

Southern Living®

Cooking Up Community On Lunar New Year In Atlanta

Georgia author Natalie Keng celebrates Lunar New Year with an epic feast where all are welcome.

By [Natalie Keng](#)



Born and raised in Smyrna, Georgia, by Taiwanese parents, I grew up on [hoppin' John](#) with a side of bok choy. Throughout my life, I have learned grit and perseverance navigating what it means to be Asian and Southern. When I was 5 years old, my parents bought me a frilly dress and entered me in a Little Miss pageant at the local mall. When asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said, "I want to be a brain surgeon because I'm good at cleaning fish guts."

My career took a much different path, although it does involve the culinary world. I created [Cooking Up a Better World](#) workshops, which foster camaraderie and collaboration through interactive food-and-culture experiences. I believe that minds open when mouths open. And nowhere is the power of food more evident than at holiday time.

During Lunar New Year, one of the most important celebrations in many Asian countries, families come together to reconnect over a feast. (This year, the holiday starts on January 29.) The culinary parallels in Eastern and Western New Year's traditions might surprise you.

In the American South, [leafy collards](#) represent money and a hope for prosperity. The Lunar New Year counterpart is a "long-life vegetable," a regional mustard green that is intentionally cooked uncut, signifying longevity (chopping them up would be taboo). Golden cornbread also has an Asian doppelgänger: Chinese fa gao (sweet muffins made of rice). Behind all this symbolism are universal sentiments: peace, goodwill, and may your tummy never go empty.



My annual Lunar New Year banquet started out as a dinner party for friends and then grew into a 200-seat event hosted at Canton House restaurant on Georgia's [Buford Highway](#), a destination for international food. The idea came to me as a traveler strolling the alleyways of Taiwan's famous Dihua Street. Generations of grandmothers, including mine, made yearly pilgrimages to the historic marketplace, which has become synonymous with the holiday, to splurge on delicacies essential for gathering around the hot pot. "Behind all this symbolism are universal sentiments: peace, goodwill, and may your tummy never go empty. "

Now in its 11th year, the nine-course menu features both traditional and homegrown recipes, curated to juxtapose heritage with modernity. Each dish has a story. My mother's cured five-spice bean curd with garlic chives and Chinese sausage unfailingly wins over die-hard tofu naysayers.

Curry rice vermicelli noodles honor my grandmother Po-Po, who defiantly unbound her feet and became a wartime nurse while upholding her duties as a wife and mother. Whole fish, a Mandarin homophone for abundance and thus a requisite banquet dish, is always present. I use the recipe from my cookbook, [Egg Rolls & Sweet Tea: Asian Inspired, Southern Style](#).

Looking across the room, I see a field of lazy Susans, each encircled by an array of jubilant faces, all different yet connected by a sentiment as old as the thousand-year egg in the rice congee: a sense of community.

[Natalie Keng](#)

Natalie Keng is the founder and CEO ("Chief Eating Officer") of Global Hearth, a multi-faceted business that leverages the power of food and culture through its Cooking Up a Better World™ platform of inspiring, interactive, and impactful presentations, tours, and events. Known as the Chinese Southern Belle™, she has created an award-winning line of family recipe cooking sauces, earning her the title The Sauce Maven™. She's also the author of the cookbook, [Egg Rolls & Sweet Tea: Asian Inspired, Southern Style](#).

