*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong, (Frederic) Inter-County Leader*

**How to host your own hot pot dinner**

Hot pot dinner is one of my most favorite meals. Now that the weather is getting cold(er), it is time! What makes cooking hot pot exciting is not just about the gathering and feasting, but it is an event indeed.

Who shall we invite? Anyone who loves company and enjoys fun conversations and great food.

How much food do we need? More than needed, as always. In general, one can consume 36 ounces of food and beverage (of course, there are exceptions). The leftover stock makes the best soups for days to come.

How to accommodate the settings with plates and plates of food? Prepare everything beforehand and stack them in the refrigerator. Then bring them out to the counter, and then to the table two to three platters at a time.

With the hot pot in the middle and all the settings and dipping sauces, the space is quite limited. There is a strategy to the madness in how to orchestrate the “flow” of colors, flavors and aromas. In general, meat goes first, then vegetables, then seafood, and then noodles and tofu … etc., etc. You’re the master of the ceremony. Fan everything nicely on the platter. The eyes will be feasting first.

Everyone has their own setup — a sauce dish, soup spoon, pair of chopsticks, and a small wire basket with a long handle to cook stuff that can easily slip away. And everyone creates their own dipping sauce — a blend of soy sauce, chili paste, sesame oil, chili oil, add minced garlic or shredded ginger and scallions.

Make sure that all the foods are sliced into very thin bite-size pieces, so they will be cooked within seconds in the hot pot.

Here are some ideas for hot pot ingredients. Pick whatever you prefer:

* **Sliced meats:** beef, chicken, pork, lamb, liver, etc.
* **Seafood:** shrimp, crab claws, oysters, clams, fish fillets, etc.
* **Appetizers:** fish balls, beef balls, beef tendon balls, fried and fresh tofu.
* **Vegetables:** napa cabbage, spinach, scallions, chives, oyster mushrooms, etc.
* **Others:** noodles, rice sticks, vermicelli, udon (Japanese noodles), etc.

In a hot pot dinner, there is no etiquette to observe, just enjoy the fun and the company. You should have a little respect for others, such as never picking up any food that you did not drop in the pot. If you find a piece of “hidden treasure” floating around, ask before you consume it.

As mentioned earlier, most folks can consume 36 ounces of food and beverage. So, if you have four ounces each of nine items that you’ll be serving, the guests will be full. If you have eight guests, I would purchase 32 ounces of each kind of meat. Use the same formula with other ingredients as well.

Any kind of beer and wine is also great to pair with your hot pot dinner. Make sure you stock plenty. And for the nonalcohol drinkers, jasmine tea is a must.

Here is what you need for cooking your hot pot dinner:

* **The cooking pot.** Actually, we just need a burner and a boiling pot of soup (use chicken consume). Do not use a pot that is too deep, as your food will sink to the bottom and disappear fast.
* **The burner.** There are many kinds. Choose whichever works best for your dinner.
  + An electric burner keeps things easy, as you just have to plug it in.
  + A gas burner is very efficient, using a small can of butane.
  + The most authentic option is a brass boiler, which is featured only in movies and expensive restaurants. It has a tall chimney in the center with a trough around to hold the soup. It uses real wood, never charcoal.
* **Chairs are optional.** It is comfortable, yet after a while, you may be eating standing up. The food goes down faster this way, and it is easier to watch for your food that you drop in the pot, making sure that no one “borrowed” it by mistake.

Don’t forget to stage your dinner in courses. Put the meat in the soup first, then vegetables, meatballs and lastly, all the noodles to soak up the flavors. Eat slowly and take your time between courses.

Make sure you have extra soup prepped, as you might have to keep adding more soup to the pot while it keeps boiling.

So, it might be minus-15 degrees outside, but no one would ever notice! Trust me on that. Enjoy!