

# Dandelion Cuisine

Linda Lau Anusasananan on the art of writing recipes

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When Hakka folks refer to themselves as dandelions, it's a nod to their tribe's ability to take root in the most unlikely soil. The first waves of Chinese migration to any new region – be it Southeast Asia, Latin America or Africa – almost certainly included the famously tenacious Hakka and their salty, fatty comfort food.

Like a culinary genealogist, Linda Lau Anusasananan traveled to explore the Hakka family tree: various branches (Singapore, Malaysia, Canada, Peru) and boughs (Hong Kong, Taiwan) and the trunk (southern China), including her ancestral village in Meixian, Guangdong Province. She visited the kitchens of more than 50 Hakka home cooks, and even as she drank in their stories, she watched carefully as they prepared their favorite dishes. The end result was *The Hakka Cookbook*, as cozy as a kitchen scrapbook, filled with recipes that simply work.

Having taken seven years to produce this cookbook, Anusasananan has said she has no plans for a follow-up. And yet she admits that she would have liked to spend more time in Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore, and seems wistful about not having time to visit Mauritius, Surinam, Britain, and Tahiti. She knows all too well that there are more Hakka recipes out there to be discovered. More stories to be told. After all, once you start looking for dandelions, you start noticing them everywhere.



Piles of panelos  
for sale in the market

**What has been the most unexpected reaction to *The Hakka Cookbook*?**

My neighbor told me she was Hakka. It was news to her, too. She never knew she was part-Hakka until her mother saw my book in her house and told her daughter that she was Hakka.

**In your opinion, who's the best Hakka cook in the world?**

Right now, I really like the cooking from Chef Jin Hua Li from Hakka Restaurant in San Francisco. His Chinese Bacon with Preserved Greens 扣肉梅菜 *kiu ngiuk moi choi* (Hakka) or *kourou meicai* (Mandarin) is one of our favorites. One of his specialties is Chicken with Preserved Greens, which we included in *The Hakka Cookbook*.

**There's undoubtedly a strong overlap between Hakka and local cuisine of the regions where they settled (i.e. Guangdong, Jiangxi, Guangxi, Hunan, Fujian). But are there any ingredients used in Hakka cooking that almost never show up in other Chinese dishes?**

In China, we tasted a Hakka yellow wine – sweet and mellow like a cream sherry – which is used to make Wine Chicken 酒雞. Many Hakka cooks make their own wine. I tried to make it many times but it was never as good. Ton Kiang Hakka Restaurant in San Francisco served me a delicious version that they made at home (but do not sell in their restaurant). I found that cream sherry or tawny port could be used as a substitute.

Red yeast rice, which the Hakka call *kuk*, is a fermentation byproduct of the red yeast growing on cooked non-glutinous rice. It's used as a natural dye and preservative in fermented

bean curd, wine, soups and sauce. I believe the Cantonese also use it.

**In 1987, while working for *Sunset Magazine*, you convinced your editor to send you on a culinary research trip to China. The result was "From China's Kitchens to Ours," the first article published by an American magazine about home cooking in China. Can you tell us more?**

I sent the Ministry of Commerce a list of story ideas; they set up the itinerary. We went to Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Chengdu, and Guangzhou. We tasted so many dishes – over 300 dishes in two weeks, I think. Most of the restaurant meals were banquets, but the home cooks and their meals were the most amazing of all. They cooked so much with so little. Since we were accompanied by government officials, I am sure we were offered the best food. I wrote many stories and recipes based on that trip. Many were easy, achievable recipes from home cooks. Others were regional specialties and some from banquets. I believe many of those recipes are still eaten today in China and the story stands the test of time.

**In her Goodreads.com review of the cookbook, your daughter said: "Mom's recipes are the tightest you'll ever find. I watched her slave in her kitchen over and over until each was perfected." Why was the recipe testing difficult?**

I have had 34 years of recipe development and testing at *Sunset Magazine*, so I have a lot of experience with Western foods and limited experience with Chinese food. For *The Hakka Cookbook*, I wanted to make sure the recipes were achievable. I had looked at many Chinese recipes and found them hard to understand unless you had eaten or cooked the dish before. My research introduced me to ingredients I wasn't used to cooking, such as some preserved vegetables, dried seafood, and Asian flours. So I had to test them many times to find the best and easiest way to use them.

I also like to make recipes accessible to as many people as possible. So if it is easy to give a supermarket substitution for a Chinese ingredient, I will do so. For instance, dark soy

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sauce or black soy sauce is not always available in North American supermarkets. As an alternative, I suggested two parts regular soy sauce and one part molasses.

**Did you alter any recipes to reflect our health-conscious times?**

I prefer chicken thighs to breasts in most recipes. And I like almost all cuts of pork. I generally use the minimum amount of oil or fat needed to accomplish the task. I often find deep-fat frying and oil blanching very messy for a home kitchen. If it is not absolutely necessary and the results are acceptable, I may change deep-frying to oven-browning or oil-blanching to stir-frying.

**Having spent decades in food writing and publishing, what did you come to think of as the most common pitfalls of food writing?**

The perception of editors and publishers is that people want recipes that look easy. So they ask writers to make recipes look very short and not too complicated. However, once people start cooking from stripped-down recipes, many questions arise, and it becomes frustrating.

For instance, a recipe may call for one large head of cabbage, chopped. I often shop at the farmers' market and the size of a head of cabbage varies widely. If a weight is given or the number of cups when chopped, the reader has a better idea of how much cabbage is needed.

The recipe says to sauté the cabbage in a large frying pan until done.

At what heat? An experienced cook knows that sauté implies medium-high heat, but an inexperienced cook may not know the term sauté.

How big is a large frying pan? The largest pan in many pan sets is 10 inches wide. However, with the big head of cabbage, the cabbage won't fit into a 10-inch pan. The recipe needs a 12-inch pan.

What does "done" mean? Should the cabbage be limp? Brown? Crisp?

As you can see, leaving details out makes a recipe much harder to follow because there are so many questions and so many chances to fail.

**What Hakka dish from the cookbook would you**

*I have a friend who told me she reads *The Hakka Cookbook* at night, slowly savoring each story*

**recommend for somebody who loves a crunchy texture?**

Pickled Mustard Greens.

**How about for somebody who likes chewiness?**

Stir-fried Taro Abacus Beads and Vegetables.

**And for somebody who doesn't mind dealing with a high "grapple factor" (the term that Fuchsia Dunlop uses to describe foods that are complicated to eat, i.e. bone-in or shell-on)?**

Braised Chicken Wings in Bean Sauce or Shrimp with Fried Garlic and Chiles.

**For many food lovers, cookbooks are mostly aspirational – an excuse to luxuriate in the photos and imagine how the recipes will taste. Having worked as a recipe editor, can you enjoy cookbooks on this level – or is your internal critic always evaluating its recipes for clarity?**

I understand people read cookbooks simply for pleasure. I do the same. I have many cookbooks that I have never cooked from. I read cookbooks for their stories, information, and creativity. I wrote *The Hakka Cookbook* for those who wanted to read stories, those who were interested in history, and those who wanted to cook. I have a friend who told me she reads *The Hakka Cookbook* at night, slowly savoring each story. She has health problems and is unable to eat the food, but reading about it satisfies her.

**If Hakka cuisine were a genre of music, which would it be?**

Hakka food is like gospel music. Soulful, gutsy, and down-home.