



## Join Me for a Cooking Class!

### January

18 French Country Cooking

### February

1 Italian Country Kitchen

15 French Country Cooking

29 Italian Country Kitchen

### March

7 Mediterranean Easter Feast

28 Tapas & Finger Food

### April

4 Italian Country Kitchen

18 French Country Cooking

### May

2 Italian Country Kitchen

16 French Country Cooking

### June

6 Summer Salads

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I send you all best wishes for an auspicious New Year of the Rat. Yes, in case you missed it, we are in the middle of Chinese New Year celebrations. The Chinese New Year always sneaks up on me but it goes on for fifteen days, so there is still plenty of time to celebrate. The Chinese or Lunar New Year starts with the first new moon of the ancient Chinese calendar and the celebrations continue until the moon is full. The holiday does more than mark the arrival of the new lunar year; it celebrates luck, happiness and prosperity. This year's lunar celebration is a welcome relief. With all the dreary weather we have been having, any excuse to celebrate is a good one.

I am not a fan of mice or rats but the Chinese have a different, more favorable view. The Rat is the first sign of the Chinese zodiac and signifies new beginnings. So be advised that 2008 is a good year to start something new. Think of it as a good time for new adventures or new ideas. Maybe it's the right time to tackle a new challenge or head in a new direction.

According to Chinese custom, the New Year demands a new look and a clean sweep. Tradition demands that we welcome in the New Year in new clothes. If you are a shopaholic, feel free to shop 'till you drop. And don't forget a trip to the barber for a hair cut to complete your new look. House and hearth also deserve a fresh start to the year. Just before the celebrations Chinese families go to work with mops and brooms. The goal is to sweep away any bad luck and clear the way for a bright future. Windows and doors are thrown open to welcome the New Year and all the luck it brings. With clean houses, new outfits and hair cuts, the Chinese celebrate for fifteen fun-packed days. There are dinners with family and friends, special services to honor ancestors, gifts, parades and fireworks. Through western eyes it looks a bit like Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, Christmas, Mardi Gras and the 4<sup>th</sup> of July all rolled into one.

Many of today's Lunar New Year traditions developed in ancient China. According to legend, a Nian or man-eating beast came out of the mountains during the winter to hunt for its human prey. Fortunately, it was discovered that the Nian was sensitive to loud noises and the color red. To keep the Nian at bay, lots of fireworks were set off, drums were banged, cymbals were clanged and red became the favorite color of the season. Noisy parades and fireworks and the color red have all become an integral part of the lunar celebrations.



Dragons are good luck in Chinese lore and it would not be the New Year without parades of dragon dancers. The dragon plays a dual role of welcoming in the New Year and evicting any bad spirits. As the dancers parade through the streets with a giant dragon head, they set off firecrackers and bang drums and cymbals. The deafening racket, the fierce dragon and the aggressive dance chase away any evil spirits or Nian that might be lurking in the neighborhood.

Unlike western New Year celebrations, gifts are a big part of the festivities and children traditionally receive red packets of money. Amounts are carefully chosen since certain numbers reflect good luck and honor. Even numbers are generally considered lucky, but beginners beware; eight is very lucky but four is associated with death and funerals. But the most important gift of the Lunar New Year is time spent with family and friends. Special holiday dinners with dishes symbolizing wealth, happiness and good fortune are shared.

Whether you decide to throw a big party or meet a few friends at your favorite Chinese restaurant, put on your finest red sweater and gather around the table for a festive dinner. Have a wonderful celebration and,

Bon appétit! - Susan



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**Spicy Chinese Noodles**

*Uncut noodles symbolize long life and are a favorite for New Year feasts and throughout the year. Serve these noodles with a simple grilled fish or chicken for an easy and delicious dinner. Enjoy!*

Serves 4-6

8 ounces Chinese wheat and egg noodles  
4 green onions, sliced thin  
1/2 red bell pepper, cut in thin strips  
1 cup bean sprouts  
1-2 teaspoons chili paste with garlic, or to taste  
2 tablespoon soy sauce  
1/4 cup dry white wine  
2 tablespoons chopped cilantro  
1/4 cup chopped peanuts  
Peanut oil

1. Cook the Chinese noodles in a large pot of boiling water according to package directions. Drain well, rinse with cold water, drain again and toss with 1 tablespoon of peanut oil.
2. In a large skillet or wok heat 2 tablespoons of peanut oil over high heat until very hot. Add the chili paste, soy sauce and wine and bring to a boil. Taste for seasoning. Add the noodles, green onions, bell pepper and bean sprouts; toss to combine and stir fry, tossing gently, until heated through. Sprinkle with cilantro and chopped peanuts, toss and serve immediately.