

FOOD FROM THE TOMB

by Moonsil Lee Kim

1 **T**oday, Chinese food is well known around the world, and recipes for Chinese cooking can be found in most cookbooks and on many Web sites. While books with some information about ancient Chinese food have survived the centuries, fascinating new information has come more recently from tombs.

SAVE THE BROKEN BAMBOO STRIPS!

2 In 1999, a tomb belonging to Wu Yang, the marquis¹ of Yuanling, who lived during the Han dynasty and died in 162 B.C., was discovered at the site of Huxishan. In his tomb was a book made of 300 bamboo strips, every one of which was found broken. Yet, after much painstaking work, conservators were able to reassemble many of the erased and mixed-up fragments. Further study allowed researchers to determine that it was actually a cookbook titled *Meishifang* (“Recipes for Beautiful Food”). It seems that each recipe had a title preceded by a number. In turn, each title began with the phrase “recipe to make....” For example, one began “recipe to make slabs of suckling pig.” Unfortunately, many titles are illegible; so, too, are some of the numbers. Today, work

continues on reconstructing and interpreting these texts. . . .

3 Perhaps those who buried the cookbook with the marquis of Yuanling’s remains expected that it would be used by his servants when they prepared food for him in the afterlife. The recipe ingredients could have been those he enjoyed most when he was alive or perhaps they were the sacred, ideal foods for the afterlife. In any case, the *Meishifang* shows that Han elite enjoyed a varied diet that included vegetables and meats such as pig, chicken, dog, lamb, goose, deer, swallow, beef, and hare. The recipes also offer evidence that the Chinese at the time used a

NUMBER 46: RECIPE TO MAKE SLABS OF SUCKLING PIG

First butcher the pig, then singe and scrape away the hair. Use the edge of the hand with the fingers moving away from you...

variety of cooking techniques. Among these were steaming, braising, and stewing in liquor with ginger and various other ingredients for flavoring.

¹ *marquis* — a royal title

THIS LADY HAD IT ALL!

- 4 Another tomb that allows us to glimpse ancient cooking practices is Han tomb No. 1 at Mawangdui. It belonged to the wife of the marquis of Dai, who died around 168 B.C. In this tomb, there was a lacquered² tray that could hold a single meal for Lady Dai, exactly as she had been accustomed to eating when she was alive. The five small bowls on the tray contained meat dishes. Also buried with her in the tomb were bamboo cases and pottery vessels that held a great variety of foods. These were to nourish her on the long journey in the afterworld. There were seven kinds of grains and beans, five kinds of fruits (melon, jujube, pear, plum, and strawberry), five kinds of vegetables (malva, mustard, ginger, lotus root, and hemp), five mammal meats (hare, dog, deer, ox, and sheep), 13 bird meats and eggs (duck, chicken, pheasant, crane, pigeon, owl, magpie, sparrow, and others), six kinds of fish (carp, bream, catfish, perch, and others), and several spices and medicinal herbs. These foodstuffs show the variety of ingredients used for cooking in ancient China.

[NUMBER UNKNOWN]: [TITLE UNKNOWN]

...boil. When done, lift it out and discard the broth. Shake... Take the fresh sweet fresh broth and add wine, salt, meat sauce liquid, ginger, and magnolia. Boil it again. When done, lift it out and serve. The recipe for making boiled horse, boiled lamb, and boiled deer is like this.

WHAT THE DEAD EAT

- 5 In addition to these written records and preserved foods, there is another type of “recipe” in these tombs—mural paintings and relief³ carvings depicting cooking scenes. The ancient Chinese believed that such images were “real” and had the power to nourish the deceased in the afterlife. These images show various types of meat, cooking utensils, including large cauldrons, and people preparing food. Some people are butchering animals, while others are stirring food in boiling pots, cutting ingredients, and carrying items to cook.
- 6 Mural paintings and relief carvings are very informative, as they not only represent kitchen activities, but also explain the process for making food. For example, a series of images was found engraved on a stone slab on a wall in a Han tomb discovered at Dahuting. After much analysis and discussion, scholars determined that the relief (illustration below) describes the process of making tofu:



The procedure for making tofu

- 1) soaking soybeans, 2) grinding soybeans, 3) filtering the soymilk, 4) adding brine, and 5) pressing for solidification and dewatering. This

² *lacquered* — covered with a clear, glossy protective coating

³ *relief* — a flat art form that contains three-dimensional elements

process matches almost exactly the recipe for making tofu in a medieval Chinese cookbook. Moreover, we can see that the same recipe and the utensils, including the millstone and the pressing box shown at the end of the process, are still being used today in the countryside in China.

A TRADITION THAT ENDURES

- 7 These tomb recipes clearly show that many of the foods and methods of preparation found in Chinese kitchens today trace their origins to those living in China more than 2,000 years ago. But, it is not just in China where 21st-century diners will find these foods. Many restaurants in the United States, and indeed around the world, offer them as well.