



Rethinking the TRADITION

*The transformation of traditional Chinese snack food into modern products, manufactured on an industrial scale, could very well be one of the most challenging and promising application areas of food ingredients in China at this moment, says **Peter Peverelli** of Eurasia Consult* in this exclusive article*

The Chinese are an inquisitive people and always interested in trying out the latest gadgets. This holds for technological things like cell phones, but equally so for novel foods and drinks. Some try to cool down with a Magnum ice cream on a hot day, while others prefer a chilled Heineken. Starbucks is becoming THE fashionable place to meet one's friends in more and more Chinese cities and children celebrate their birthdays in McDonald's or KFC.

However, Chinese are as multifaceted as they have always been. The curiosity for the new foods is very visible, because it is literally superficial. Underneath that surface, Chinese are still as patriotic as ever and at the end of the day, often in the most literal sense, what they really appreciate are the

traditional snacks, washed down with a pot of fragrant tea.

The variety of such snack foods is enormous, as each region has its own range of typical snacks. They used to be prepared at home and although this was a time consuming task, the Chinese found it a meaningful investment of time. However, with the modernisation came the acceleration of the pace of life. Time became money in China as well. It was no longer regarded as feasible to spend several hours each day in the kitchen preparing dishes and a supply of snack foods. A market formed itself for the large-scale commercial production of snacks and convenience foods.

This development stimulated another market: ingredients for traditional Chinese foods. Apart from being curious and patriotic, the Chinese are also finicky eaters. Commercial products still need to look, smell, feel and taste like the real thing that your mother used to prepare when you were young. This development thus created new application areas for existing ingredients and opportunities for new types of ingredients, like compound ingredients specially formulated for a particular traditional food. An interesting example is the commercial production of steamed bread, mantou. A number of Chinese ingredient companies have developed specialised flour improvers for this application, including a mix of emulsifiers, enzymes, etc.

One Chinese snack food had already found its way to the European market: instant noodles. The growing popularity of this product has also started to influence the food ingredients market in Europe.

However, in this article I have selected another snack food, that is still less known in the West, but the commercial production of which has proved to be especially challenging for ingredient suppliers: Babao ('Eight Treasure') Porridge.

Babao Porridge

Babao Porridge (Babaozhou), sweet rice porridge stuffed with dates, lotus seeds and other fruits, is an extremely interesting example of a traditional product turned into a vogue recently through commercial production and innovative packaging. As Chinese snacks cannot be appreciated without some cultural knowledge, we need to take a short look at the history of Babao Porridge.

Present day Babao Porridge is derived from a southern Chinese type of porridge called Laba Porridge. La refers to the La month, the last month of the lunar calendar and ba ('eight') to the eighth day of that month. On the 8th day of the lunar 12th month people used to prepare porridge using eight or more ingredients to celebrate the end of the year. Another story explains the custom as a Buddhist tradition. Legend has it that Shakyamuni, after six years of seeking enlightenment by liv-



Steamed bread or mantou

Today Babao Porridge comes in cans



Babao porridge recipe



Ingredient	Ratio(%)
Pumpkin cubes	5
Glutinous rice	3
Xylitol	3
Konjac powder	1
Small peanuts	0.8
Job's tears	0.4
Fragrant rice	0.4
Wheat kernels	0.4
Red beans	0.4
Sticky yellow rice	0.4
Maize	0.4
Pumpkin powder	0.3
CMC	0.3
Wolfberries	0.2
Salt	0.04
EDTA	0.02

The remainder is made up of water.

ing frugally, once sat down under a tree, dead tired. A woman herding cows saw him and prepared a simple porridge for him using coarse cereals, wild fruits and nuts. Shakyamuni was so revived from eating a bowl of that porridge that he immediately gained enlightenment. So much for frugal living! From that day on, Buddhist Temples prepared a similar type of porridge on the 8th of each 12th month. Later, Babao Porridge was savoured the whole year round.

As cooking Babao Porridge, including preparing the various ingredients, is rather time consuming, it is a typical traditional food that Chinese will no longer want to make at home. The consumption of Babao Porridge indeed decreased dramatically after the introduction into China of Coca

Cola and the Big Mac. Until some 15 years ago, when technology was introduced to produce Babao Porridge on a large scale and sell it packed in cans, similar to those used for soft drinks. The basic production process is easy enough. The raw materials are mixed and cooked, cooled and then canned. In this way, the porridge can be easily consumed as a convenient food, while travelling, as a snack during office work, etc. A plastic spoon is usually attached to the can, so the traveller does need to pack a metal spoon from the kitchen either.

The most challenging aspect of the production of Babao Porridge is to find the optimal combination of emulsifiers and thickeners. Babao Porridge consists of a viscous liquid part and solid parts (cereal solids, pieces of fruits, nuts, etc). The commercial product is more liquid than the homemade porridge, as it is marketed as a type of beverage ('relieves hunger and thirst'). Manufacturers need to formulate the product in such a way, that the solid parts are more or less evenly distributed over the liquid part upon opening of the can. Consumers do not want to have to dig up the solids from the bottom. A number of Chinese manufacturers of emulsifiers and thickeners supply products specially formulated for Babao Porridge.

Some sources propagate CMC as the most appropriate thickener for this application. Especially when used in instant Babao Porridge, the dry product will easily solve in both cold and hot water, with CMC as thickener. Moreover CMC is said to enhance the taste experience of synthetic sweeteners (see below).

As porridge, Babao Porridge is a starchy product, produced by heating ground cereals. When improperly processed, the starch can start retrograding upon cooling. Although retrograde starch is itself harmless to the human body, it affects the typical texture expected by the consumers.

Babao Porridge easily turns brown, which is regarded as not fresh by Chinese consumers. Sources of browning are protein-containing ingredients like the various beans used in different recipes. The heating of these ingredients can cause a Maillard reaction with its typical brown colour. There are several ways of avoiding a Maillard reaction, including ones involving ingredients. One can, for example, use sweeteners that do not facilitate browning. The Jiayi Food Institute (Shanghai) supplies a special compound 'anti-browning agent' that can prevent a Maillard reaction altogether. It was developed for application in UHT milk, but is said to be working in Babao Porridge as well.

Fewer calories

Traditional Babao Porridge, home made as well as commercially produced, contains loads of sugar. This suits people who spend their days working the fields, but modern Chinese city dwellers have also started to watch their waste line.

A combination of CMC and a low calorie sweetener like xylitol to replace the sugar will not only provide an authentic mouthfeel, but also decrease the caloric value. Xylitol is rapidly gaining popularity as a low caloric sweetener in China recently. Yet another route to healthier types of Babao Porridge is to develop savoury varieties. Chinese like to eat plain porridge in the morning with salty duck eggs, pickled vegetables, etc. It is easy enough to alter the recipe of Babao Porridge by lowering sugar and adding salty ingredients as part of the 'eight treasures.' A number of such products have appeared in the southern Guangdong province.

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**Eurasia Consult is a consultancy specialising in the Chinese food industry*

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