

Su Shi and Gourmet Food — A Scholar's Palate

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Abstract: Su Shi, an outstanding scholar of the Northern Song Dynasty, is renowned for his exceptional literary talent and unique life philosophy. Not only did he achieve great success in poetry, prose, calligraphy, and other fields, but he was also a lover of life and an expert in cooking. In his poems and essays about food, he not only describes the deliciousness of food but also integrates his love for life and pursuit of beauty, making him a representative gourmand among ancient Chinese scholars. This paper aims to provide a simple reading and categorization of Su Shi's works that mention food, analyzing the gourmet sentiment reflected in his literary creations, as well as how food reflects his life philosophy and attitude toward life.

Keywords: Su Shi, Gourmet Food, Concept of Eating.

1. Introduction

Su Shi (January 8, 1037 – August 24, 1101), courtesy names Zizhan and Hezhong, and pseudonym “Dongpo Jushi” (The Recluse of Dongpo), is widely known as “Su Dongpo.” A Han Chinese, he was born in Meizhou (modern-day Meishan, Sichuan, which was Meishan City during the Northern Song Dynasty), with ancestral roots in Luancheng. Su Shi was a renowned literary figure, calligrapher, painter, poet, and gourmet during the Northern Song Dynasty. He was one of the Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song dynasties and a representative of the bold and unconstrained style of poetry. This literary giant of the Northern Song is not only celebrated for his extraordinary literary talents in poetry and prose, which have immortalized his name, but also for his profound love of food and unique insights, making him an indispensable figure in the history of Chinese culinary culture. Su Shi's connection with food reflects both his love for and enjoyment of life, as well as his deep humanistic cultivation and distinctive aesthetic perspective. In this paper, we will explore his love for food and his views on cuisine through his poetic and literary works, further understanding the humanistic sentiments and aesthetic tastes of this literary giant.

2. Praise for Food Itself and Exploration of Culinary Techniques

Su Shi's life was one of fluctuations within the officialdom, and he traveled extensively across China, leaving his footprints in many regions of the country. This rich life experience allowed him to taste a variety of local delicacies, leading him to develop his unique concepts of food and aesthetic tastes. He was skilled at discovering poetry and beauty in everyday meals, blending food with emotions, philosophy, and art, thereby creating his distinctive “Su Shi Culinary Culture.”

2.1. Culinary Elements in Su Shi's Poems and Essays

Food elements are omnipresent in Su Shi's poetry and prose. With delicate brushwork and vivid descriptions, he presents various dishes to readers in a way that makes them mouth-water. He praises the tenderness of fish, describes the lush green of vegetables, and sketches the richness of wine. Every line of his poetry seems to allow readers to smell the aroma of food and feel the excitement of their taste buds.

In his work *With Qian Mu Fu, Fifty-seven Poems*, he writes: "The newly carved special bamboo shoots are a rare gift, too exquisite to express in words. The bamboo shoots are also a delightful offering, picked with hearts of tender bamboo shoots, laid beside the mandarin fish. They are boiled in clear water, then dressed with ginger, leek juice, and wine, with a touch of salt. Slowly, as the wine is added, the dish becomes tender and ready to eat. I dare not savor it alone. Please follow this recipe and share it with my elder sister-in-law." [1] Here, he describes a bamboo shoot recipe: the bamboo shoots, mushrooms, cabbage hearts, and mandarin fish are boiled in clear water, then seasoned with ginger, leek juice, and wine, with a pinch of salt, and enjoyed slowly.

In *Ode to Pork*, he paints a mouthwatering scene: "Clean the pot, add a little water, and keep the fire low, so the smoke does not rise. Let it cook on its own; don't rush it. When the fire is just right, it will become delicious on its own. Pork from Huangzhou is the best, priced as cheap as dirt. The rich won't eat it, and the poor don't know how to cook it. Get up early, make two bowls, and enjoy it to your heart's content without worrying about the household." [2] Su Shi delicately describes the process of cooking pork, with vivid imagery of cleaning the pot, adding water in moderation, and simmering the meat slowly over a low flame. These poems and essays not only portray the process of making food but also do so in great detail, making the descriptions feel vivid and mouthwatering.

2.2. Su Shi's Exploration of Culinary Craftsmanship

Su Shi's love for gourmet food led him to approach the art of cooking with great seriousness. In his *On Millet and Wheat*, he discusses: "The rice in the north lacks sufficient shade, and the wheat in the south lacks sufficient sunlight. Therefore, there is no fine wine in the south, because the wheat used in brewing is mixed with the moisture of the shade. Moreover, in the South Sea, where there is no wheat, they use rice for brewing. I once stayed in the capital and transported wheat to Qiantang to make wine. That year, the official wine was better than the brewed wine in the capital. In the north, wine is made using southern rice, which is why the wine is of good quality. When I was in Gaomi, I made wine using local rice, but it had no flavor. Now, in Hainan, I use imported rice to make the wine, and the quality is exceptional. From this, one can see the evidence of my observation." [3] This passage delves into how the geographical environment affects the growth of crops and the brewing process. It also reflects Su Shi's deep understanding of brewing techniques and practical experience.

First, Su Shi points out the climatic differences between the north and south and their impact on crop growth. He observes, "The rice in the north lacks sufficient shade, and the wheat in the south lacks sufficient sunlight," meaning that northern rice grows well under abundant sunlight but lacks enough shade, while southern wheat, deprived of sunlight, cannot grow properly. This geographical and climatic difference leads to different crop qualities, which in turn affects the quality of ingredients used in brewing.

Next, Su Shi further analyzes how these ingredient differences affect the brewing results. He argues that the reason southern regions struggle to produce good wine is that the quality of southern wheat is poor, leading to "moisture" being mixed into the brewing yeast, thereby diminishing the quality of the wine. In the South Sea region, where wheat is unavailable, rice is used instead, which also influences the flavor and quality of the wine.

However, Su Shi does not stop at describing the phenomenon; he corroborates these views with his own practical experiences. He recalls transporting wheat to Qiantang for brewing, and that year, the official wine was better than the wine brewed in the capital. This demonstrates the importance of selecting the right ingredients for brewing. He also mentions that in the north, wine is made using southern rice, which is why the wine is of good quality. These practical experiences further validate his observation about the impact of geography on brewing.

Finally, Su Shi reflects on his brewing experiences in Gaomi and Hainan. When he was in Gaomi, the wine made from local rice lacked flavor. However, when in Hainan, he used imported high-quality rice, resulting in exceptional wine. This comparison underscores the decisive impact of ingredient selection on brewing quality.

This passage not only showcases Su Shi's sharp insights into the relationship between geography and crop growth but also reflects his profound understanding of brewing techniques and practical experience. Through observation and practice, he discovered how geographical conditions influence brewing ingredients and successfully brewed high-quality wine by cleverly selecting ingredients and refining brewing methods. This passage is not only scientific but also practical and engaging, serving as a significant reflection of Su Shi's literary and philosophical thought.

3. The Perfect Combination of Culinary Culture and Life's Insights

Su Shi's love for gourmet food is reflected not only in his admiration for food itself, his careful selection of ingredients, and his study of cooking techniques, but also in how he uniquely combines food with the pursuit of life's pleasures, philosophy, and emotional experiences.

3.1. Su Shi Uses Ingredients to Convey Life Philosophies and Personal Beliefs

For example, in his poem *On the Bian Fish*, the line "Who says the fish can't shrink its neck? It is often cooked due to its greed for bait" uses the Bian fish as a metaphor for human greed and insatiability. The Bian fish, driven by its greed for bait, is often caught, just as people in life often fall into trouble due to their greed and desires. In *Eleven Poems on the Plants of My Garden, Composed in Response to My Brother Ziyou*, the lines "Aloe grows along the Shu Road, and white angelica comes from Jiangnan. Though they drift to the Guanfu, they do not lose their fragrance and sweetness" describe two types of medicinal plants, Aloe and white angelica, representing the distinctive plants from different regions. The phrase "drifting to the Guanfu" subtly suggests that these plants have undergone various difficulties and changes, yet despite all the shifts, "they do not lose their fragrance and sweetness" emphasizes that they have retained their excellent qualities and characteristics. This conveys a belief that, no matter how much one faces challenges and changes in life, one must maintain their inherent qualities and values. Also, in the same work, the lines "Enjoying the moment, cherishing the fragrant morning; the autumn wind always comes too early" express the poet's appreciation for beautiful moments, while "Who knows the sorrow of parting? How joyful it is to see the autumn melons ripen" further contrast the sadness of separation with the inevitability of time passing. These lines reveal a deep sense of melancholy and resignation about the passage of time, yet they also carry an optimistic attitude that finds hope and joy even in adversity.

3.2. Su Shi's Concepts of Food in His Poetry and Prose

In *Dongpo Zhilin: On Health Preservation*, Su Shi writes: "When hungry, one should eat; when not yet full, one should stop. Take a leisurely walk and ensure your stomach is empty. When it is empty, then go indoors. Regardless of day or night, sit or lie as you wish, but the key is in health preservation, like a wooden puppet." [4] This emphasizes the principle of moderation in food intake. In Su Shi's view, eating should be based on the body's true needs, rather than external temptations or habitual

tendencies. Food should only be consumed when the body truly feels hunger, which helps meet its energy requirements and avoids indigestion caused by eating too early. The advice to “stop before full” warns against overeating, meaning one should stop eating before feeling completely full, to maintain a light and healthy body and avoid overburdening the digestive system. Su Shi also emphasizes the need to eat in harmony with nature and the seasons. He writes in *Dongpo Zhilin* that: “Let the plants be like the eight delicacies, but the key to good food lies in eating late.” This highlights that the value of food is not solely determined by its rarity or the skill of cooking, but more importantly by whether it aligns with the natural rhythms and seasonal cycles. In his view, every plant, when harvested at the right season, can become a delicious dish, as precious as the eight treasures. This is not only a respect for food itself but also an appreciation and gratitude for nature’s gifts. By stating that “eating late is the way,” Su Shi further elaborates on his food philosophy. He believes that dinner should be the most important meal, as it aligns with the human biological clock and is when the body needs nourishment after a day’s work. Eating late not only aids digestion and absorption but also allows one to enjoy the pleasure of food in the quiet of the evening without affecting nighttime rest and recovery. More importantly, the late meal encourages a slower, more reflective way of life, urging people to slow down, appreciate the connection between food and nature, and savor each moment.

3.3. Su Shi Expresses His Emotions Through Food

In *Sending Bamboo Shoots and Peony to Gongze, Two Poems*, the first poem reads: “Having been away for so long, I am tired of the northern fare and long for the southern cuisine. A friend knows my feelings and sends bamboo shoots from a thousand miles away. The shoots are paired with jade baby peas, each unwrapped from a brocade bag. The cook may not know, but the traveler’s eyes are clearer. My humble kitchen offers pork and boiled vegetables. I send it to a guest from Jiangnan, to be roasted with fragrant rice.” [5] In this poem, Su Shi explicitly expresses his weariness of the northern food after being away for a long time, as well as his deep longing for the cuisine of the south. This sentiment is a common experience for many who are far from home, yet Su Shi’s description is particularly delicate and moving. He uses food—an essential part of daily life—to cleverly convey his nostalgia and yearning for his homeland.

When a friend from the distant land of Shu sends bamboo shoots from Su Shi’s hometown, his joy is evident. The bamboo shoots, a delicacy of his homeland, not only represent the taste of home but also carry Su Shi’s memories and emotions. He treasures this gift from his hometown, while also lamenting that the cook does not know the correct way to prepare the bamboo shoots. This tender feeling toward the food and the pursuit of culinary quality further showcases Su Shi’s unique emotional connection with food.

Finally, Su Shi sends the bamboo shoots to his guest in Jiangnan, Li Gongze, and instructs him on how to cook them to bring out the full flavor. This gesture not only reflects Su Shi’s deep affection for his friend but also underscores his love for fine food. Through this act, Su Shi is able to taste the flavors of his hometown again, creating an emotional “return” to his roots through his writing. In this poem, by using bamboo shoots as a motif, Su Shi vividly displays his love for food and his unique perspective on it, while also revealing his deep homesickness and appreciation for friendship.

Through food, Su Shi expresses his love for life and enjoyment of it. By savoring food, he reflects on the bittersweetness of life. In his philosophy of life, food holds a central position. He does not merely view food as a tool to satisfy hunger, but as an important means of expressing his love for life and enjoying it. For Su Shi, each dish contains the essence of life, and each tasting is a profound reflection on the joys and sorrows of life.

4. Su Shi Enriched Chinese Culinary Culture and Left Us a Precious Cultural Legacy

In Su Shi's poetry and prose, food is not merely a sensory pleasure for the taste buds, but also a vivid vehicle for his profound life philosophy and rich emotional experiences. With a unique perspective, he transforms seemingly ordinary foods into brilliant passages, delicately sketching the intricate connections between food, life, emotions, and philosophy. This showcases the humanistic spirit and aesthetic taste of a literary giant.

Su Shi's life, much like the foods he describes, was rich, colorful, and full of poetry. His life experiences and literary achievements have left us with a valuable legacy. His love for and insights into food offer us a fresh perspective, allowing us to appreciate not only the flavors of food but also the beauty of life and the true essence of existence.

5. Conclusion

Therefore, Su Shi stands not only at the pinnacle of Chinese literature with his outstanding literary achievements, making him a rare and exceptional scholar, but he is also a gastronome deeply passionate about life and adept at savoring the true essence of food. Su Shi's culinary sentiments are a sincere expression of his personal emotions; whether in times of prosperity or adversity, he could always find solace for his soul in food. They also reflect his unique understanding of life philosophy: through tasting food, he grasped the bittersweetness of life and experienced its ups and downs. It is this quality of closely integrating food with life, emotions, and philosophy that makes Su Shi's culinary culture a beautiful and enduring highlight in ancient Chinese culture, forever shining brightly.

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