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Get a jump on year of the rabbit

Eat Chinese New Year foods for good fortune

By Diane W. Stoneback, OF THE MORNING CALL

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Chef Alex Zhong's Chinese New Year menu, composed of foods to bring prosperity, good luck and good fortune, delivers promise with every bite.

With such plate appeal, it's no wonder the holiday dinner he will prepare for participants in Northampton Community College's Dine-Around program is nearly sold out and why a second meal has been added to the schedule.

The first Chinese New Year's dinner is 5:30-8:30 Sunday and the second is 5:30-8:30 Feb. 20. Both are \$49 per person.

Can't make either date? You'll still be in luck if you visit Asia Oriental Cuisine, 1102 E. Susquehanna St., Salisbury

Township, any time from Feb. 1 to 20. That's because Zhong also will offer most of the Chinese New Year meal's eight courses as a la carte choices for guests who can't eat their way through the massive feast but still want to get the jump on the Year of the Rabbit.

The chef also is working on three additional Chinese New Year banquet menus for guests who want to celebrate this happy time with their families or a group of friends.

Finally, Zhong is sharing the recipe for one of the meal's most important, festive and colorful dishes — his Nien Gow. Make it at home and you'll be able to set your personal course for a rewarding time in Chinese year 4709, which officially begins Feb. 3.

Nien Gow, he explains, is popular for New Year's feasts because its name is a homonym for "Year of Highs." The dish's eight main ingredients are beef, chicken, large shrimp, fish balls, carrots, baby bok choy, Chinese black mushrooms and lotus root.

Noticing the emphasis on eights? "It's considered our luckiest number and means 'to prosper,'" explains the chef's wife, May Wong. Of course, this also suggests that it would be wise to gather seven family members or seven friends so you'll have eight people enjoying this flavorful dish.

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"Each year, more and more Americans are celebrating Chinese New Year with us," May says and adds, "Alex loves the holiday because it gives him the chance to cook all kinds of special foods and create elaborate feasts. It's really the highlight of his culinary year."

Although the chef grew up in the northeastern region of China, May says, "He's all over the map when it comes to the foods he makes for Chinese New Year."

Certain to be on the menu, however, are an assortment of five kinds of dumplings (pork, shrimp, mixed pork and shrimp, vegetarian and chicken), which are important to the celebrations in northeastern China. She explains, "It's because they physically resemble gold and silver ingots that once were used in China as currency. The more dumplings you make and eat, the wealthier you will be."

So bring on the dumplings, but don't overdo it because there is so much more to eat.

In addition to the Nien Gow, here are remaining courses on Zhong's Chinese New Year menu for the two NCC dinners, as well as what they symbolize.

- Peking Duck, because poultry is another symbol for prosperity. Cut in pieces, the duck will be served with the head, tail and feet on the plate because the presentation symbolizes completeness.
- Crispy Whole Flounder, because fish is a homonym for the Chinese character "yu" which means abundance. Once again, it will be served whole.
- Braised Abalone over Chinese Greens, because abalone is expensive. "If you can serve it on your table, it symbolizes the wealth you possess and will carry into the new year," May says.
- Ginger Scallion Whole Lobster, also a pricey dish, is on the menu because the Chinese characters for lobster translate to "dragon shrimp." For the Chinese, dragons symbolize prosperity, good luck and good fortune which is also why the dragon dance is a highlight of Chinese New Year celebrations.
- Seafood Bird's Nest because Chinese New Year also is called the Spring Festival. The bird's nest represents spring, birth and new growth. Zhong will make the edible nest out of taro root and will fill it with conch, shrimp, scallops and fish balls.
- For dessert, Tong Yuen (Sticky Rice Ball Soup) is made from bite-sized balls of rice containing different fillings including black sesame paste, peanuts and red bean paste. Served hot in bowls with the water in which they've been cooked, the rice balls symbolize completeness. Also, ending the meal on a sweet note will mean your new year will be sweet until it comes to an end, May explains.

"The New Year's Eve meal is our most important one of the holiday. It's when we gather to eat and celebrate with our families and pay our respects to our deceased ancestors," explains May who grew up in Quakertown where her mother, Sui Liu, still resides. "I will always follow the guides she set and eat the foods that are important to the New Year's observance."

But does she really believe that eating those foods will bring good luck, good fortune and prosperity? "It's certainly not going to hurt, and I'd rather err on the side of caution than cause myself any bad luck," she says.

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Chinese New Year's Dinners

- **What:** Northampton Community College's Chinese New Year Dinners
- **When:** 5:30-8:30 p.m. Sunday; 5:30-8:30 p.m. Feb 20
- **Where:** Asia Oriental Cuisine, 1102 E. Susquehanna St., Salisbury Township
- **How much:** \$49 per person
- **Tip 1:** Asia also will serve a la carte versions of some of the dinner's courses to guests who stop in from Feb 1-20.
- **Tip 2:** Want to celebrate with your family or a group of friends? Asia will have additional Chinese New Year banquet menus for \$88 (for four to six people) or \$188 or \$288 for groups of eight. Call ahead.
- **Info:** To register for the NCC Chinese Dinners, presented at Asia, call 877-543-0998 or go to <http://www.northampton.edu>. For more about Asia Oriental Cuisine, call 610-798-7777

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