

POCKET GUIDE

- Whole wheat experience in Xi'an
- Tram-versing Hong Kong
- Retail therapy in Melbourne
- The vibrancy of the Maldives' local islands



p44
WHOLE
WHEAT
EXPERIENCE



WHOLE WHEAT EXPERIENCE

Discover how wheat and meat collectively dominate the culinary experience in Xi'an

WORDS & PHOTOS ■ MARK ANDREWS



Finding good food these days in many Chinese cities is a case of potluck with restaurants buried away in identikit shopping malls taking a large amount of local savvy, or at least web browsing, to separate the wheat from the chaff. In Xi'an however, it is pretty much all wheat – at least with regards to the ingredient list. “The food here has a lot of seasoning in it, and is saltier and heavier than in the south” says Hu Ruixi, founder of the Lost Plate food tour company. Formerly known as Chang'an, the city was China's capital during the Western Zhou, Qin, Western Han, Sui, and Tang dynasties.

More importantly for food, this was where the great caravans set out from on their journeys along the Silk Road. Returning, they brought spices and traders with different religions and food cultures that have left their mark on the city's cuisine today. Here are some dishes that should make it onto your must-try list, all of which can be found within the food Mecca of the Muslim Quarter. With few vegetables able to be grown in the harsh local climate, it mainly comes down to dishes based on meat or flour, and in some cases both.



■ ROUJIAMO

Sorry Earl of Sandwich, but the Chinese beat you by at least a thousand years with this meat-stuffed pocket of bread. With a documented history stretching back to the Tang dynasty, roujiamo comes in three main versions. Tongguan style, from a county in Weinan prefecture in Shaanxi Province, has thin crispy bread (*mo*) and uses slightly spicy pork cooked with vinegar and spices. Guanzhong (also an area in Shaanxi) style uses white pork and thicker bread. Finally, there is the Muslim version which swaps the pork for beef with liberal lashings of chilli and cumin and is the least fatty of the three. Understandably, they make for great food on the go when sightseeing. *Mo* also makes an appearance in another well known Xi'an dish, lamb *paomo*, where diners break the bread into a noodle soup.



■ BARBECUE

The wafting smell of barbecuing meat, cumin, chilli, and burning charcoal is quintessentially Xi'an. Wander along Beiyuanmen, the main tourist street of the Muslim Quarter, and you will see great hunks of meat skewered by large twigs spitting over the coals. Choice comes down to quality over quantity. According to Hu, locals seek out the thinner variety served in the non-touristy back streets. Small pieces of meat on metal skewers in the hands of a skilled chef allow for much more even cooking all the way through.





BIANGBIANG NOODLES

Famed as much for its name as its taste, these are top-draw for many Chinese visitors to Xi'an. This *biang* is one of the most complex Chinese characters in existence – 43 strokes in simplified and a time-consuming 57 in traditional – and the noodles are some of the largest, similar in size, but not texture, to a belt. They are usually topped off with meat and veggies. Allegedly, Xi'an has more than a hundred noodle dishes, and some unfairly say this one is best left for the tourists!

DUMPLINGS

Rounding out the use of flour are the dumplings in Xi'an. For something more unusual, try the beef soup variety in the Muslim Quarter. Made with beef, onion, and cinnamon, they have a richer taste than the normal pork variety. The best places don't use jelly to produce the soup inside – it is instead a natural effect of condensation from the steamer. To do this, they have to ensure the thickness of the dough wrapper is neither too thick nor too thin. Dip the dumplings in a mixture of dark Shaanxi vinegar, garlic, ginger, and sesame oil after slurping the superheated soup out.





■ HIGH OVEN BREAD

The name of this slightly sweet sesame encrusted bread comes from it being stuck upside down to bake on the top of a high oven. Opened to create a pocket, it is first filled with a mashed egg and dry flower tofu from old soup – a soup which is never turned off but continually warmed as new seasoning and ingredients are added. Next, cold fillings are added to the mix. The crunch comes from crispy fried corn pieces and peanuts, and vegetables such as red cabbage, carrots, and pickles are added according to your preference.



■ SOUR PLUM JUICE

With a history of more than a thousand years, this is the drink to wash down all the dishes. The taste is both sweet and sour thanks to the plums being soaked with herbs and other ingredients. Sweetness usually comes from sugar but better versions use honey.



■ COLD NOODLES

Xi'an has many a take on cold noodles, but the ones with sesame sauce are a must to try. Cold wheat noodles, thick like Japanese udon, are topped off with a sauce mainly made from sesame but also containing vinegar and other ingredients. Chilli oil is then drizzled over for some kick and the dish is rounded out with julienned cucumber – the perfect way to conquer the hot summer days in Xi'an.



GET AWAY FROM THE TOURISTS

Lost Plate offers morning and evening tours in English and French, taking visitors to the best places in the backstreets where the locals eat.

■ lostplate.com