Mooncake

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Mooncakes are Chinese bakery products traditionally eaten during the Mid-Autumn Festival / Zhongqiu Festival. The festival is for lunar worship and moon watching; moon cakes are regarded as an indispensable delicacy on this occasion. Mooncakes are offered between friends or on family gatherings while celebrating the festival. The Mid-Autumn Festival is one of the four most important Chinese festivals.

Typical mooncakes are round or rectangular pastries, measuring about 10 cm in diameter and 4-5 cm thick. A thick filling usually made from lotus seed paste is surrounded by a relatively thin (2-3 mm) crust and may contain yolks from salted duck eggs. Mooncakes are usually eaten in small wedges accompanied by Chinese tea. Today, it is customary for businessmen and families to present them to their clients or relatives as presents,[1] helping to fuel a demand for high-end mooncake styles.

General description

Most mooncakes consist of a thin tender skin enveloping a sweet, dense filling. The mooncake may contain one or more whole salted egg yolks in its centre to symbolise the full moon. Very rarely, mooncakes are also served steamed or fried.

Traditional mooncakes have an imprint on top consisting of the Chinese characters for "longevity" or "harmony" as well as the name of the bakery and the filling in the moon cake. Imprints of the moon, the Chang'e woman on the moon, flowers, vines, or a rabbit (symbol of the moon) may surround the characters for additional decoration.

Mooncakes are considered a delicacy; production is labor-intensive and few people make them at home. Hence, most prefer to buy them from commercial outlets, which may range from smaller individual bakery shops to high-end restaurants. The price of mooncakes usually ranges from US$10 to US$50 (around £5 to £35) for a box of four although cheaper and more expensive mooncakes can also be found.
History

Mid-Autumn Festival

The festival is intricately linked to the legends of Chang E, the mythical Moon Goddess of Immortality. According to “Li-Ji”, an ancient Chinese book recording customs and ceremonies, the Chinese Emperor should offer sacrifices to the sun in spring and the moon in autumn. The 15th day of the 8th lunar month is the day called “Mid-Autumn”. The night on the 15th of the 8th lunar month is also called “Night of the Moon”. Under the Song Dynasty (420), the day was officially declared for Mid-Autumn Festival.

Because of its central role in the Mid-Autumn festival, mooncakes remained popular even in recent years. For many, mooncakes form a central part of the Mid-Autumn festival experience such that it is now commonly known as 'Mooncake Festival'.

Ming revolution

There is a folk tale about the overthrow of Mongol rule facilitated by messages smuggled in moon cakes.

Mooncakes were used as a medium by the Ming revolutionaries in their espionage effort to secretly distribute letters in order to overthrow the Mongolian rulers of China in the Yuan dynasty. The idea is said to be conceived by Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋) and his advisor Liu Bowen (劉伯溫), who circulated a rumor that a deadly plague was spreading and the only way to prevent it was to eat special mooncakes. This prompted the quick distribution of mooncakes, which were used to hide a secret message coordinating the Han Chinese revolt on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month.[2]

Another method of hiding the message was printed in the surface of mooncakes as a simple puzzle or mosaic. In order to read the encrypted message, each of the four mooncakes packaged together must be cut into four parts each. The 16 pieces of mooncake, must then be pieced together in such a fashion that the secret messages can be read. The pieces of mooncake are then eaten to destroy the message.[3][4]

Traditional styles

Fillings

Many types of fillings can be found in traditional mooncakes according to the region's culture:

- Lotus seed paste (蓮蓉, lián róng): Considered by some to be the original and most luxurious mooncake filling, lotus paste filling is found in all types of mooncakes. Due to the high price of lotus paste, white kidney bean paste is sometimes used as a filler.
- **Sweet bean paste** (豆沙, dòu shā): A number of pastes are common fillings found in Chinese desserts. Although red bean paste, made from azuki beans, is the most common worldwide, there are regional and original preferences for bean paste made from Mung bean as well as black bean known throughout history.

- **Jujube paste** (棗泥, zǎo ní): A sweet paste made from the ripe fruits of the jujube (date) plant. The paste is dark red in colour, a little fruity/smoky in flavour and slightly sour in taste. Depending on the quality of the paste, jujube paste may be confused with red bean paste, which is sometimes used as a filler.

- **Five kernel** (五仁, wǔ rén): A filling consisting of 5 types of nuts and seeds, coarsely chopped and held together with maltose syrup. Recipes differ from region to region, but commonly used nuts and seeds include: walnuts, pumpkin seeds, watermelon seeds, peanuts, sesame, or almonds. In addition, the mixture will usually contain candied winter melon, jinhua ham, or pieces of rock sugar as additional flavouring.

**Crusts**

Traditional mooncake vary widely depending on the region where the mooncake is produced. While most regions produce traditional mooncakes with many types of fillings, they usually only make their mooncake from one type of crust or another. Although vegetarian mooncakes may use vegetable oil, many mooncakes use lard in their recipes for a better taste. There are three types of mooncake crust used in Chinese cuisine:

- **Chewy**: This crust has a reddish-brown tone and glossy sheen. It is the most common type of crust used on Cantonese-style mooncakes. It is also the most commonly seen type of mooncake in North America and many western countries. Chewy mooncake crusts are made using a combination of thick sugar syrup, lye water, flour, and oil, thus giving this crust its rich taste and a chewy yet tender texture. Chewiness can be increased further by adding maltose syrup to the mixture.
  - The dough is also baked into fish or piglet shapes (Cantonese: "Jue Zai Bang"; 豬仔餅; lit. "Piglet Biscuits") and sold at mooncake bakeries as a chewy snack.
  - They often come individually packaged in small plastic baskets, to symbolize fish being caught or piglets being bound for sale.

- **Flaky**: Flaky crusts are most indicative of Suzhou-style mooncakes. The dough is made by rolling together alternating layers of oily dough and flour that has been stir-fried in oil. This crust has a very similar texture to the likes of puff pastry.

- **Tender**: Mooncakes from certain provinces of China and Taiwan are often made to be tender rather than flaky or chewy. The texture of this type of mooncake crust is similar to the likes of the shortcrust pastry used in Western pie crusts or tart shells. Tender crusts are made mainly of a homogenous mix of sugar, oil, flour, and water. This type of crust is also commonly used in other type of Chinese pastries, such as the egg tart.

**Regional variations in mainland China and Taiwan**

There are many regional variants of the mooncake. Types of traditional mooncakes include:
- **Beijing-style mooncake**: This style has two variations. One is called "di qiang," which was influenced by the Suzhou-style mooncake. It has a light foamy dough as opposed to a flaky one. The other variation is called "fan mao" and has a flaky white dough. The two most popular fillings are the mountain hawthorn and wisteria blossom flavour. The Beijing-style mooncake is often meticulously decorated.

- **Cantonese-style mooncake**: Originating from Guangdong province, the Cantonese style mooncake has multiple variations. The ingredients used for the fillings are various: lotus seed paste, melon seed paste, ham, chicken, duck, roast pork, mushrooms, egg yolks, etc. More elaborate versions contain four egg yolks, representing the four phases of the moon.

- **Chaoshan (Teochew)-style mooncake**: This is another flaky crust variety, but is larger in size than the Suzhou variety. It is close in diameter to the Cantonese style, but thinner in thickness. A variety of fillings are used, but the aroma of lard after roasting is emphasised.

- **Ningbo-style mooncake**: This style is also inspired by the Suzhou-style. It is prevalent in Zhejiang province and has a compact covering. The fillings are either seaweed or ham; it is also known for its spicy and salty flavour.

- **Suzhou-style mooncake**: This style began more than a thousand years ago, and is known for its layers of flaky dough and generous allotment of sugar and lard. Within this regional type, there are more than a dozen variations. It is also smaller than most other regional varieties. Suzhou-style mooncakes feature both sweet and savoury types, the latter served hot and usually filled with pork mince. Filling made from roasted black sesame (椒鹽, jiāoyán') are common in flaky Suzhou-style mooncakes.

- **Yunnan-style mooncake**: Also known as "l’o" to the residents, its distinctive feature is the combination of various flours for the dough and includes rice flour, wheat flour, buckwheat flour, and more. Most of the variations within this style are sweet.

- **Taiwanese-style mooncake**: The most traditional mooncake from Taiwan is filled with yam. Taiwanese moon cakes are wide in variety that include low fat, lard free and ice cream versions. Popular modern flavors include green tea, chocolate and many others.

## Contemporary Styles

Over time, both the crusts and the composition of the fillings of mooncakes have diversified, in particular due to a commercial need to drive up sales in the face of intense competition between producers and from other food types. Part of these trends are also to cater to changing taste preferences, and because people are more health-conscious. Most of these contemporary styles were therefore especially prominent amongst the cosmopolitan and younger Chinese and amongst the Overseas Chinese community, although traditional mooncakes are often times sold alongside contemporary ones to cater to individual preferences.
Some of the earliest forms of diversification were by changing the fillings with ingredients considered unusual then. Taro Paste (芋泥, yù ní), pineapple and durian were amongst the first to be introduced, especially amongst the overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. The crust itself also evolved, particularly with the introduction of "snowskin mooncakes". Miniature mooncakes also appeared, in part to allow for easier individual consumption without the need to cut the large cakes.

To adapt to today's health-conscious lifestyle, fat-free mooncakes also appeared. Some are made of yogurt, jelly, and fat-free ice-cream. Even high-fibre low-sugar mooncakes have made their appearance. Customers pick and choose the size and filling of mooncakes that suits their taste and diet. For added hygiene, each cake is often wrapped in airtight plastic, accompanied by a tiny food preserver packet.

Contemporary-style mooncakes, while increasingly popular, have their detractors. Pricey ingredients have pushed up prices, causing worry of a "mooncake bubble" forming in China[6]. Food critics sometimes point out that "chocolate mooncakes" are in reality just chocolate shaped into mooncakes, and not mooncakes made of chocolate, while others complain that food chains appear intent on coming up with exotic flavours to take advantage of the market, without much thought for how well the tastes fuse together[7].

**Fillings**

Fillings in contemporary style mooncakes has diversified to include just about anything which can be made into a paste. Mooncakes containing taro paste and pineapple, which were considered novelty items at their time of invention have in recent years become commonplace items. In addition, filling with ingredients such as coffee, chocolate, nuts (walnuts, mixed nuts, etc), fruits (prunes, pineapples, melons, lychees etc), vegetables (sweet potatoes, etc), and even ham have been added to give a modern twist to the traditional recipes. It is also increasingly popular to change the base of the paste to a custard-style.

Some other examples include

- cream cheese
- chicken floss
- tiramisu
- green tea
- pandan
- durian
- ice cream (variety of flavours)
- chocolate
- coffee
- peanut
Some bakeries and restaurants have attempted to go up-market, often times with excellent results. Gold-plated mooncakes were popular when they first appeared, and it is now possible to even find entire mooncakes made of pure gold. Traditional Chinese delicacies such as ginseng and bird’s nest were soon followed by abalone and sharks’ fin. Foreign food companies have also tried to cash in. Häagen-Dazs were one of the first to create an ice-cream mooncake, with a choice of either the "traditional," snow-skin, or Belgian white, milk, and dark chocolate crusts. Other ice-cream and restaurant chains soon followed up with their own versions. Other western ingredients, including champagne ganache, malt whisky, volcanic-salt caramel and even Black truffles, caviar and foie gras has made it into mooncakes.

**Crusts**

Snowy mooncakes first appeared on the market in the early 1980s. These non-baked, chilled mooncakes usually come with two types of crusts:

- **Glutinous rice**: A crust with texture similar to that of a mochi. These moon cakes are known colloquially as "snowskin mooncakes" or "ice-skin mooncakes" (冰皮 or 冰皮月饼).
- **Jelly**: A crust made of gelling mixtures such as agar, gelatin, or konjac and flavoured with a wide variety of fruit flavourings.
Easy Chinese Moon Cakes

Makes 24

**Ingredients:**

- 1/4 cup sugar
- 2 egg yolks
- 1/2 cup salted butter
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup strawberry (or your favorite) jam (traditionally red bean paste is used so if you want a more authentic version, you can use a can of red bean paste instead of the jam).

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

Combine the butter, sugar and 1 egg yolk and stir.

Mix in the flour.

Form the dough into one large ball and wrap it in plastic wrap.

Refrigerate dough for half an hour.

Unwrap the chilled dough and form small balls in the palms of your hand.

Make a hole with your thumb in the center of each mooncake and fill with about half a teaspoon of jam.

Brush each cake with the other beaten egg yolk and place on a cookie sheet. Bake for about 20 minutes or just until the outside edges are slightly brown.
Mooncakes

Prep Time: 20 minutes  Cook Time: 20 minutes  Total Time: 40 minutes

Ingredients:

- Filling:
  - 1 pound red azuki beans
  - water
  - 3/4 cup lard or oil
  - 1-3/4 cups sugar

- Water-Shortening Dough:
  - 2 cups flour
  - 5 tablespoons lard
  - 10 tablespoons water
  - 1/4 teaspoon salt

- Flaky Dough:
  - 1 cup flour
  - 5 tablespoons lard
  - red food coloring for design

Preparation:

Filling Instructions: Soak red beans in water to cover 2 hours. Drain and discard the water. Cover with 8 cups fresh water and bring to a boil, then simmer over low heat 1-1/2 hours or until skins open. Strain the beans and discard the skins. Place the strained beans in several layers of cheesecloth and squeeze out any excess water. Place in a saucepan with the lard or oil and the sugar. Cook, stirring continuously, until almost all the moisture has evaporated. Let cool.

Dough Instructions: You will need 2 cups of filling for the mooncakes. Divide this into 20 portions and shape into balls. Mix ingredients for the water-shortening dough and the flaky dough separately until smooth. Divide each dough into 20 equal portions. Wrap one portion of flaky dough inside each portion of water-shortening dough. Roll out each piece of dough, then fold in thirds to form three layers. Roll out again, and once more fold in thirds to form three layers.

Flatten each piece of dough with the palm of your hand to form a 3" circle. Place one portion of filling in the center. Gather the edges to enclose the filling and pinch to seal. Place the filled packet in the mold, gently pressing to fit. Invert and remove the mold. Dilute red food coloring with water and pour onto a damp paper towel on a plate. Take some food coloring onto the cookie-design stamp, then press on top of the mooncake. Repeat process for remaining mooncakes. Arrange mooncakes on a baking sheet. Bake 20 minutes at 350 degrees. Let cool before serving.
Mid-Autumn Moon Cake Recipes

By Yan Can Cook, Inc

Makes 2 dozen
1 can (17-1/2 ounces) lotus seed paste
1/4 cup finely chopped walnuts

Dough
4 cups all-purpose flour
1/2-cup non-fat dried milk powder
3 teaspoons baking powder
1/2 teaspoon salt
3 eggs
1 cup sugar 1/2 cup solid shortening, melted and cooled
1 egg yolk, lightly beaten

1. Mix lotus seed paste and walnuts together in a bowl; set aside.

2. Sift flour, milk powder, baking powder, and salt together into a bowl. In large bowl of electric mixer, beat eggs on medium speed until light and lemon colored. Add sugar; beat for 10 minutes or until mixture falls in a thick ribbon. Add melted shortening; mix lightly. With a spatula, fold in flour mixture. Turn dough out on a lightly floured board; knead for 1 minute or until smooth and satiny. Divide dough in half; roll each half into a log. Cut each log into 12 equal pieces.

3. To shape each moon cake, roll a piece of dough into a ball. Roll out on a lightly floured board to make a 4-inch circle about 1/8-inch thick. Place 1 tablespoon of lotus seed paste mixture in center of dough circle. Fold in sides of dough to completely enclose filling; press edges to seal. Lightly flour inside of moon cake press with 2-1/2 inch diameter cups. Place moon cake, seam side up, in mold; flatten dough to conform to shape of mold. Bang one end of mold lightly on work surface to dislodge moon cake. Place cake on ungreased baking sheet. Repeat to shape remaining cakes. Brush tops with egg yolk.

4. Bake in a preheated 375 degree F. oven for 30 minutes or until golden brown. Transfer to a rack and let cool.