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DIVERSIONS

Fresh food, fresh start

Chinese celebrate new year with menu filled with luck

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Christina Li bites into a golden sweet cake, a special treat eaten only at Chinese New Year. She has many reasons to smile. As with most of the foods eaten during the biggest Chinese holiday of the year, the cake not only tastes good, it also brings good luck in every bite.

Chinese New Year begins Thursday and runs 15 days. Once known as spring festival, the lunar new year signalled the renewed fertility of the Earth. Today, it symbolizes a fresh beginning.

Traditional foods and ingredients reflect that meaning, selected to play a special role during the holiday because their names sound similar to all the good things one hopes to enjoy throughout the year.

"The Chinese like to play with phonetics," said Ms Li, who grew up in Hong Kong and is business development director for the Ambassador Group. "They believe what you take in brings you good luck."

Which is why new year cakes are particularly special. Cake is pronounced "go" in Chinese and sounds similar to the word that means "rising," implying rising fortune and success.

Eaten at lunch or brunch, new year's cakes are made with rice flour, which symbolizes cohesiveness. Savoury cakes include taro and turnip cakes.

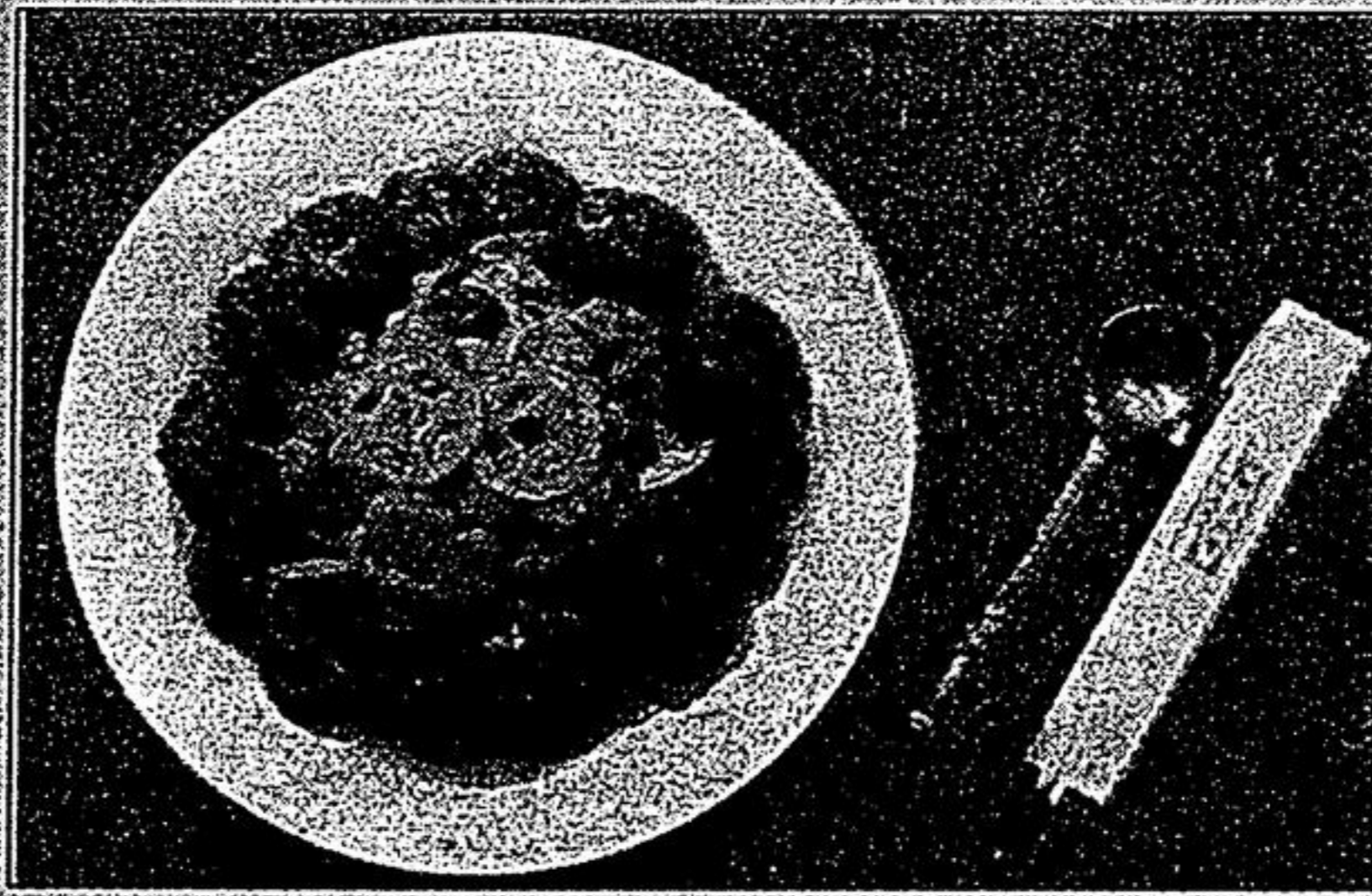
Of sweet cakes, two of the most popular are the traditional red new year sweet cake (made of brown sugar, flour and water) and the golden sticky cake.

"It's really different," Ms Li said of her favourite, adding the custard-flavoured treat has only become popular in the past two or three years.



STAFF PHOTOS/SJOERD WITTEVEN

Christina Li of the Ambassador Chinese Cuisine restaurant on West Beaver Creek in Richmond Hill displays Chinese new year's dishes including a new year's cake fish (foreground) made of rice powder and sugar, (second row) sweet cakes, golden sticky cakes, turnip cakes and taro cakes, (third row) duo chips, sesame smiley balls, peanut in spicy shell and golden dumpling. Ms Li holds a traditional banquet good luck dish (inset), made with lucky ingredients — dry oysters, chinese black mushrooms, black seaweed, dried scallops and corn poy.



New year's cakes are steamed and then left to stand a few days, allowing the flavours to mix and mature.

They are then sliced, pan-fried and served warm.

Because the cakes are made mainly from root vegetables, they were available in winter and to poor families.

However, it is customary to add special, prestigious items, such as pork and shrimp.

Traditional dinner foods, certainly included in the New Year's Eve feast, are also filled with significance. Common items are fish (which sounds like excess, meaning there is food left over); black

mushrooms (includes the word for east, the first of the four directions; meaning you will have God's blessings from all directions and your path throughout the new year will be eased); black sea moss (or fat choy, a typical part of a new year's greeting, meaning growing fortune) and dried oysters (sounds like good things).

"Think of it: You have wealth, fortune and good things. What else can you ask for?" Ms Li said, with a smile.

As well as linguistic similarity, foods are also chosen for their colour, shape and flavour. So it is customary to eat crispy pastries

and nuts, which are golden (a symbol of wealth or fortune) and sweet (a symbol of sweetness or happiness in life). Golden dumplings and fried chicken are also common for their auspicious colour.

While Chinese people celebrate the new year on the same day no matter where they live in the world, the foods they eat vary from place to place.

Chef Fred Oh, owner of the Culinary Arts Centre in Richmond Hill and winner of many international culinary competitions, said traditional

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猴 Year of the Monkey

Jan. 22 is the first day of the year 4701 on the Chinese calendar, the Year of the Monkey.

The coming year should be a time of progress, advancement and learning.

The monkey is intellectually agile and this year should be marked by invention, improvisation and success, even in apparently impossible ventures.

The year ahead will see everyone more likely to speculate and gamble on risky ventures. Avoiding direct confrontation, people will be more likely to get ahead by trying to outsmart one other, in politics, diplomacy, high finance and business.

In the Chinese zodiac, the monkey is an inventor and improviser. He is quick-witted, clever, flexible and innovative.

People born during this year will be successful at whatever they choose to do. On the other hand, they are likely to have a superiority complex and lack respect for others.

They may be extremely selfish, egocentric and vain. They tend to be jealous and extremely competitive.

In the Chinese calendar, years are sometimes counted in a 12-year cycle instead of inventing 12 special symbols for the purpose, each year is represented by an animal.



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