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From market to market to buy a holiday feast

Taipei's night markets, hotels and restaurants provide everything from ingredients for home-cooked family meals to fully prepared multi-course banquets to ring in the Year of the Ox

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STAFF REPORTER

For many people in Taiwan, the Lunar New Year feast, loaded with symbolism, is the most important meal of the year. Primarily it is a chance for the whole family to get together, remembering those in distant places who cannot make it back to the family home by keeping an empty seat at the table. It also serves as a benediction for the coming year, and while much of the food is carefully selected for its rarity and flavor, it is also chosen for the auspicious meanings that it can suggest.

Chicken and fish, usually served whole, represent happiness, family unity and prosperity, noodles and certain vegetables suggest longevity, and a string of ingredients such as oranges and radishes are used because their names can, by some smaller or greater stretch of the imagination, form homophones of various auspicious words.

For many vendors of both fresh and cooked food, the Lunar New Year's family dinner is also seen as a perfect opportunity to get their hands on government money in the form of the recently issued consumer vouchers. In this, and the desire of many Taiwanese to spend this windfall as quickly as possible — be it on food or accommodation offers, lucky draws or prizes — Lunar New Year's Eve dinner 2009 is certainly going to bring prosperity to some.

For those doing their own cooking, the annual Taipei Big Street New Year Shopping Festival (台北年货大街) is the place to be. As in past years, this event will bring together the considerable resources of five of Taipei's traditional commercial districts. The center of the vast shopping area is Dihua Street (迪化街) market, which will link up with Huaying Street (華陰街) market, both of which will open for business at 10am every day. The Taipei Underground Mall (臺北地下街), with more than a kilometer of shops, and the section of Chongqing North Road Section 1 (重慶北路一段) between Changan West Road (長安西路) and Zhengzhou Road (鄭州路), will open for business daily from 11am, and the Ningxia Road night market (寧夏路夜市), which will open from 6pm, complete this large shopping precinct at which everything from snack foods to auspicious wall hangings can be obtained. Shops and stalls will be doing business full-throttle until Sunday, Lunar New Year's Eve, with the Taipei City Government estimating that 50,000 thousand people will shop there over the 10-day period of the pre-Lunar New Year shopping blowout. Detailed information can be obtained at the event's Web site at www.2009newyear.com.tw.

Two other traditional markets that are especially popular and busy in the run-up to the Lunar New Year are the Nanmen (南門市場) and Dongmen (東門市場) markets, both of which specialize in many regional Chinese delicacies. Nanmen market is located at 8, Roosevelt Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市羅斯福路一段8號) and Dongmen Market is located at 81, Ln 79, Xinyi Road Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市信義路二段81號).

To take up the challenge of preparing your own Lunar New Year banquet, check out the Department of Health's (行政院衛生署) recommended banquet menu, which is estimated to cost under NT\$2,000 for a table of 10. Complete details on how to prepare this healthy and inexpensive banquet can be found at the department's Web site at food.doh.gov.tw/foodnew.

If this feels like too much effort, many hotels and restaurants are providing everything from individual dishes to complete banquets for you to take home. Pretty much every major convenience store and hypermarket chain puts out extensive menus of Lunar New Year dishes, including top-shelf items. Even the ubiquitous 7-Eleven convenience store offers a casserole of abalone, pig's foot and wild chicken for NT\$2,599.

7-Eleven and most of the other mass-market outlets closed their pre-order list last week, but Taipei's hotels and many restaurants are still taking orders for those making a last-minute rush to put a proper banquet on the table.

The Shangri-La Far Eastern Plaza Hotel's (香格里拉台北遠東國際大飯店) main restaurants are all offering takeaway festive menus. The hotel's

Shanghai Pavilion restaurant has a seven-course menu for eight people starting at NT\$9,888 and 16 a la carte dishes with prices from NT\$388. The set menu includes dishes such as double-boiled mixed seafood and pork knuckle, deep-fried sea grouper with sweet-and-sour sauce, braised fresh crab with rice cake and purple glutinous rice with yam for dessert. Pickup can be as late as Lunar New Year's Eve from noon to 2:30pm and 4pm to 6pm. Packed in thermo bags, the dishes can be brought directly to the table with a minimum of fuss.

Most smaller restaurants require pickup of dishes the day before, and in some instances, particularly with sea food, provide the raw ingredients; the host is required to do the final preparation at home.

If you are looking for something different, Far Eastern Plaza Hotel's Ibuki Japanese restaurant has festive bento-style boxed dinners that include 20 kinds of sushi and specialties such as steamed king crab and asparagus rolls with wagyu beef, for NT\$6,888 for three persons.

Grand Formosa Regent (台北晶華酒店) has a number of special dishes that can serve as a centerpiece to a home banquet. It offers a Fortune and Prosperity Feast (NT\$888 for 20 dumplings), consisting of "delicately handcrafted" dumplings filled with a choice of Australian wagyu beef, lobster, abalone, shark's fin or king crab. Also available are Cantonese-style and Shanghaiese-style hot pot set menus (NT\$6,888 for six people).

For a taste from the Chinese interior, one of two Lunar New Year set menus on offer at the Ambassador Hotel (台北國賓) is from its highly regarded Sichuan restaurant and costs NT\$8,800 for a seven-course menu for eight people. There is also an extensive a la carte selection of specialty dishes such as *hejiahuan* (闔家歡), a casserole of exotic ingredients, which range in price from NT\$3,999 to NT\$5,999.

The Sheraton Hotel Taipei (台北喜來登大飯店) offers a Fortune Chinese New Year Dinner Set for six at NT\$10,800. The dinner set includes reunion chicken pot, Taiwanese stewed shark's fin, cheese-roasted king prawn, abalone mustard greens, stewed yellow croaker, shredded crispy radish cake and brown sugar mung bean cake.

And if the whole Lunar New Year feast is simply too much of a chore to contemplate, you might simply want to have a late lunch at the likes of Chili's Grill & Bar or Romano's Macaroni Grill, which will be open until 6pm on Lunar New Year's Eve. Swensen's branch on Renai Road (仁愛路) will be open until 3pm. Many hotel chains also offer a Lunar New Year's Eve dinner for those without relatives on hand to staff the kitchen.

Most major restaurant chains will be back in operation on Lunar New Year's day, and with so many options from stocking up, there is not much danger of going hungry.

HOTEL MEALS FOR TAKEOUT

Today is the last day to order Lunar New Year takeout meals from the Ambassador, Sheraton and Grand Formosa Regent hotels. Final orders for Far Eastern Plaza close on Saturday.

FAR EASTERN PLAZA

Shanghai Pavilion: (02) 2376-3245
Ibuki: (02) 2376-3241

GRAND FORMOSA REGENT

(02) 7701-7711

SHERATON

(02) 2321-1818

AMBASSADOR

(02) 2100-2100



Taipei's hotels offer a number of extravagant home banquet options, including the Far Eastern Plaza's seven-course menu for eight people, starting at NT\$9,888, and the Sheraton's Fortune Chinese New Year Dinner Set for six people at NT\$10,800.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF FORMOSA REGENT, SHERATON TAIPEI AND FAR EASTERN PLAZA HOTELS