

Growing up in England, Chinese takeaway food gradually began competing with the traditional after-pub fish and chips.

Over the years, Chinese and Indian takeaways became firmly established on British high streets, while many of the old chip shops and pubs began to disappear.

But those early takeaway experiences were a long way from the exciting, fresh flavours of regional Chinese cuisine. Unless you ventured into London's Chinatown, opportunities to discover something more authentic were limited.

My real introduction came unexpectedly in the Caribbean.

A Chinese restaurant opened around the corner from a resort where I was working.

From my first meal, I was sold.

The freshness of the ingredients, precision of the cutting and attention to cooking techniques were extraordinary.

I became friendly with the chef-owner, a kindred spirit in what was, at times, something of a culinary wilderness.

Then, one day, the restaurant was boarded up. The chef had disappeared rather suddenly. Apparently, his past had caught up with him.

You meet some interesting characters in the islands.

To this day, I lament the loss of that restaurant.

Years later, travelling and working in China, I discovered an extraordinary diversity of regional cuisines, fascinating markets and a profound respect for ingredients.

This week, we explore the Five-Flavour Interaction System - how contrasting tastes, aromatic heat and texture combine to create remarkable dishes.



Kitchen Haiku

Five flavours awake
Fire dances beneath the wok
Balance fills the bowl

This Week's Focus - Flavour Through Interaction

Chinese cuisine demonstrates how different flavour elements can work together rather than compete.

- **SAVOURY** - Depth, seasoning and umami.
- **SWEET** - Rounds stronger flavours.
- **SOUR** - Brightness and contrast.
- **BITTER** - Complexity and restraint.
- **PUNGENT / AROMATIC HEAT** - Fragrance, warmth and energy.

Texture adds another important dimension, providing contrast between crisp, tender, silky and chewy elements.

The objective is not necessarily to include every taste equally in every dish. It is to understand how contrasting elements influence the final balance.



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Flavour Lens

Profile

Savoury • Sweet • Sour • Bitter • Aromatic • Pungent •

Behaviour

Ferments • Caramelises • Infuses • Stir-fries • Braises • Steams • Balances

Balance Role

Savoury ingredients establish depth. Sweetness rounds stronger flavours, acidity adds brightness, bitter notes provide complexity, and aromatic heat introduces energy.

Key Pairings

Soy Sauce • Black Vinegar • Fermented Bean Paste • Ginger • Garlic • Spring Onion • Chilli • Sichuan Pepper • Sesame • Mushrooms • Peanuts



Chef's Insight – Balance Does Not Mean Equal Quantities

One of the great lessons of Chinese cookery is that balance does not require every flavour to be equally pronounced.

A dish may be predominantly savoury, yet depend on a small quantity of vinegar to sharpen its character.

Sweetness may be barely noticeable but essential to rounding seasoning.

Aromatic heat may provide excitement without overwhelming the principal ingredient.

The skill is understanding which flavour should lead - and which should support it.

Ingredient Spotlight - Sichuan Pepper - More Than Heat

Sichuan pepper is one of the most distinctive ingredients in Chinese regional cooking.
Despite its name, it is not a true peppercorn.
Its characteristic floral, citrus-like aroma is accompanied by a tingling, numbing sensation, known as má.
Combined with chilli heat, là, it creates the celebrated málà character associated with many Sichuan dishes.
Used carefully, Sichuan pepper adds aromatic complexity rather than simply making a dish hotter.
In Kung Pao Chicken, it complements dried chillies, ginger, garlic and the sweet-sour savoury sauce.
Chef's Rule
Use aromatic heat to energise a dish, not overwhelm its other flavours.



Five Elements of Flavour Interaction

Element	Typical Ingredients	Culinary Function
Savoury Depth	Soy sauce, fermented bean paste, mushrooms, stock	Builds depth and seasoning
Sweet Balance	Sugar, hoisin, sweet soy, caramelisation	Rounds stronger flavours
Sour Lift	Black vinegar, rice vinegar, pickled ingredients	Adds brightness and contrast
Bitter Contrast	Greens, charred or tea-smoked notes	Adds complexity and restraint
Aromatic Heat	Ginger, garlic, spring onion, chilli, Sichuan pepper	Adds fragrance and energy

The Sixth Consideration - Texture

Crisp vegetables, roasted nuts, sesame, silky tofu and noodles contribute structure and contrast.
Texture is not one of the five flavour categories, but can transform the eating experience.
The principle: Build a clear flavour foundation, then introduce complementary elements that bring the dish into balance.
ements of Flavour Interaction

Professional Application

- Build the savoury foundation first. Adjust stock, soy and fermented ingredients before stronger accents.
- Use sweetness to round—not dominate.
- Add acidity for definition and a cleaner finish.
- Toast carefully. Roasted notes create depth; burning creates harsh bitterness.
- Layer aromatic heat. Chilli, Sichuan pepper, ginger, garlic and spring onion perform different functions.
- Design texture deliberately. Balance soft, silky or tender elements with crisp, chewy or crunchy contrasts.
- Do not force every element into every dish. Harmony comes from proportion and interaction, not equal intensity.



For chefs, the practical lesson is clear: understanding Chinese cuisine means recognising the regional logic behind flavour. Some regions prize delicacy and freshness, others depth, spice, fragrance or rustic comfort - and it is this diversity that gives Chinese cuisine its extraordinary richness.

China Five Flavour System Podcast

Chinese Regional Cuisine Comparison

Chinese cuisine is a collection of highly developed regional traditions shaped by climate, geography, produce and local taste. The best-known framework is the Eight Great Regional Cuisines, each with its own flavour identity, techniques and iconic dishes. Together, they show the remarkable range within Chinese cooking — from delicate steamed seafood to fiery chilli-driven dishes, and from refined banquet cuisine to rustic mountain cookery.

Sichuan is bold, layered and energetic, known for chilli heat, Sichuan pepper, garlic and fermented pastes.

Cantonese cuisine is lighter and more refined, focusing on freshness, clarity and careful cooking of prime ingredients.

Shandong is robust and savoury, with a strong banquet tradition and an emphasis on seafood, wheat and aromatic stocks.

Jiangsu is elegant and gently sweet, often highlighting texture, knife skills and refined presentation.

Zhejiang is fresh, clean and seasonal, favouring delicate flavours and balanced, graceful dishes.

Fujian is especially noted for soups and broths, with layered umami and strong coastal influence.

Hunan is hot, sour and assertive, using fresh chillies, pickles and smoked ingredients for a more direct fiery style than Sichuan.

Anhui is rustic and earthy, drawing on mountain produce, wild herbs and slow-cooked savoury dishes.



This Week's Infographic

FLAVOUR NOTES
SERIES II

ISSUE 32
PHASE 3: GLOBAL FLAVOUR SYSTEMS

CHINA

The Five-Flavour Interaction System

SAVOURY • SWEET • SOUR • BITTER • AROMATIC HEAT

A dynamic cuisine where five fundamental flavours work in balance to create depth, complexity and complete dishes.

THE FLAVOUR SYSTEM

Chinese cuisine is built on the interaction of five core flavours — savoury, sweet, sour, bitter and aromatic heat.

Rather than one dominant flavour, the aim is harmony, contrast and depth, creating dishes that are balanced, layered and satisfying.

KITCHEN HAIKU

Five flavours in play
Balance, contrast, harmony
A complete dish

FEATURED DISH

CHICKEN KUNG PAO

A Classic of Balance and Contrast

Wok-tossed chicken with dried chillies, peanuts and spring onion in a savoury, sweet, sour and spicy sauce.

THE FIVE FLAVOURS

SAVOURY (Xián)
Depth, richness and umami.

SWEET (Tián)
Rounds, softens and balances.

SOUR (Suān)
Lifts, brightens and adds contrast.

BITTER (Kǔ)
Adds complexity and restraint.

AROMATIC HEAT (Là / Xiāng)
Fragrant, warming and energising.

KEY INGREDIENTS

Soy Sauce • Fermented Bean Paste
Sichuan Pepper • Dried Chillies • Ginger
Garlic • Spring Onion • Rice Vinegar
Sesame Oil • Peanuts

WHY IT WORKS

BALANCE
Five flavours work together without one overpowering.

CONTRAST
Opposing elements — such as sweet and sour, rich and fresh — create interest.

LAYERING
Flavours are built through seasoning, marinating, stir-frying and finishing.

TECHNIQUE
The wok, high heat and precise timing preserve texture, colour and flavour.

KEY CHINESE FLAVOUR BUILDERS

SOY SAUCE	FERMENTED BEAN PASTE	RICE VINEGAR	OYSTER SAUCE	HOISIN SAUCE	SICHUAN PEPPER	DRIED CHILLIES	GINGER	GARLIC	SPRING ONION
Savoury depth and seasoning.	Rich, complex umami.	Clean acidity and balance	Savoury richness and gloss.	Sweet, savoury and aromatic	Aromatic heat with a mild numbing note	Heat, colour and depth	Warm, fresh and pungent	Aromatic foundation	Freshness, colour and lift.

THE FIVE-FLAVOUR INTERACTION



COOKING APPLICATIONS

STIR-FRY	BRAISE	STEAM	COLD DISHES
Fast, vibrant and textural.	Rich, tender and full of depth.	Clean, light and balanced	Refreshing, contrasting and aromatic

TEXTURE & CONTRAST

CRISP (Fresh)	TENDER (Rich)	CRUNCHY (Contrast)	CHEWY (Interesting)	SILKY (Smooth)

CHEF'S INSIGHT

The strength of Chinese cuisine lies in balance. It is the interaction of the five flavours, the use of bold ingredients and skilled technique that creates dishes with depth, harmony and a lasting appeal.

厨

"In Chinese cuisine, flavour is not a single note, but a conversation between five — balance creates the complete dish." — Mark J French

The Chef's Five-Point Check

BEFORE IT LEAVES THE WOK

01 Is the savoury foundation clear without excessive saltiness?
02 Does sweetness round the flavours rather than dominate?
03 Is acidity sufficient to lift the richness?
04 Are the aromatics fragrant rather than burnt?
05 Have contrasting textures been preserved?

The best dishes are balanced before they reach the table.

Click here for a detailed reference:
China Flavour Matrix Chart



Chef's Insight
"Respect for ingredients begins with understanding their potential - not simply using the familiar parts."

Kitchen Practice – Five Ways to Build Flavour Interacting

1. Establish the Savoury Foundation – Use soy sauce, fermented ingredients, stock or mushrooms to develop depth.

2. Round with Sweetness – A little sugar or natural caramelisation can soften stronger flavours without making the dish noticeably sweet.

3. Introduce Acidity – Vinegar and pickled ingredients sharpen rich preparations and provide contrast.

4. Control Aromatic Heat – Ginger, garlic, spring onion, chilli and Sichuan pepper contribute fragrance and energy. Timing and temperature are critical.

5. Preserve Texture – Cook quickly where appropriate, avoid overcrowding the wok and introduce crisp ingredients at the correct stage.

Build Depth – Create Contrast – Preserve Texture



Pairing Logic

Ingredient	Character	Application
Lime	Bright, fresh, sharp	Finishing, salsa, dressing
Tomatillo	Tangy, green, fruity	Raw or cooked salsa
Sour Orange	Fragrant, tart	Marinades, braises
Vinegar	Direct, structured acidity	Adobo, pickles
Tamarind	Fruity, sweet-sour	Drinks, sauces, sweets

The Guiding Principle:

Develop depth during cooking. Use acidity deliberately to provide balance and definition.



A practical application of this week's flavour system

Kung Pao Chicken

Kung Pao Chicken is a classic Sichuan stir-fry that demonstrates flavour interaction particularly well.

Tender pieces of chicken are marinated with light soy sauce, Shaoxing wine, cornflour and sesame oil.

The sauce combines light and dark soy sauces, Chinkiang black vinegar, sugar and a little stock.

Dried red chillies and Sichuan pepper are briefly stir-fried until aromatic, followed by chicken, ginger, garlic and spring onion.





What This Dish Teaches

SAVOURY - Soy sauce and chicken establish depth.

SWEET - Sugar rounds the seasoning.

SOUR - Chinkiang vinegar provides brightness.

BITTER CONTRAST - Lightly toasted chilli notes contribute subtle complexity; burning must be avoided.

AROMATIC HEAT - Dried chillies, Sichuan pepper, ginger and garlic create warmth and fragrance.

TEXTURE - Roasted peanuts contrast with tender chicken and glossy sauce, and the sauce should cling lightly to the chicken.

The objective is flavour interaction, not one dominant seasoning.

🔗 **Recipe: Chicken Kung Pao**

The Liquid Counterpoint - Chinese Jasmine Tea

A fragrant jasmine tea provides a delicate aromatic counterpoint to richly seasoned Chinese dishes.
Its floral character and restrained bitterness offer a refreshing contrast to savoury sauces, chilli heat and richer ingredients.

From the Kitchen - Respect for the Ingredient

Travelling and working in China opened my eyes to the extraordinary diversity of its food culture.
I remember restaurants where diners selected live fish directly from tanks, and markets displaying an astonishing range of fresh produce.
There was also a noticeable respect for using as much of an ingredient as possible.
Many parts of animals that we routinely discard in Western kitchens are valued and carefully prepared.
I must confess that chicken feet, particularly their texture, have never been a personal favourite!
Nevertheless, the principle is admirable.
There is much to learn from this approach to ingredients, preparation and minimising waste.



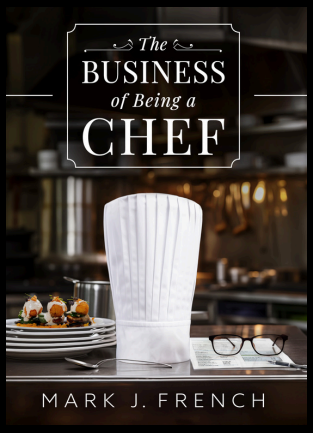
Further Reading & Resources

From the Library

See flavour balance charts and acidity mapping in the ChefsNotebooks archives.

The Business of Being a Chef

For a deeper understanding of flavour structure and kitchen systems, The Business of Being a Chef provides useful operational context alongside culinary insight.
🔗https://chefsnotebooks.com/books



The Business of Being a Chef is the result of more than 30 years of experience in hotels and restaurants throughout the world. It is a guide to managing the multiple business demands of today's executive chef, encompassing diverse areas including cooking, taste, food safety, human resources, finance, and sales & marketing, amongst others. It is also a great resource for operations managers.

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About the Author

Mark J French is a hotelier, chef, consultant, and author of several books on culinary arts and business. Based in the UK and Philippines, he blends classical training with global flavours.



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