

Mid-Autumn Festival (Zhong Qiu)

Zhōng qiū 中秋

A Chinese holiday celebrated during the autumn season, Zhong Qiu celebrates family togetherness, which is symbolized by the roundness of the completely full moon. Though the true origin of this festival is unknown, and many of the traditions associated with it are derived from a range of tribes and countries, it is considered one of the most important festivals for the Chinese.

Zhong Qiu, also known as the “Mid-Autumn Festival” and the “Moon Festival,” is held on the fifteenth day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar and is the third-most important family reunion day for Chinese throughout the world (after the lunar Chinese New Year, which falls between late January and late February, and the tomb-sweeping Qing Ming Festival on 5 April). On the day of the Mid-Autumn Festival family members gather for the evening meal and afterward move outdoors to enjoy the full moon. The perfectly round and bright moon (*yueyuan*) signifies the complete togetherness (*tuanyuan*) of the family. Those who are away from their families during the festival feel sad for missing such an opportunity.

Two foods, the moon cake and the pomelo, are closely associated with the festival. The moon cake is baked with a flour-based shell surrounding a sweet bean-paste stuffing. A pomelo (or pummelo, *Citrus maxima*, *Citrus grandis*) is a citrus fruit that ripens in southern China around



Historical illustration of the legendary Moon Palace. The Mid-Autumn Festival is also called the “Moon Festival.”

mid-autumn. Both foods are round, like the moon, and further strengthen the importance of family unification.

No consensus exists among sinologists as to when or where the Moon Festival originated. The scholar Wolfram Eberhard believed that it began rather late in Chinese history, perhaps in the post-Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) era, and had one of two possible origins. The first was with the Yao tribe, who once had wide distribution in China’s southern provinces of Fujian, Hunan, and Guangdong.

Mid-Autumn Moon Cake

These dense cakes are sold in elaborate packaging across Asia in the autumn and often contain salted boiled eggs inside the sweet paste filling. This recipe is just a basic version; many variations can be found in cookbooks and online.

MAKES 2 DOZEN

Filling

- 1 can (17½ ounces) lotus seed paste
- ¼ cup finely chopped walnuts

Dough

- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½-cup non-fat dried milk powder
- 1 cup sugar
- 3 eggs
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ cup solid shortening, melted and cooled

- 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 until uniform. Add sugar; beat for 10 minutes or until mixture falls in a thick ribbon. Add melted shortening; mix, and fold in flour mixture. Turn dough out on a lightly floured board; until smooth and satiny. Divide dough into 24 equal pieces.

- 3 To shape each moon cake, roll a piece of dough into a ball. Roll into 4-inch circle about 1/8-inch thick. Place 1 tablespoon of lotus seed paste mixture in center of dough circle, and seal with the edges of the dough. Lightly flour inside of moon cake press with 2-1/2 inch diameter cups. Place moon cake, seam side up, in mold; flatten dough slightly. Remove from mold, and place on ungreased baking sheet. Brush tops with egg yolk.

- 4 Bake in a preheated 375 degree F. oven for 30 minutes or until golden brown. Let cool.

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The Yao people follow a lunar calendar, and the fifteenth day of the eighth month is actually the beginning of their New Year, which they celebrate by worshipping the Moon Goddess at night. The second possibility is that the festival originated in north China and Korea, where peasants harvested their crops of millet or sorghum by mid- to late September. (It should be noted as well that eating moon cake to celebrate the full moon was a practice of the Thai, another minority group that was once widespread in southwest China's Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi provinces.) Whatever the origin, the homogenizing process of unifying and standardizing local customs throughout Chinese dynastic history gradually blended these elements to become one major festival.

Folklore holds that Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang, founder of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), originated the now-abandoned practice of inserting a piece of paper inscribed with secret messages into a moon cake. According to

legend, Zhu sent secret messages to encourage the Han Chinese to revolt against the occupying Mongols on the fifteenth day of the eighth month and succeeded in bringing down the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368).

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Further Reading

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