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The Year of the Rabbit ushers in healthy chinese meals

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By Jane Ammeson Times Correspondent | Posted: Thursday, February 3, 2011 12:00 am | No Comments Posted

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Lily White remembers celebrating Chinese New Year when she was young before her family left China and moved to the United States.

In China, the celebrations begin on the first morning of the New Year (which is today, Feb. 3), children receive presents of cash wrapped up in red paper packages (hong bao) and then families go door to door visiting friends and relatives. The holiday also emphasizes reconciliation and letting go of old grudges.

This festive atmosphere goes on for 15 days until the Festival of Lanterns, which involves lighting lanterns, folk dancing and eating tang yuan, a dumpling made of sweet rice rolled into balls and stuffed with either a sweet or spicy fillings. Noodles also can be a symbol of good luck and eaten during the celebration.

The Chinese New Year goes in 12-year cycles with each year associated with an animal. That's because, according to legend, Buddha asked all the animals to celebrate the New Year and 12 of them showed up. One of those animals was the rabbit and

this is his year.

"It's not as cultural here as it is in China," says White, who works at the Fortune House Chinese Buffet in Gary. "In America, it's quieter. To celebrate we have dinner with our family and make wishes for the New Year."

According to White, seafood is usually on the menu.

"We have food here at the restaurant that would be eaten for New Years," says White, "including lobster, mussels, crab and shrimp."

Gloria Tsang, founder of HealthCastle.com, a website that provides nutrition information and resources, suggests we combine the Year of the Rabbit with February's National Heart Month by adding heart-healthy Chinese dishes to the menu.

"Many people think of fat-heavy dishes like lemon chicken or spring rolls when they think of Chinese food," Tsang says. "But there are many heart-healthy ingredients that have been part of Chinese cooking for centuries."

Tsang lists the following as the top five healthy Chinese foods and makes suggestions on how to incorporate them into meals.

- **Citrus:** Citrus fruits like oranges, pummelos, and tangerines are good sources of flavonoids, antioxidants that contribute to heart health. Of course, they're also packed with vitamin C. Toss these traditional symbols of happiness and good fortune into stir-fries, or use the juice instead of salad dressing.
- **Brown Rice:** Rice and Chinese cooking go hand-in-hand, but whole-grain brown rice is much better for your heart than white rice. Whole grains like brown rice can reduce heart disease by lowering cholesterol and blood pressure. Use brown rice instead of white rice in any Chinese recipe.
- **Tofu:** Soy, the source of tofu, has been shown to help lower cholesterol and triglycerides and prevent heart disease. To add more heart-healthy soy to your Chinese cooking, use tofu to replace meat. Try a stir-fried tofu (firm) and broccoli dish with black bean sauce.
- **Bok choy:** Bok choy is packed with vitamins A and C, phytonutrients, and folate, which add up to one heart-healthy vegetable. Plus, it's very filling, high in fiber, and low in calories. Try stir-frying it in a nonstick pan or tossing it into your salad.
- **Fish:** Omega-3 fatty acids from fish have been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease by lowering cholesterol. Cod and sea bass are more prevalent on the Chinese menu, but you can use any fish you prefer. Try steaming with ginger or topping with black bean sauce.

"By eating healthy Chinese foods," Tsang says, "we honor not only the new year but also our hearts."

Gung Hay Fat Choy or Happy New Year!

Chinese Chicken Noodle Soup

For the broth:

- 1 whole chicken breast, 3-½ pounds
- 12 cups low sodium chicken broth
- 2 large pieces of zest from a scrubbed and dried lime
- 1 tablespoon crushed coriander seed
- 4 stalks lemongrass, thinly sliced
- 1 bay leaf
- 4 sprigs fresh mint
- 4 whole black peppercorns
- ¼ teaspoon chili powder
- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

To serve:

- 1 leek white part only, well washed and thinly sliced
- 1 medium carrot, peeled and finely diced
- 1 (10-ounce) package Chinese noodles

Cilantro-Mint Pesto (recipe below)

DIRECTIONS: In a 10-quart stockpot, combine the chicken, broth, lime zest, coriander seed, lemongrass, bay leaf, mint, peppercorns, chili powder and ½ teaspoon salt. Place over medium high heat and bring to boil. Then lower the heat and simmer for 1 hour uncovered. Lift the cooked chicken from the broth and set aside to cool. When cool enough to handle, remove and discard all the skin and bones. Shred the meat and set aside. Strain the broth through a colander lined with cheesecloth and place in a clean soup pot. Season with salt and pepper to taste. To serve, return the broth to a simmer and add the chicken, leek and carrot. Cook until vegetables are tender, about five minutes. Meanwhile, bring a saucepan of salted water to a boil and cook the noodles for 3 minutes; drain well and rinse under cool water. Divide the soup among warm bowls and ladle over the noodles. Garnish with a dollop of Cilantro Mint Pesto.

Cilantro Mint Pesto

- ½ cup fresh cilantro
- ½ cup fresh mint leaves
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

DIRECTIONS: In a small food process, combine all the ingredients. Pulse until smooth.

SOURCE: "Mr. Sunday's Soups" by Lorraine Wallace

Asian Grilled Salmon

1 side fresh salmon, boned but skin on (about 3 pounds)

For the marinade:

- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 3 tablespoons good soy sauce
- 6 tablespoons good olive oil
- 1/2 teaspoon minced garlic

DIRECTIONS: Light charcoal briquettes in a grill and brush the grilling rack with oil to keep the salmon from sticking. Or use a grill pan. While the grill is heating, lay the salmon skin side down on a cutting board and cut it crosswise into 4 equal pieces. Whisk together the mustard, soy sauce, olive oil, and garlic in a small bowl. Drizzle half of the marinade onto the salmon and allow it to sit for 10 minutes. Place the salmon skin side down on the hot grill; discard the marinade the fish was sitting in. Grill for 4 to 5 minutes, depending on the thickness of the fish. Turn carefully with a wide spatula and grill for another 4 to 5 minutes. The salmon will be slightly raw in the center, but don't worry; it will keep cooking as it sits. Transfer the fish to a flat plate, skin side down, and spoon the reserved marinade on top. Allow the fish to rest for 10 minutes. Remove the skin and serve warm, at room temperature, or chilled.

SOURCE: Ina Garten's "Barefoot Contessa Parties!"

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