China's Mealtimes - When, What, and How Chinese Eat

Mealtimes in China are not very fixed; it depends on the individual. But with the timetables of work and school, the common mealtimes for Chinese are usually these three: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Knowing when and what Chinese eat may help you have a more "in tune" trip.

Breakfast - Simple

When Breakfast Is

Breakfast StallBreakfast stall

7–9am

Usually children go to school before 8 o'clock, so their breakfast time is usually around 7 o'clock. City Chinese typically go to (office) work before 8:30 or 9 o'clock, so they usually have breakfast between 8 and 9 o'clock. Farmers, laborers, retailers, etc. start work at 7:30 or earlier.

Most hotels offer breakfast between 7 and 9:30. Choose your time to have fresh breakfast outside and you will meet different people at different times.

What's for Breakfast

For breakfast in China, there are different styles in different cities. The most common breakfast food is soya-bean milk, deep-fried dough sticks, porridge, steamed stuffed buns, or rice noodles.

Read more about What the Chinese Eat for Breakfast.

How Chinese Have Breakfast

Breakfast in GuangzhouBreakfast in Guangzhou

Most Chinese hurry to have breakfast, and some of them even don't have time to sit down, but get take-out and finish breakfast on the bus or on the way to catch the bus.

But this is different in Guangzhou. Many big restaurants in Guangzhou offer breakfast, because the locals enjoy a long breakfast time. They call it zaocha, (早茶 zǎochá /dzaoww-chaa/‘morning tea'). If you are travelling Guangzhou, you can see many people in restaurants leisurely eating and chatting, especially on weekends. They have dimsum (点心 diǎnxīn /dyen-sshin/ 'touch heart')for breakfast. Don't forget to experience leisurely morning tea if you are visiting Guangzhou.

Lunch - Fast

When Lunch Is

12–2pm

Lunch foodSet meal for lunch

Lunchtime is usually around noon, when Chinese take a break from work or classes. Lunchtime for most Chinese is quite rushed, but they customarily take a nap after lunch, so they usually finish lunch quickly to have a decent siesta.

In tourist areas, people usually go for lunch from 12– 1pm, so you can visit attractions with less crowding when most tour groups head off to restaurants.

What's for Lunch

The menu is usually simple: noodles or rice, plus some meat and vegetables; no more than three dishes. But if there is a business lunch or any important lunch appointment, the lunch menu is usually richer and more varied (more like dinner).

How Chinese Have Lunch

Most people don't go far for lunch, or to big restaurants. They usually eat at the school/company canteen, or order take-out food. Some people bring their own lunchbox from home (cooked in the morning) and reheat it in a microwave.

Dinner - Big

When Dinner Is

6–8pm

S BupperDinner with soup, meat, and vegetable

Chinese usually arrive home from work and school around 6pm. Their family prepare dinner for them or they have to cook. Usually dinnertime is 6– 8pm.

For restaurants the busiest time is from 7pm. Most restaurants close around 10pm. But in snack streets, small stalls offer snacks like noodles or dumplings or barbeque till late into the night.

What's for Dinner

Dinner has become the most important meal for many Chinese. The dishes usually include soup, a variety of meats and vegetables, and rice. Because dinner is a meal to enjoy with the family the food is very hearty.

How Chinese Have Dinner

Most Chinese go home after school/work, but some go to restaurants for dinner with friends. If you go to local restaurants you will find that people often go with several friends or families.

It's also an interesting phenomenon that people don't leave the restaurants after dinner. They usually spend more than 30 minutes chatting or playing games.