LIFE







Sichuan cuisine served at the China House in Paris during the 2024 Paris Olympic Games includes (from left) dishes like spicy chicken, Dongpo pork, and popular staple foods, such as dumplings and panda-shaped mooncakes. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Sichuan's offerings shine in City of Light

Menu of cooperation during Olympics helps bring China, France closer, reports **Li Yingxue** in Paris.

This summer, the vibrant flavors of Sichuan cuisine, such as chicken tofu pudding, spicy chicken, Dongpo pork, and pickled vegetables, made a striking impression in Paris, the City of Light. In the prelude to Mid-Autumn Festival, which falls on Sept 17 this year, the city even offered mooncakes shaped like charming pandas.

At the Rothschild Mansion, situated near the Arc de Triomphe and serving as China House during the 2024 Paris Olympics, nearly 10,000 guests from home and abroad were treated to this exceptional Chinese fare.

Chinese and French cuisines also engaged in a vibrant exchange at a Sino-French food event held last month at China House, to celebrate the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries, utilizing cuisine as a cultural bridge.

Chez Papa, a well-known Parisian restaurant, offered classic French dishes, including confit duck legs, snails and sheep's milk cheese, while Chinese chefs presented Sichuan classics, such as spicy chicken and Dongpo roast duck. The diverse array of flavors from both culinary traditions received widespread acclaim from attendees.

Behind the exquisite dishes delighting guests during the Paris Olympics was a dedicated team of 10 seasoned chefs from the Meizhou Dongpo restaurant chain. These chefs and culinary professionals worked nonstop for nearly a month to ensure top-notch service.

During the Paris Games, the chef team welcomed an array of distinguished guests, including International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach, Olympic champions Zheng Qinwen and Qin Haiyang, as well as previous Olympic gold medalists including Wu Dajing, Hui Ruoqi, and Tian Liang.

This marks the restaurant chain's third appearance at the Olympics, following its participation in the 2008 Beijing Games and the 2022 Beijing Winter Games. This year's Paris Olympics is its first venture into providing dining services for an overseas China House.

"French cuisine is celebrated as the 'pinnacle of Western dining', renowned for its delicate flavors, rich sauces, and elegant presentations. In contrast, Sichuan cuisine, with its millennia-old tradition, offers a rich variety and distinctive style," says Wang Gang, founder of the restaurant chain. "When representing Chinese cuisine, it must be unique, flavorful and presentable."

To deliver an exceptional dining experience, the restaurant chain assembled a 24-member service team, including 10 chefs with over 15 years of experience each.

"Our extensive experience at the Olympics has equipped us with a robust set of practices and techniques, enabling us to handle challenging situations with confidence — reflecting the true Olympic spirit," Wang says.

The carefully curated menu features traditional Sichuan specialties, such as Kung Pao shrimp, sugarcoated popcorn and iced jelly. Additionally, to meet diverse guest needs, the team prepared multiple menus, including daily offerings, banquet, halal, tea break, and Sino-French culinary exchange options.

Wang says that their dishes have been met with enthusiastic acclaim from international guests, staff, volunteers and athletes. "Guests have praised our offerings as 'delicious and a true taste of home', with particular acclaim for the spicy chicken and Kung Pao shrimp," Wang says.

"We remain dedicated to our mission of 'serving people around the world', embracing the Olympic spirit, pushing boundaries, and turning the impossible into possible," Wang says. "Our goal is to introduce the world to Chinese cuisine and foster a deep appreciation for Sichuan flavors."

Gold medal

The restaurant chain's first encounter with the Olympics was in 2008, when it served as the official catering provider for the Olympic Village (Paralympic Village) during the 29th Olympic Games.

"This was an incredibly exciting opportunity for our team. We provided catering services for 130,000 people over 106 continuous days and nights," Wang recalls.

The high-quality food and service earned them special honors and a gold medal for "Chinese Taste, Olympic Standards".

In 2022, they served as the "Official Catering Provider for China House" and "National Team Meal Service Provider" at the Beijing Winter Olympics. Their service received high praise from Bach, who referred to the restaurant chain's chefs as "Olympic chefs", according to Wang.

For the Paris Olympics, Wang states that they were fully committed to delivering a high standard of Chinese culinary culture and exceptional taste.





From top: The Sichuan culinary team at the China House in Paris welcomes an array of distinguished guests, including IOC President Thomas Bach (center, front row) during the Paris Games. Guests from home and abroad being served Chinese food by the team.

Zhu Zhiwei, 46, one of the chefs who worked in Paris, says that their preparations for the trip began right after the Lunar New Year. Together with his colleagues, he coordinated with the China House setup team on kitchen layout and dining equipment details.

In May, Zhu and food safety manager Song Jing visited Paris to inspect the venue and source ingredients. "The work required is comparable to opening a new restaurant in France," Zhu says.

On July 12, the first team of 10 members flew from Beijing to Paris to start setting up equipment, purchasing ingredients, and testing recipes. Eight days later, a second team of 14 joined them.

Key Sichuan seasonings, such as Doubanjiang (fermented bean paste), Sichuan peppercorns, and pepper, were transported from Beijing, while fresh ingredients were sourced locally.

Each morning in Paris, Zhu and his team scoured farmers' markets and Asian supermarkets to find seasonal vegetables and unique spices that best represent Sichuan cuisine.

"The salt and sugar here appear similar to those in China but taste different. For example, French salt is saltier, while French sugar is less sweet," Zhu explains. "This necessitated adjustments to our seasoning ratios and continual recipe refinements."

For instance, to match the flavor of Kung Pao shrimp in France, 35 grams of local sugar are required compared to 23 grams in China. Zhu and his team are dedicated to perfecting their recipes to bring an authentic taste of Sichuan to Paris.

"Spicy chicken is a beloved dish on many Sichuan family tables, but achieving perfection requires precise timing and ingredients," says Zhu, who has been crafting Sichuan cuisine for 27 years. "In Paris, spicy chicken is the most popular dish, and it's almost always ordered at every table."

Unique blend

As the Paris 2024 Olympics unfolded, Chinese cuisine made a significant impression, extending beyond the offerings at China House.

Various Chinese food and beverage brands had set up shop in Paris, using the global sports event to highlight the diverse and appealing flavors of Chinese cuisine. Across Parisian landmarks, such as the Arc de Triomphe, the Seine River, the Hotel des Invalides, and the Eiffel Tower, a red food truck featuring panda and bamboo designs drew a lot of attention.

The truck, operated by Sichuan pickled vegetable brand Jixiangju, offered a unique blend of French and Sichuan flavors. Among its offerings were the bamboo shoot salmon baguette, bamboo shoot ham croissant, and bamboo shoot stir-fried beef baguette.

These fusion dishes have garnered praise from both Parisians and Chinese students living in the city.

Many students have shared their experiences on social media platforms, such as Xiaohongshu, one of whom commented that "the spicy and tangy flavors instantly reminded me of home, easing my homesickness".

Chinese tea has also made its mark in Paris, a city traditionally known for its coffee culture. The pop-up shop of Chagee brought a touch of jasmine tea to Paris, attracting nearly 2,000 visitors on its opening day in July.

Meanwhile, Heytea's "Paris Viewing Room", a pop-up in the 11th arrondissement, has seen robust sales, with over 1,000 cups sold on the first day and revenue exceeding 10,000 euros ($11,134). Two special-edition sports-themed items quickly sold out.

Zhu, noting the presence of various Chinese restaurants in Paris, from Cantonese and Sichuan to popular street foods, such as chicken pot and spicy hotpot, appreciates the city's diverse and authentic Chinese dining scene.

Looking ahead to the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, Zhu is already anticipating the next adventure.

"In the United States, we won't need to transport so many ingredients and spices from China. With local supplies and equipment available at our restaurants in the US, preparing Sichuan cuisine at the next Olympics should be even easier than in Paris," Zhu says.

Contact the writer at liyingxue@chinadaily.com.cn

Teen pilot on round-the-world flight to raise funds for cancer

DOHA — Despite being only 19, Chinese American Ethan Guo has already flown solo across four continents. His "small goal" is to complete a solo flight around all seven continents in the coming weeks.

On May 31, Guo departed from Memphis, Tennessee. So far, he has flown across four continents — North America, Europe, Africa and Asia — covering 15 countries and regions.

According to the plan, he still has 30 countries and regions to visit, with just 20 days to go. Along the way, he has encountered engine trouble and visa issues.

"Plans often change, and it's uncertain whether I will be able to finish on time," he said in Doha late last month.

Born in Tianjin, Guo spends his time between China and the United States. Over the past couple of years, he has spent more time in the latter.

Guo began learning to fly in the US when he was 13, starting with a one-hour introductory lesson.

It was enough to spark a dream of flying around the world, so he completed high school early and began preparing for his journey.

At 17, he obtained his Private Pilot License and was Instrument Flight Rules certified. The IFR are rules which allow properly equipped aircraft to be flown under instrument meteorological conditions.

After that, he began reaching out to companies, in search of sponsors to support his dream.

At first, many found the young man's proposal hard to believe, thinking he was just daydreaming, but eventually, some started to back him.

In 2022, Guo first broke the record for the fastest flight around the contiguous US, completing the journey in 12 days, surpassing the previous record of 16 days.

However, six months ago, his record was broken by someone else. Guo doesn't feel discouraged, as his ambitions extend far beyond this record.

His primary goal was to learn, gain experience, and prepare for his round-the-world journey, and more positively, the new record brought him more attention, and helped him secure more sponsorships.

While flying solo around the world is cool, it's also filled with challenges and dangers.

Last year, when he made his first solo attempt, Guo came close to death when his engine malfunctioned, and the plane began to shake as he was flying by a mountain.

Fortunately, he managed a successful emergency landing.

Flying over the ocean, with no land below for over 3,000 kilometers, adds to the risk.

The plane is equipped with a small lifeboat just in case.

"I'm flying a Cessna 182Q, which is 50 years old. Is it safe?" he says, laughing. "Not much of a choice. But the engine is new."

Even if he secures a new world record, this is not what matters most to him. Gao says that his real goal is to use the flight to draw attention to childhood cancer, and raise funds for research.

His cousin's diagnosis in 2021 had a profound impact, motivating him to take action.

"I admire my cousin. He and other kids from around the world who are fighting cancer have inspired me to fight on and overcome my fears," he says.

"I want to use every opportunity to raise awareness of childhood cancer and of the necessity to increase research efforts to find prevention and treatment methods."

All the money Guo raises is directly donated to a renowned US hospital, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, which treats the toughest childhood cancers and pediatric diseases.

"Life is short, and I want to do as much as I can to make the world a better place," he says.

XINHUA