



ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL FOR NIANYEFAN

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Chinese New Year's Eve dinner, or *nianyefan*, is the biggest meal of the year for Chinese people and a family event to celebrate the achievements of the past year and welcome the next with hopes and resolutions.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many families have been unable to travel and get together, and cooking *nianyefan* is a nostalgic experience to bring back memories of home with familiar tastes and smells. For Chinese people, this meal, grand or simple, is a ritual to embrace the new year.

The Chinese Lunar New Year dates back more than 4,000 years, and in addition to the most important part, the New Year's Eve reunion, the holiday continues to the Lantern Festival, the 15th day of the first month of the lunar calendar.

The *nianyefan* dinner at home is usually served leisurely, as the idea is to gather everyone to enjoy the holiday spirit and share intriguing stories while the whole family watches the New Year Gala on CCTV, which has become a tradition since it was first broadcast live in 1983.

But cooking *nianyefan* at home is a marathon and takes days of preparation and cooking before the feast is eaten, so many families now choose to celebrate the Chinese New Year in restaurants, before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

The food traditions

There's no standard for how to arrange the *nianyefan* menu — every family has their own specialties and secret recipes, and the dinner is about using the best regional cuisine so those who work and live far from home can taste their hometowns' authentic flavors.

But there are several dishes that are cooked and served across the country due to their representations of good luck.

Fish is one of the must-have main entries, as the Chinese character for fish and the character for abundance share the same pronunciation — *yu* — so serving a whole fish symbolizes prosperity and more to come in the new year. As for the choice of fish, there can also be different meanings, like crucian carp which is pronounced "*jiyu*" sounds like the word "*ji*" for good luck.

The fish can be steamed or braised and its position matters in some regional cultures, such as placing the head toward the respected guests or elders, and the two people facing the fish's head and tail should drink for good luck.

Families that cook the *nianyefan* dinner at home often have special dishes for the occasion, like recipes that have been passed on for generations or something everyone enjoys eating. To set up a more extravagant reunion dinner, a centerpiece dish like *pencai*, an assorted stew of upscale delicacies including abalone, sea cucumber and fish maw, is served. However, because it takes a lot of time and effort to make, most people choose to reserve cooked products from restaurants and reheat them at home.

Cured meat/sausage are also must-haves, either served alone after steaming or added to other dishes to elevate the flavor. The taste of cured meat varies depending on regional tastes; Cantonese cured sausage is slightly sweet while Sichuan-style is red and spicy.

In northern China, the Chinese dumpling *jiaozi* is the most essential item on the *nianyefan* menu, and it's also served for other occasions like Winter Solstice. It's a simple staple where savory filling is stuffed in a flour wrapper. The wrapper used for *jiaozi* is round and slightly thicker than thin, square wrappers used to make *huntun* or wontons. The best *jiaozi* is made with hand-rolled wrappers that have



Handmade dumplings