

Mandarin recipes complete Terry Tan's tour of China

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Although Fuchsia Dunlop and Grace Young may be more familiar names here, the UK-based chef and teacher Terry Tan may well be the best-known author of Chinese and Southeast Asian cookbooks around. He has over 20 at last count. His latest, “Mandarin Food and Cooking,” concentrates on Beijing and northern China, and completes his series of four regional Chinese cookbooks (roughly corresponding to south, west, east, and north).

They're a visually impressive set — large-format books that are lavishly illustrated and beautifully produced. With only 75 recipes in each volume, there's plenty of room for step-by-step photography and a spacious text layout. I wonder how representative the selection is and how the recipes will work for a typical US kitchen.

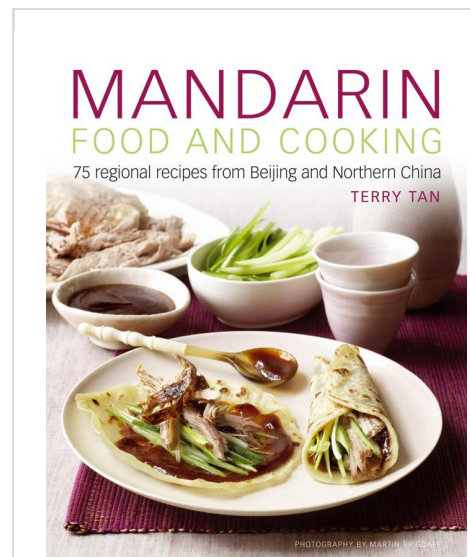
This volume revolves around an axis of strong flavors from mushrooms, dark soy, meat, scallions, and ground bean paste. Cold, dry northern China famously depends on wheat rather than rice, while the red chiles so beloved in southern China are few. Comfort and sustenance take precedence over speed and fire.

A tofu and minced pork soup thickened with a slurry of cornstarch isn't much to look at, but it's fragrant with sesame and intensely comforting on a chilly night. Walnuts, not commonly found in the other cuisines of China, star in a simple chicken stir-fry, slicked with rich yellow bean sauce (you'll find it labeled “ground bean paste” in the condiment aisle of an Asian market) and delectably seesawing between the crisp and the satiny. The same yellow bean sauce works its magic on green beans, happily wedding a big dose of garlic and ginger into a classier approximation of the “brown sauce” at your favorite Chinese restaurant.

Vegetarian dishes are all about the fungi. Straw mushrooms sweetened with hoisin sauce pair up with irresistible puffs of fried tofu (don't worry — you buy it prepackaged) in a leek-filled tofu braise. And three different mushrooms — shiitake, button, and wood ear — complement each other in a jaunty, texturally varied vegetarian stew.



Terry Tan has written more than 20 Asian cookbooks.



**Mandarin Food and Cooking:
75 Regional Recipes From
Beijing and Northern China**

Ginger and dark soy provide the engines of flavor for sliced beef and bamboo shoots in a typically northern tangle of wheat noodles and lamb. The bamboo shoots offer slippery, pliant texture, the lamb is rich and gamey (and why are there leeks in the picture, but not in the recipe?). There's no denying the rib-sticking power of these thick and savory dishes, but by the time you're done with them you may find yourself craving a giant pile of fresh greens.

Soy sauce potatoes are worth trying just for the novelty. How often do you get Chinese-style potatoes? Sliced thin and fried, they look like they'll develop the crusty properties of chips, but by the time all is said and done, the sauce has soaked them back into a pliable soy sponge.

There was only one real disaster. Practically everything went wrong with a great-looking, straightforward-sounding smoked chicken. The spiced-flour smoking mixture destroyed my bamboo steamer basket, the instructions contradicted each other (plate or no plate inside the steamer?), the chicken took twice as long as predicted to partially cook, and the final steamed breast was only mildly flavored. Where there's guesswork, human error is inevitable, so I'm sure I was partly to blame. But clearer instructions might also have helped.

In general, a little vagueness in the instructions isn't so bad when you have such eloquent visuals. And mixed success is understandable when you're cooking from a book published on a different continent about a cuisine half a world away. The range of this book is not great. Northern China's vast array of pancakes and dumplings and buns, for example, are limited to a representative handful. But Tan's choices err on the side of accessibility, for which we can be grateful. Compared to, say, Fuchsia Dunlop's regional Chinese cookbooks, Tan's are less thorough, more visual, and more likely to adorn the coffee table. Meanwhile, we're all still waiting for the regional Chinese cookbook to end all cookbooks. For now, this mixed but well-meant volume remains a welcome contribution.

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