

Lifestyle/ Food & Drink

Lao Gan Ma, or 'chilli crisp', the Chinese chilli oil that's hot stuff in the West

Originating from a small food stall in China's Guizhou province, Lao Gan Ma – known in the US as 'chilli crisp' – is now exported to over 30 countries

US professional wrestler John Cena is a huge fan, Facebook groups sing its praises and a clothing brand even sold a hoodie with Lao Gan Ma's logo

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Lao Gan Ma was created by Chinese food stall owner Tao Huabi, whose stern portrait adorns every jar.

In many kitchens in China you'll likely find a bottle or three of Lao Gan Ma, a crisp chilli oil infused with a potent mix of dried chilli peppers, fried onions, peanuts, fermented soybeans and, yes, MSG.

It is ideal for spicing up staple Chinese dishes such as dumplings and fried rice, delivering the perfect balance of heat and crunch, as well as a delightful hit of umami. It is also one of the bestselling condiments in the country, with sales of over 5 billion yuan (US\$770 million) in 2019.

Today, savvy foodies in the West are catching on, from chefs to critics to celebrities. In 2018, American professional wrestler John Cena waxed lyrical about Lao Gan Ma – in fluent Mandarin to boot – in a video posted on Weibo. And in early 2020, British chef Alex Rushmer proclaimed on Twitter that "I would eat a bowl of gravel if it was smothered in Lao Gan Ma. If all you had was rice and noodles, Lao Gan Ma would make it all OK."

The condiment has even become something of a pop culture icon. During New York Fashion Week in September 2018, clothing brand Opening Ceremony sold a hoodie emblazoned with Lao Gan Ma's logo; a Lao Gan Ma fanzine launched in the same month. There are even fan clubs dedicated to the sauce – on Facebook, the Lao Gan Ma Appreciation Society has over 3,500 global members.



The Lao Gan Ma fanzine.

Lao Gan Ma's culinary and cultural clout is something that 74-year-old founder Tao Huabi, whose stern portrait adorns every jar, probably never envisioned. Back in the 1990s, a widowed and impoverished Tao ran a small food stall in China's Guizhou province, dishing up cheap bowls of rice noodles. Even though times were hard, she often handed out free food to hungry kids, earning her the nickname Lao Gan Ma, or "old godmother".

Word soon spread not about Tao's noodles, but about the moreish crispy chilli oil they were served with, prompting her to focus solely on selling the latter. She eventually closed her shop to grow her chilli oil business, which she named after her moniker. The rest, as they say, is history. Today, Lao Gan Ma is exported to more than 30 countries worldwide, including the UK and the US.

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While Lao Gan Ma is most readily available in Asian supermarkets overseas, it can also be found on the shelves of mainstream retailers such as Sainsbury's in the UK.

"What's really striking is how it has caught on outside the community of Chinese people and people who have a particular interest in Chinese food [in the UK]," says Chinese food expert Fuchsia Dunlop.

She cites the sauce's "immediate sensory appeal" as a key reason for its growing popularity. "It's that electrifying combination of chilli heat with the rich, fermented umami taste of the black beans – it perks up almost any dish."



Chinese food expert Fuchsia Dunlop. Photo: Colin Bell.

Kate Ray, the founder of the Lao Gan Ma fanzine, notes a surge of interest in the US, where the condiment is widely known as “chilli crisp”.

“When we first launched, many people didn’t know about Lao Gan Ma, so we offered some samples where we were selling the ’zine,” she says. “Now, it feels like everybody I know has heard about it or has a bottle at home.”

Lao Gan Ma features in many Chinese restaurants overseas, from hole-in-the-wall takeaways to fine-dining venues. In Los Angeles, casual Chinese joint Northern Cafe sells spicy noodles tossed in Lao Gan Ma. In London, upscale restaurant Hutong (currently closed due to the UK’s Covid-19 lockdown) dishes up sautéed tiger prawns drenched with the sauce.



Kate Ray, who founded the Lao Gan Ma fanzine.

Some restaurants have taken to making their own artisanal versions of Lao Gan Ma. Milu, a fast-casual Chinese restaurant in New York City, serves a house-made iteration derived from a mix of ground chillies.

“When developing our recipe, we experimented with many different chillies and spices, including the more common Sichuan chilli flake but also others such as cobanero chilli from Guatemala,” says chef and co-founder Connie Chung. “We think it goes really well and adds a savoury and spicy kick to most of our dishes.” It even plays a starring role in the restaurant’s chilli crisp chicken, imbuing the deep-fried chunks with umami goodness.



Jars of Milu's house-made chilli crisp.



Milu chef and co-founder Connie Chung.

Chung says there has been an increasing interest in Asian and international condiments in the US and the popularity of Lao Gan Ma is a natural extension of that. She credits renowned chefs such as Momofuku's David Chang for bringing the condiment to a wider audience. Indeed, when Momofuku's "Chilli Crunch" sauce – which the brand says is inspired by its "love and respect" for Lao Gan Ma – debuted in September 2020, it sold out within hours.

Then there is also Fly by Jing, which has amassed a cult following since launching in 2019. The brand's Sichuan chilli crisp is made using Sichuan chillies and peppercorns, with a hint of umami derived from dried mushrooms and kombu.

"Sichuan chilli crisp brings a balanced sort of heat that is becoming increasingly rare in the Western hot sauce landscape, where more brands are leaning on shocking amounts of heat rather than something that is deeply flavourful and complex," explains founder Jing Gao, who was born in Chengdu in China and is based in Los Angeles.



Fly By Jing's Sichuan chilli crisp sauce.



Jing Gao, who founded Fly by Jing.

It is precisely this nuance of flavour that makes the crispy chilli oil so versatile. In particular, it goes remarkably well with dairy. “For a while, I was putting Lao Gan Ma on pizza and macaroni and cheese, and mixing it with sour cream or mayonnaise,” Ray says. In the same vein, Fly by Jing recently collaborated with Wanderlust Creamery in Los Angeles on a limited-edition chilli crisp and tonka bean ice cream, which came topped with mala peanuts (mala is a spicy, numbing seasoning made from Sichuan peppercorn and chilli pepper) and fresh coriander.

Of course, it pairs brilliantly with various other dishes too, as members of the Lao Gan Ma Appreciation Society Facebook group can attest: slathered on peanut butter toast, served atop steak and eggs, as a dip for French fries, and more. As another of the group’s founders, Simon Stahli, says, “It goes with almost anything.” This, perhaps, best sums up the condiment’s enduring appeal.