voted in the Top 5 in China by the Miele report), Li Tao looks after 500 of the best and brightest Chinese chefs in town. Outside of the kitchen, he regularly blogs on food and lifestyle in the capital, seeking out new Yunnan and Huaiyang restaurants.



DAI AIQUN

One of China's best-known food critics and gourmet columnists, Dai Aiqun makes regular appearances on food-related TV shows and consults for various magazines. He tells us, "Food is more important than reading, less important than breathing." Wise words indeed.



SHEN XIAOCHANG

This shy gentleman is host of a popular food-based radio show, "Talk about Eating." A history prof, he naturally favors the time-honored *laozihao* restaurants of Shandong, Jiangzhe, Huaiyang and Beijing cuisine.



CHEN YIDONG

One of Dianping.com's elite "diamond users," this Beijing foodie supports his obsessions with investment banking, which seems eminently sensible. When he's not frequenting Beijing's traditional eateries or gourmet restaurants, he's cooking up Hakka-style stuffed tofu in his kitchen.



ZHAO XU

A lover of wide-open spaces, Zhao Xu cites food and food alone as the reason he's drawn to the big city. Averse to overly sweet or salty food, he's made it his personal mission to seek out Beijing restaurants that go easy on the seasoning. Tough assignment, but someone's got to do it.



GAO JIAYUE

One of the original users of Dianping.com, housewife Gao Jiayue favors Guizhou, Sichuan, Jiangsu and Zhejiang cooking styles in both restaurants and her own home-cooking. She describes her life as 50 percent clothes and 50 percent eating – which seems a waste of good eating time.



QU MIN

A reporter and feature writer for *Travel & Leisure Asia*, Qu Min writes on all aspects of Chinese dining in the capital and is a regular at Beijing's finer establishments.



YE JUN

China Daily's principal food writer, Ye Jun has penned articles on everything from the unstoppable rise of Sichuan food in Beijing to roundups of bargain-basement noodle restaurants.



Suggested menu:

1. Salad of wild ferns with dipping sauce
shui douchi ban shanyecai
水豆豉拌山野菜 (RMB 22)
2. Homemade tofu with chilli and pork
shui doufu
水豆腐 (RMB 28)
3. Fish with peas, chillis and pickled vegetables
yan suan ganshao yu
盐酸干烧鱼 (RMB 48)
4. Fresh bamboo with fermented chilli
zaola xiansun
糟辣鲜笋 (RMB 28)
5. Stir-fried pea sprouts
qingchao wandoujian
清炒豌豆尖 (RMB 22)

JIA XIU LOU YUAN 甲秀楼缘

Daily 11.30am-2pm, 5.30-9pm. Bldg 5, Guoying Yuan (inside the Guiyang City Government Office), Xizhimen Nanxiaojie, Xicheng District (6613 1442, 6618 3399 ext 200)
西城区西直门南小街国英园5号楼(青年宫对面)

Cuisine: Guizhou

Nearest subway: Xizhimen, Lines 2, 4 and 13 (5-minute walk)

Menu: Picture menu, Chinese only

Approximate cost: RMB 50 per person. Chinese bank cards accepted

Combine visit with: A show or movie at the communist-style Beijing Youth Palace Theatre opposite



Memorable fish dishes, mouthwatering pickled veggies and a bright, buzzy dining room

For a state-run joint, this upper-floor eatery surprised us with its congenial atmosphere, alert waitresses, sunny windows, and fetching tableware. Operated by the provincial government of Guiyang (Guizhou's capital), the restaurant specializes in food at once sour and

spicy, with preserved meats, pickled vegetables and an abundance of *zaola* (fermented chillis) dominating the menu.

Vegetarians have a lot of scope here (though several dishes on the menu feature dog, so tread carefully). Exotic edible plants native to the region



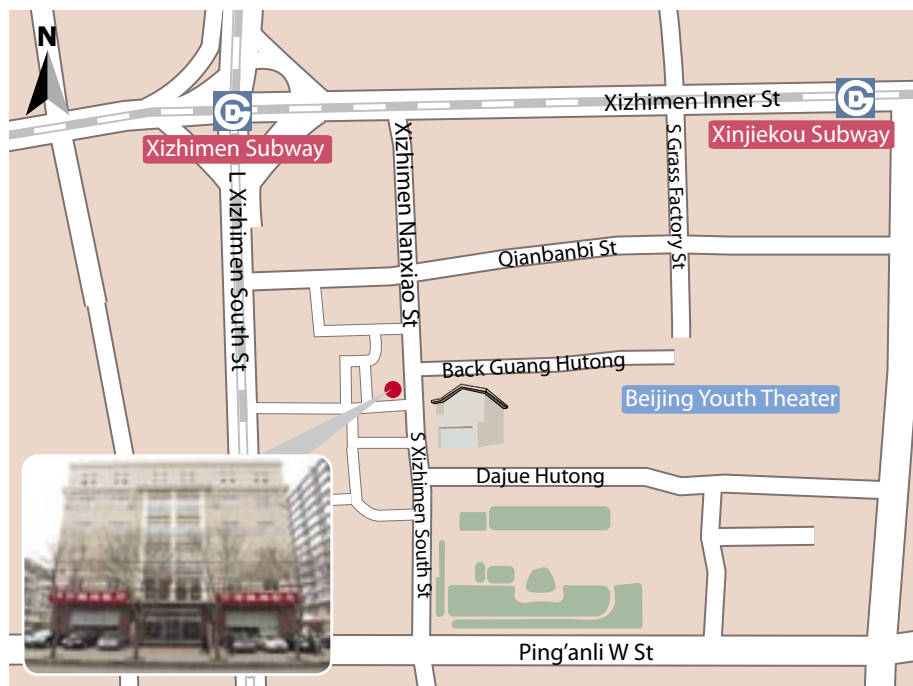
are flown in weekly; they're fun to try, but it can be a lottery of freshness. On one visit our wild ferns tasted like they'd just been picked; on a subsequent visit, they were bland and wilted.

Fish dishes here are commendably fresh and satisfying, and the neutral white meat accommodates the tart spiciness of other offerings especially well. Don't visit without ordering *shui doufu*, a peasant dish of rough-hewn tofu chunks made on-site and served with a pungent dipping sauce just a few shades milder than Japanese *natto*. A safe bet for fussy eaters is Guizhou's answer to red-braised pork (*hongshao rou*, RMB 42), a spectacular, dome-shaped sculpture of layers of colorful vegetables and melt-in-the-mouth meat. Round off your meal like the locals do - knock back a shot of fruit-infused *heinuomi jiu*, a traditional rice-based *digestif*.

Our expert says:



"Since Da Gui closed, this is the number-one Guizhou restaurant in town - much better than Guizhou Mansion, Er Gui or the terrible Three Guizhou Men. We had a *suantang yu* there recently that tasted exactly like it does at my Guizhou friend's house. The experienced *maitre d'* is a Guizhou beauty." Gao Jiayue



BA TIAO YI HAO 八条一号

Daily 11am-2pm, 4.30-10pm. 1 Xisibei Batiao (near Ping'anli crossing), Xicheng District (6616 6292) 西城区西北八条1号

Cuisine: Yunnan

Nearest subway: Ping'anli – Line 4 (5-minute walk)

Menu: Picture menu, Chinese only

Approximate cost: RMB 40 per person. Cash only

Combine visit with: A stroll north along Xinjiekou where shopkeepers flog musical instruments with impromptu streetside performances

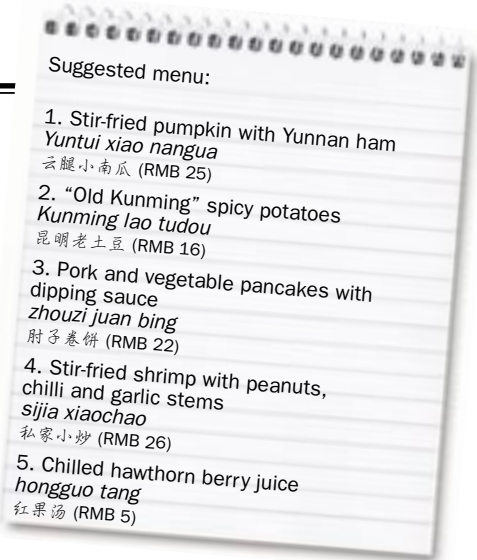


This hutong hideaway serves soulful Beijing and Yunnan standards under the same sky-lit roof



It might lack the dazzling ethnic flavors of Yunteng Shifu or Golden Peacock, but this unassertive alleyway diner is probably the only spot in town where you can chase a spicy mint salad with a saucer of oily *ma doufu*. The hybrid menu – half northern Yunnan, half *lao Beijing* – is skewed towards affordable homestyle cooking, a good fit for the cozy, plant-strewn dining room lit from above by glass partitions.

Start by getting messy with the novel signature dish of sliced pork with julienned veggies, fried pancakes (*bing*) and a sticky dipping sauce. The “self-assembly” concept is Beijing duck; the price (RMB 22) is Kentucky Fried Chicken. Continuing the *kuaican* theme, the Kunming potatoes achieve a rare combo of hash brown-y exterior and velvety mashed insides, sprinkled liberally with peanuts, exotic chillies and herbs (though the magic here may well be a trick of the MSG). Steamed *chou doufu* (RMB 25) – smooth, soft and smelly, with a touch of chilli – is wonderfully authentic.



Their homemade hawthorn berry drink, ladled out of an English pub pint glass (RMB 5), is sour, sweet and refreshing. Though it owes its origins to Beijing, it pairs particularly well with the Yunnan dishes on offer, such as stir-fried “hotbed” chives with black pork. Or try the smoky, salty imported Yunnan ham cooked with green baby pumpkin (another ingredient seldom found in Beijing) – unfussy, thoroughly pleasant food that deserves recognition.

Our expert says:



“Ba Tiao Yi Hao features Dali cuisine native to northwestern Yunnan, which is a little unusual for Beijing. You can taste the serious attitude to cooking in the authentic dishes, and the décor features green plants – something this whole city lacks.” *Li Tao*

BINGTUAN DASHA 兵团大厦

Daily 11.30am-2pm, 5-9pm. Bldg 2, Courtyard 6 (west of Carrefour), Maliandao Nanjie, Xuanwu District (5836 3988)

宣武区马连道南街6号院2号楼(家乐福西侧)

Cuisine: Xinjiang

Nearest subway: Taoranting, Line 4 (5 minutes by taxi)

Menu: Picture menu, Chinese only

Approximate cost: RMB 50 per person. Chinese bank cards accepted.

Combine visit with: A tour of Beijing’s tea district.

See www.teatrips.com for reliable guided day tours with a local expert.



Far-flung gourmet Xinjiang food in the heart of Beijing’s tea district

This brutalist block of a government building in Beijing’s tea district hides a gourmet secret: the finest Xinjiang restaurant in town. Waitresses in shapely dresses usher dealmakers past counters of still-warm *putao nang* (bread baked to resemble a bunch of Turpan’s famous grapes) to smart tables topped with fresh flowers and gold and silver ornamental teapots. An open kitchen reveals chefs spearing great hunks of marinated lamb onto willow-wood skewers brought in from Xinjiang – gimmicky for sure, but the rich, faintly fruity flavor trumps most other *chuan’r*.

Indeed, it’s lamb, of the aromatic, melt-in-the-mouth kind, that’s on everybody’s table. Order two hours ahead to sample tender lamb ribs or a whole cumin-spiced leg, but the *nang bao rou* – lamb chunks slow-cooked on the bone in a mild tomato sauce and served atop a huge, floury *nang* bread – is wonderful and demands no advance



planning. *Kao baozi*, palm-sized pastry pockets of fatty lamb ubiquitous in Xinjiang, are a joy here (*dabao* some for your friends), and meat-pie fans should go for the *roubing*, a large circular lamb and onion pie in crispy, flaky pastry.

For dessert, try all manner of ethnic cakes and pastries, including what the menu describes as baklava (*bakelawa*, RMB 4), sticky with honey and walnuts and a scrumptious counterpoint to the near-sour homemade yoghurt studded with fruit. Should you need any more persuading to make the pilgrimage out west, the Chinese government has awarded Bintuan Dasha an “A” rating for hygiene, which puts it in a rather elite club – especially, it should be noted, for a Xinjiang restaurant.



Our expert says:

“My Xinjiang friends introduced me to this place. It’s in the representative office of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, so it’s effectively a non-local take on authentic Xinjiang food, hence many traditional recipes have been improved upon while still using authentic imported ingredients.” *Dai Aiqun*

MOYU'ER DASONG SHIGONG

摸鱼儿大宋食供

Daily 9.30am-9pm. 8 Zhongjiangzi Xiang, Dongcheng District (6403 3309)
<http://blog.sina.com.cn/mooyuer> 东城区中剪子巷8号

Cuisine: Song dynasty (Imperial)

Nearest subway: Zhangzizhong Lu, Line 5 (5-minute walk)

Menu: None (set menus)

Approximate cost: RMB 100, 200 or 300 per person. Cash only

Combine visit with: An evening concert at Yugong Yishan

GOOD FOR:
History buffs
and
poetry fans

Dishes inspired by ancient poetry, elegant private rooms and hassle-free set menus



Despite its centrality, this "gem" is so well-concealed we almost didn't include it. An expressionless door opens into a warren of elegant, freshly painted private rooms, where staff in Song dynasty dress (a bit startled – we hadn't booked) usher us to a table.

The unusual food is what sets this place apart: The dishes derive from references in Song dynasty poems. Don't worry if your memory for verse is a little rusty – the menus are fixed at RMB 100, 200 or 300 per person, so deciding your price point is the only obstacle before dishes start sailing endlessly out of the kitchen. For RMB 100 we enjoyed a big claypot of *dongpo rou*, Hangzhou's famously fatty pork (named after the poet Su Dongpo),



sliced beef brisket, tender chicken with black bean, pickled turnip, fish poached in a soy milk soup flavored with pineapple, and many more. A flask of warm almond wine was a mellow treat, though some dishes, like the "sizzling" squid with onions, looked and tasted decidedly modern. The RMB 200 and 300 menus offer more "prestige" dishes, some of them charmingly playful, like a "bear's paw" carved skillfully out of aspic.

Call ahead to book, especially in the colder months, so they can warm up your room and prepare the menu. Spring or summer is the best time to visit, when traditional drumming and dance performances in the central courtyard play up the sense of occasion.

Our expert says:



"I really liked the 'Golden Chicken,' a dish famous in the Tang dynasty and name-checked by poet Li Bai: 'There are green spirits in the pavilion and golden chicken on the plate' (亭上十分绿醪酒, 盘中一味黄金鸡). It's healthy, not greasy or heavy, and the meat comes off the bone with no effort, which suggests the chef knows how to choose ingredients and control cooking time." *Dong Menghao*



XIAO LIU SHUANROU

小刘涮鲜肉

Daily 10.30am-11pm. 12 Lazhu Hutong, Hufang Qiao, Xuanwu District (134 3938 1885)
宣武区虎坊桥腊竹胡同12号

Cuisine: Beijing hot pot

Nearest subway: Caishikou, Line 4 (10-minute walk)

Menu: Chinese only

Approximate cost: RMB 30 per person.

Cash only

Combine visit with: A trip to the Temple of Heaven and the last few hutong districts south of Qianmen

GOOD FOR:
Hutong fans
and
time travelers

Bring a camera and your appetite for a hot pot adventure that's as traditional as it gets

Suggested menu:

1. Hot pot soup base

guo di

锅底 (RMB 25)

2. Hand-sliced fresh mutton

shougongqie xian yangrou

手工切鲜羊肉 (RMB 22)

3. Napa cabbage

baicai

白菜 (RMB 4)

4. Sliced lotus root

lian'ou

莲藕 (RMB 5)

5. Fresh tofu

xian doufu

鲜豆腐 (RMB 4)

You could pick almost any hot pot place on Luzhu Hutong, a wonderfully winding jumble of steamy eateries, ragtag homesteads and shop fronts. But Xiao Liu Shuanrou is remarkable in that it's so authentically, well, unremarkable. A tiny box-shaped room houses four cheerfully dressed vinyl tables topped with excellent chilli sauce and vinegar. Once-white walls, strip lighting and dozens of empty *baijiu* bottles along the wall sum up the décor: functional.

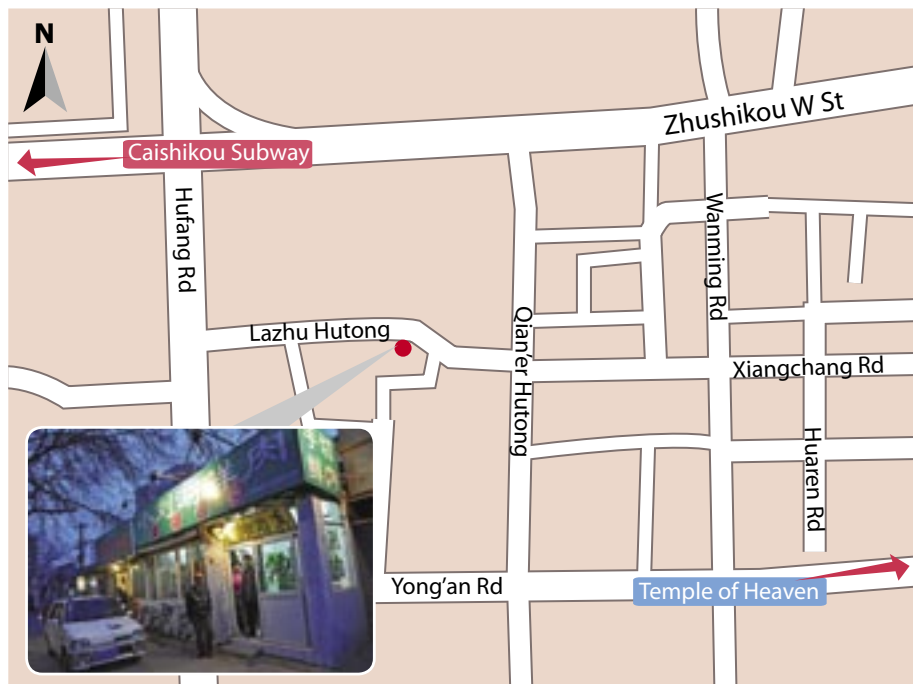
Pick your fixings from a one-page print-out of lamb, tofu and veggies. The *laoban*, cigarette in teeth, will heap glowing coals into a battered copper pot, and set it at your table topped with a huge funnel on top to suck in air and get the soup simmering. The water-based broth is seasoned simply with goji berries, ginger and dates on one side, and spicy chilli on the other. Such an austere broth demands quality meat, so order the pricier hand-sliced mutton (*shougongqie yangrou*), bought from nearby Niu Jie. Particularly fresh and tender, it retains its flavor profile even when dunked liberally in the cilantro-flecked sesame sauce.

If you ignore the tinny music coming out of the *laoban*'s mobile phone, this is a place where Father Time really does seem to have stood still. But don't be fooled. He's just taking a breather. Like much of the surrounding neighborhood, it won't be around much longer, so visit while you can.

Our expert says:



"It's tucked away in a typical Beijing hutong, the décor is just so-so, and you have to yell to order food. I recommend the fresh mutton, frozen mutton, cabbage and tripe. This kind of hot pot, with a charcoal fire, plain lamb and almost no extra flavorings, is an unforgettable *lao Beijing* experience that's been the same for hundreds of years." *Zhao Xu*



SHENG JIN LOU 盛金楼海鲜

Daily 9am-10pm. Unit 106, Jinghua Haoyuan, Bldg 8, Waijiaobu Nanjie, Chaoyang District (8562 2792)
朝阳区外交部南街8号楼京华豪园106店铺

Cuisine: Wenzhou (Zhejiang)

Nearest subway: Chaoyangmen – Line 2 (10-minute walk)

Menu: No menu – point to items

Approximate cost: RMB 80 per person (if you order seafood). Cash only

Combine visit with: A visit to Alien Street Market and Ritan Park

GOOD FOR:
Seafood lovers
and
DIY diners

Market-fresh seafood and no-frills stir-fry present an intriguing introduction to the flavors of Wenzhou's night markets

Sheng Jin Lou takes its cue from the sidewalk food stalls (*da paidang*) of Wenzhou, a major city in Zhejiang province. Though southern in temperament, this food should not be mistaken for Cantonese or Fujianese. The cuisine

is seafood-heavy, but also relies on a dizzying array of food preservation methods, suggesting that traditionally, this was suitable fare for the province's many traveling merchants.

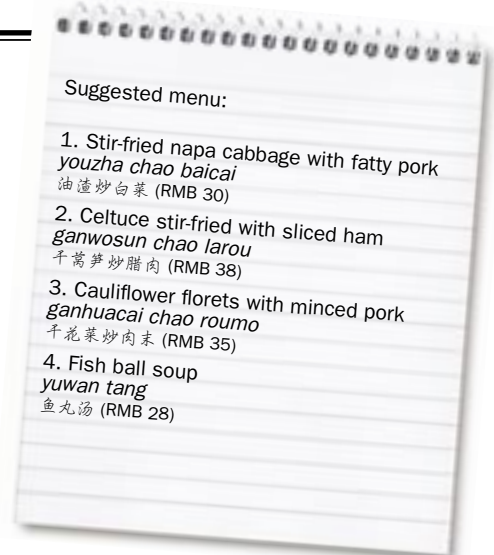
There's no menu either – come prepared with a list of dishes (use our suggested menu for starters) or take a gander at the seafood, at the counter of brined and braised "deli" meats, and at the shelves of greens. Point at what you want, and within minutes it's been stir-fried and on your table.

The vegetables here, dry-preserved and rehydrated, seem to take on intensified flavor and a snappy texture. Chunks of reconstituted celtuce (think of it as a mellow celery) practically squeak in the mouth; green cauliflower, thinned into florets, are also intriguingly al dente. *Baicaï*, paired with fatty pork that's been fried in its own drippings, is made unctuous and flavorful. Most, if not all dishes come stir-fried in lard, the time-honored cooking style of Wenzhou, but though

rich, are generally not oversalted. The décor – in keeping with the night market theme – is strictly fluorescent lights and linoleum, and we noticed several similarly attired Wenzhou restaurants within a few blocks, which could suggest they sprang up to serve the homesick wholesale barons of nearby Alien Street Market and Yabao Lu.

Our expert says:

"Don't expect much from the service, but the food is authentic and delicious. Many dishes are fried in lard which is common in the South. Try the crab cooked in the light, fragrant Wenzhou style."
Gao Kang



LANZHOU HOTEL RESTAURANT 兰州宾馆餐厅

Daily 11.30am-2pm, 5-8.30pm. Bldg 5 (by the Lanzhou City Government Office Building), Jinhui Jiayuan residential area, 58 Xizhimen Nanxiaojie, Xicheng District (8229 1133 ext 108)

西城区西直门北大街58号院金晖嘉园小区5号楼

Cuisine: Gansu

Nearest subway: Xizhimen – Lines 2, 4 and 13 (10-minute walk)

Menu: Chinese only

Approximate cost: RMB 50 per person. Chinese bank cards accepted

GOOD FOR:
Lamb lovers
and
noodleheads

Sample one of China's lesser-known food regions, not to mention Beijing's most tender lamb

Blank décor and bustling service offer scant evidence that this restaurant showcases – in some style – the food from one of China's most culturally diverse provinces. Gansu is home to myriad ethnic groups, each with their own cooking style and food staples. Many of those dishes can be sampled here.

Office workers and

Yanjing-swilling locals all swear by the aromatic braised lamb, cooked so soft it shreds apart at the merest tug of the chopsticks, stewed together with gelatinous slippery potato noodles, another regional specialty. The cold sesame noodles, a Lanzhou staple, are equally popular, though pricey (RMB 22 a bowl)

and overhyped.

If you've never eaten lily bulbs – tender, white edible bulbs said to help with coughs and lung maladies – this is probably the best place in town to try them. Deliciously plump and soft, they're simply steamed along with pumpkin, another vegetable with a natural sweetness. The dish is also dotted with ice-cream sprinkles (seriously), which they should have saved for the *hui douzi*, a faintly sweet soup made of grey peas. Another dessert of sorts is *tian pizi*, a drink made from fermented wheat with the taste of sweet wine and the crisp, brittle bite of wheat grains.



Our expert says:

"The steamed lily bulbs are as white as snow. No other place in town serves them so pure as fresh as here. I often buy mine online, but after coming here I realize that they're already shipping the best in from Gansu province."
Gao Jiayue



Suggested menu:

1. Steamed lily bulbs with pumpkin
jingua kou baihe
金瓜扣百合 (RMB 36)
2. Braised mutton with potato noodles
huangmen yangrou
黄焖羊肉 (RMB 56)
3. Spicy chicken strips
Suanla jia sha
酸辣夹沙 (RMB 36)
4. Gray pea porridge with jujube
hui douzi
灰豆子 (RMB 5)

DIAN FENG LOU 滇峰楼

Daily 9am-2pm, 5-9pm.1/F, Huadu Group, 75 Bingjiaokou Hutong (near Deshengmenwai Dajie), Xicheng District (8208 8909)

西城区德胜门外冰窖口胡同75号华都集团1楼

Cuisine: Yunnan

Nearest subway: Jishuitan, Line 2 (5-minute walk)

Menu: Picture menu, Chinese only

Approximate cost: RMB 80 per person. Chinese bank cards accepted

Combine visit with: A stroll around Xihai Lake followed by a drink at Obiwan

GOOD FOR:
Group meals
and
birthday
dinners

Authentic Yunnan dishes and exotic liquor make this an ideal venue for rowdy get-togethers



The owner of this Yunnan restaurant is not native to China's far west. He was sent there as a *zhiqing*, or Rusticated Youth of China, one of many young city dwellers exiled to rural areas during the Cultural Revolution to be "educated from living in rural poverty." One thing he did learn was authentic Yunnan cuisine.

The pan-fried goats' cheese (an artisanal product of the Bai and Sani minorities) is golden, crumbly and delicious and would give a decent *chevre* a run for its money. Order purposefully, though – the *fuwuyuan* brought ours wrapped around expensive truffle-like pine mushrooms, then tried to charge us RMB 168 for the pleasure.

Absolutely everyone here orders the signature of poached tilapia fish – it's healthy, generously portioned and served with two types of dipping sauce: one piquantly fermented, the other all *ma* and *la*. The lines between Yunnan and Sichuan cuisine can get a little fuzzy, which should be all the pretext you need to order *koushui ji* (mouth-

Suggested menu:

1. Poached white fish with two dipping sauces
zhan shui yu
蘸水鱼 (RMB 58)
2. Fried shredded potato pancake
ganbian yangyu si
干煸洋芋丝 (RMB 20)
3. Pan-fried goats cheese
rubing
乳饼 (RMB 28)
4. Chickpea cold noodles in chilli dressing
jidou fen
鸡豆粉 (RMB 16)
5. Cold "frog skin" fungus with chilli and cilantro
liangban qingwa pi
凉拌青蛙皮 (RMB 22)

watering chicken) – soft, cool and fabulously spicy. Bulk up on carbs with a portion of steamed pineapple sticky rice, a staple of the Dai people, and some of the best grains in town. If you're a "side of fries" person, supersize your table with *ganbian yangyu si*, a pizza-proportioned cake of shredded potato fried up like Swiss *rosti* with a dusting of salt.

Our expert says:



"It's a bit dark and the service can be lukewarm, but I recommend this place because the ingredients are natural and fresh. The restaurant itself is very unpretentious, which is hard to find among more fashionable Yunnan restaurants in Beijing." *Zhao Xu*

LONG XINGSHENG SNACK SHOP

隆兴盛名优小吃

Daily 5.30am-9pm. 19 Ya'er Hutong (north of Yinding Bridge),

Xicheng District (8403 1024) 西城区后海鸦儿胡同19号(近银锭桥)

Cuisine: Hui & Beijing

Nearest subway: Gulou – Line 2 (15-minute walk)

Menu: Chinese only

Approximate cost: RMB 15 per person. Cash only

Combine visit with: A trip exploring the endangered hutongs surrounding the Drum and Bell towers

GOOD FOR:
All the fixings
of a
Houhai picnic

Devotees of this traditional Muslim snack shop queue for some of the best bread in the city



A morning stroll down this little alley for fresh-baked bread is as close to a *boulangerie* moment as you'll have in Beijing. The *zhima shaobing* (sesame bread), baked every half-hour in ancient ovens, are a revelation. Small and puck-shaped, they're crisp on the outside and dense, warm and fluffy in the middle, with just a hint of Sichuan peppercorn. *You pianyi you haochi*, as the locals say. (That means "cheap and tasty." It also means don't come in the hour *before* lunch or dinner, unless you want to queue.) For a portable picnic snack, order the buns filled with braised beef (*ji rou*), cut on a huge wood block by swarthy men in traditional Hui dress.

A chipped cabinet displays other snacks so *lao* in origin that eating them is akin to time travel. Try *tang erduo*, sticky-sweet doughnuts shaped like ears and hard as rock, or *songrou*, a thrifty mix of mashed potato, beef and five-spice powder sandwiched between tofu sheets, then fried and hewn into diamond-shaped wedges.

A few tables dot the dingy interior, but it's better to sit out on the alley in warmer months. If you do, try *ma doufu*, a spreadable mulch of mung-bean pulp and lamb fat, delicious when brought to life with a splash of chilli oil. Or join the old boys and breakfast on *yangtou rou*, strips of face meat stir-fried with scallions. It's delicious and really not as grisly as it sounds, though sliced eyeball does make an appearance. Always two slices, of course. They wouldn't want to short-change the locals.

Our expert says:



"Food so simple, natural and free of additives is uncommon and deserves respect. The braised beef is made fresh everyday, low in fat and high in protein. When you sandwich cold braised beef in a hot *shaobing*, wow! What a wonderful combination." *Chen Yidong*

Suggested menu:

1. Sesame baked bread
zhima shaobing
芝麻烧饼 (RMB 0.7)
2. Slow-braised beef
jiang niurou
酱牛肉 (RMB 20)
3. Mung-bean spread
ma doufu
麻豆腐 (RMB 8)
4. Celery and tofu sheet salad
xiqin fuzhu
西芹腐竹 (RMB 6)
5. Sugar-glazed pastries
tang erduo
糖耳朵 (RMB 1)



HUGUANG HUIGUAN (CHU WAN YUAN) 湖广会馆私房菜 (楚畹园)

Daily 9.30am-2pm, 4.30-9.30pm. 3 Hufang Lu (southwest corner of intersection with Luomashi Dajie), Xuanwu District (6355 3112)

宣武区虎坊路3号

Cuisine: Hubei

Nearest subway: Caishikou, Line 4 (5-minute walk)

Menu: English, picture menu

Approximate cost: RMB 30 per person. Cash only

Combine visit with: A Peking opera show at the Huguang Guildhall next door (nightly 7.30pm, tickets from RMB 180)

GOOD FOR:
Culture buffs
on a
tight budget

This boisterous restaurant serves hearty Hubei food in a dramatic setting

It's a truth universally acknowledged that a restaurant tacked on to a Triple-A tourist venue will stink. And cost the earth. And do risible things like charge for napkins. Which makes this Hubei spot an anomaly of delicious, affordable proportions. (That charges for napkins.)

The wood-furnished dining room, with its high beamed ceilings and tight squeeze of tables, exudes a tavern-esq aura that seems to tease out congeniality from all present, making for a buzzy atmosphere that borders on raucous. It might also be that diners are collectively delighted at just how remarkably cheap it is. RMB 20 gets enough tender, smoky duck meat and vegetables to comfortably feed three people; *hanzhenglu ya*, named after the cooking pot it comes in, consists of hearty slabs of duck, first marinated, then fried and finally steamed atop an arrangement of cabbage, taro and slippery noodles. A Hubei specialty, it's a no-nonsense rebuke to the finicky slices of skin and meat in Beijing *kaoya*, not to mention a fraction of the price. The *sanxian doupi*, a Hubei street snack of sticky rice, mushroom and pork sandwiched between tofu skin, is stodgy, satisfying and similarly easy on the wallet. The *suantang yu* is less keenly priced at RMB 58, but the portion, like most dishes here, is epic.

A side door takes you down a corridor and into a pleasant courtyard, where, if you follow the characteristic clack of the *yangqin*, a traditional opera instrument, you can sneak a peek through the door at the nightly performance. Or better yet, come here for dinner and a show. And bring your own napkins.

Our expert says:



"Traditional, historical architecture creates an evocative atmosphere, and generally, the food here is lower in price and higher in quality than at other Hubei restaurants in Beijing. Being able to watch an opera after dinner is a great factor." *Qu Min*

Suggested menu:

1. Steamed duck with taro and cabbage
hanzheng luya
汗蒸炉鸭 (RMB 20)
2. Catfish in sour soup
suantang yu
酸汤鱼 (RMB 58)
3. Flat sticky rice dumplings with pork and mushrooms
sanxian doupi
三鲜豆皮 (RMB 10)
4. "Hot dry" noodles
regan mian
热干面 (RMB 5)
5. Diced veal stir-fried with peas
jingchu wandou niuzai li
荆楚豌豆牛仔粒 (RMB 22)

BEST OF THE REST

FIVE MORE GEMS FROM OUR EXPERTS

Ming Yuan 明园

Cuisine: Cantonese

Daily 11am-2pm, 5-9pm. Dongdaqiao Lu (directly south of Parkview Green; opposite Soho Shangdu), Chaoyang District (8561 9040; no reservations)
朝阳区东大桥路北京侨福芳草地对边(Soho尚都对面)

"Some of the most authentic Hong Kong food in Beijing"

This contemporary, white-walled restaurant is one of the few places listed here we'd recommend for a romantic date. The crispy chicken (*cuiji ji* 脆皮鸡, RMB 120) is fabulously succulent with glossy crackling, and the dim sum really is as good as you'll find in the capital. Free medicinal soups and *pu'er* tea take the edge off the pricey menu. The manager, a Hong Kong native, speaks English fluently.

Jiu Hua Shan Roast Duck 九华山烤鸭

Cuisine: Beijing Duck

Daily 11am-2pm, 5-9pm. 1-2/F, Ziyu Hotel, 55 Zengguang Lu, Haidian District (6841 4518) 海淀区增光路55号紫玉饭店

"Third-class service, second-class decor, first-class duck"

This old-school *kaoya* restaurant out west drew multiple nominations from our expert panel. A limit of 300 ducks are roasted here every day, and at RMB 168 each, they're notably cheaper but no less succulent than those served at other duckeries. A decade ago, Jiu Hua Shan even won out over Quanjudu and Bianyifang in a local newspaper's taste test.

Tianjin Baijiao Yuan 天津百饺园

Cuisine: Dumplings

Daily 10am-2.30pm, 5.30-10pm. 12A Xinwenhua Jie, Xicheng District (6605 9371)
西城区新文化街甲12号

"Delectable dumplings"

The dozens of varieties of dumpling here are generally top-notch, but the pickled garlic vinegar (made on-site) elevates them to new heights. Try some of the more unusual seafood fillings, like cuttlefish, crab roe, or the amazing pine nut and duck egg yolk dumplings (*songzi yadanhuang* 松子鸭蛋黄) and "pork with three treasures" (*zhu rou sanxian* 猪肉三鲜).

Re Pen Jing 热盆景

Cuisine: Sichuan

Daily 11am-9.30pm. 12 Hufang Lu, Xuanwu District (6303 3248) 宣武区虎坊路12号

"Unassuming and hearty Sichuan food"

Owned by the same Sichuanese family for 18 years, this cheap and cheerful spot is where you'll find homesick diners filling up on *mala* Sichuan sausage, slippery rice noodles and other fiery fare. The sautéed bullfrog (*chanzui wa* 馋嘴蛙) is said to be very good, but a safer bet is the stir-fried pork with garlic sprouts (*yanjian rou* 盐煎肉).

Cuiqing Restaurant 翠清餐厅

Cuisine: Hunan

Daily 11am-2pm, 5-9.30pm. 1A Cuiwei Dongli, Haidian District (6825 2634)
海淀区翠微东里甲1号

"Packed eatery serves delicious Hunan homestyle favorites"

Don't expect much in the way of service or décor, but this little joint is always full of locals tucking into Hunan favorites. Go for the steamed fish head with chillis (*jiangjiao yutou* 酱椒鱼头) and the stir-fried pork livers (*xiaochao zhugan* 小炒猪肝). A chilli-filled feast here shouldn't cost more than RMB 50 per person.

Photos by Song Yang, Emily Young, Shelley Jiang and Simon Lim