



Spring rolls — All photos by Hellorf

much better texture than store-bought wrappers made by machines.

A full-nutrition food featuring carbs, fiber from vegetables and protein from meat or eggs, *jiaozi* is also a lucky food since its shape resembles that of Chinese *yuanbao*, or a silver/gold ingot. The choice of filling varies greatly depending on individual taste and preference. Popular combinations include pork and leek, pork and Chinese cabbage, and chives and eggs. The filling can also be vegan by using hard tofu as the protein and pairing it with more fragrant greens like cilantro.

For Chinese New Year's Eve dinner, *jiaozi* is usually boiled and served at midnight. Even if you are already full from all the bold dishes, eating a few *jiaozi* is a must to celebrate the new year.

There's also a fun game to play with *jiaozi* when it's served for Chinese New Year — a few coins are hidden inside the filling and whoever finds them is said to have extra good luck in the future. But for hygienic reasons, the coins are sometimes replaced with nuts.

In southern China, the festive staples are *niangao* (rice cake) and *tangyuan* (rice dumpling), as the southern regions mostly produce rice.

The pronunciation of *niangao* implies "getting higher year by year," and it's one of the reasons why *niangao* is a holiday essential. There's a legend about the rice cake's origin in China. A monster called *nian*, a predator that lived in deep forests all year long, preyed on other animals from spring to fall. But when cold winter arrived and other animals went into hiding, *nian* would come down the mountain and eat people.

To solve this problem, a clan from a family named Gao prepared a large quantity of square grain bars and placed them outside their doors. People hid in their homes and waited for *nian* to come. When *nian* couldn't find any people to eat, it ate the grain bars and left when it was full.

People would then come out and congratulate each other for escaping *nian's* wrath. The scheme continued year after year and gradually people began calling the grain bars *niangao*, after *nian* the monster and *gao* the clan that defeated it.

An early record of eating rice cake during Spring Festival was found in "Yun Xian Za Ji,"



Steamed whole fish



Sweet rice cakes

a book from the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907), which said "eating *yulianggao* on the 15th day of the first lunar month."

The city of Ningbo in Zhejiang Province is known for rice cakes made of *wanjiangmi*, or late grained rice, which goes through several procedures to achieve its soft, smooth and sticky texture. The rice cakes are often savory and cooked in stir-fries or soups. Signature recipes include rice cake and shepherd's purse stir-fry, gazami crab and rice cake stir-fry and rice cake soup with green vegetables and shredded pork. There's also sweet rice cake with osmanthus sugar sauce.

Spring rolls, which are fried with sweet or savory fillings, symbolize wealth and lucky traditions in many places, including Shanghai.

In some places, spring pancakes, or *chunbing*, are prepared for Spring Festival to mark the beginning of spring. The ultra-thin and soft pancakes are served alongside various stir-fries in the form of shreds, such as bean sprouts, spinach, pork shreds and fresh scallions.

