



# An Exploration of the Dietary Anthropology of Avena Noodles in Wuchuan

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**Abstract.** As the saying goes, “Food is the essence of the people”, and as an integral part of people’s lives, food is one of the most important forms of cultural expression. The article explores the origins, production and value of the famous Avena noodles in Wuchuan County, Hohhot City, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, and attempts to explain the distinct regional characteristics of Wuchuan Avena noodles and their diverse functions in local folk life, taking into account the local geographical background and eating habits.

**Keywords:** Wuchuan County · Avena noodle · dietary folk culture

## 1 Introduction

“As an integral part of people’s lives, food is one of the most important forms of cultural expression. By studying local food, one can intuitively understand the local natural environment, customs and other multi-dimensional information, thus facilitating further exploration of local cultural connotations. As the American scholar Marvin Harris points out in his book *Tasty: Food and the Mystery of Culture*, “the peculiar phenomena and customs triggered by eating in human societies are to be taken as objects of analysis, allowing people to analyse the cultural differences and national personalities that result from having a diet with the vision of dietary anthropology.” [1].

With the help of the above theoretical perspectives, this paper will analyse the Avena noodles in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, examining the raw materials, production methods, evolution of the status of Avena noodles, related dietary customs and the preservation of heritage, in order to present a comprehensive picture of the relationship between Avena noodles and the origins of Hohhot’s Wuchuan County and the ethnic character and culture of the Wuchuan people.

## 2 The History of Avena Noodles in Wuchuan

To study the Avena noodles, one should first understand its raw material: Avena. Folklore has it that: in ancient times, the Yandi was the originator of the cultivation of grains, he tasted all kinds of grasses and trees, found out the degree of adaptation of various plants to the cold and warm climate, so he gave the plants fiefdoms - Jiangnan water town let

the rice go, the Central Plains let the wheat go, the Loess Plateau let the cereals go. Unfortunately, none of the plants in the alpine region went, so the Emperor gave Avena to put on the cold wheat mane and gave three cups of strong wine, since then Avena has taken root in the Seaside and become a major staple food, ranked as “three treasures of the back of the mountain” - Avena noodles, yams and big leather jacket, thus showing Avena production This shows the importance of Avena production in Wuchuan.

It is also recorded in the Suiyuan General Records: “Avena, a piece of oil wheat, that is, Avena also. The dry and barren land is also suitable for sowing, and all counties are widely planted in front of and behind the mountains.” Hohhot Wuchuan County is located in the northern foothills of the Yin Mountains, air, water pure, is the birthplace of the world’s naked Avenas, known as “Avena hometown”, also known as “China’s hometown of Avena noodles”. According to legend, the Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty, who had conquered Kardan himself, ate Avena noodles in the city of Guihua (the old city of Hohhot) and was impressed.

### **3 Making and Eating Avena Noodles in Wuchuan**

#### **3.1 The “Three Ripe” Technique**

The Avena noodles are made with “three raw and three cooked”, that is, from raw Avena to the edible Avena noodles, it has to go through three raw and three cooked processes [2]. After the Avena has been harvested and pulled onto the field for threshing, the seeds are raw, which is the “lifetime”; before grinding the seeds into Avena, they are first panned and washed, then put in a pan and fried until they are yellow and ripe, which is the “first ripe”. The fried Avena kernels are ground into raw Avena noodles, which is the “second raw”, and the Avena noodles must be boiled in boiling water, which is the “second cooked”. This is a crucial step in the production of Avena noodles, and failure to do so will affect the subsequent taste. This is why there is a local story about a mother-in-law who instructed her daughter-in-law to mix the Avena noodles before she went to work. The daughter-in-law didn’t understand what was meant by “to make”, so the mother-in-law said “to make it until you let go of the farts”. When the mother-in-law’s family came back for lunch, the daughter-in-law was still sweating and making the noodles, so she asked why she was still making them. The mother-in-law was angry and asked why she was still working. The Avena noodles are made into Avena noodle fish and fish or Avena noodle nest while they are still hot, which is why they are called “sangsheng”.

#### **3.2 Traditional Avena Noodle Cuisine**

There is a common proverb in Wuchuan: “When you look at a daughter-in-law in Tumocheon, you see a pretty face; when you look at a daughter-in-law in Wuchuan, you see how well the Avena noodles are kneaded.” The local people have created a variety of Avena noodles through their dexterous hands: rolling, pushing, rolling, doughing, rolling, pressing, wrapping, rubbing, pinching, stirring, frying, cutting and wiping.

The “Avena noodle fish” is made by taking two or three small balls of Avena noodles and rolling them together with both hands to make thin noodles, or by rolling three or

five small balls of Avena noodles by hand on a board. The average person can only roll one fish at a time, but a housewife with many years of experience can do it with two hands on the board at the same time, and can roll two or three fish with one hand. The local people are very particular about rolling the fish and fish, four in one hand, evenly and slenderly, with their arms tugging up and down and flying, the eight fish and fish are smooth and slender, like the spring silkworms spitting out silk and the wonderful hands drawing cocoons [3].

The “Avena noodle nest” is made by pinching a small ball of Avena noodles, pushing it with the right hand on a palm-sized glazed earthenware plate or the back of a kitchen knife and lifting it up with the left to form a thin slice of Avena noodles, which is then wound around the fingers into a cylinder and placed vertically on the gauze of the cage drawer. Many such cylinders stand one after the other, looking not unlike a beehive. The more skilled folk are able to roll them out on the back of one hand. It is easy to say, but not easy to make. The main thing about making Avena noodle nests is the strength of the hand, too much force is too thin, not easy to shape; too little force is too thick, the taste is not good. Only when the maker uses even force, “a push, a roll, a stand”, can a good cage of honeycomb nest be made. I found in the field investigation: local villagers push the nest, sitting cross-legged on the bed, put the Avena flour stone as clean as jade flat on the legs, the right hand back hump Avena noodles, palm forward push, the left hand will push the good noodle pieces quickly uncovered around to the index finger, and then sent into the cage drawer code. In the blink of an eye, the cage is full of crystal-clear nests, as neat as a cut-out, as regular as a beehive, which is astonishing.

The soup that goes with Avena noodle food is the soul of the dish. Depending on the season, local people mainly choose cold and hot soups: in summer and autumn, people mostly choose cold soups with Avena noodle food. In summer, when fresh vegetables are plentiful, potatoes and aubergines are steamed, cucumbers and radishes are shredded and mixed with seasonings such as spring onions, garlic, vinegar, monosodium glutamate and spring onion oil, and eaten with the steamed Avena noodle food. In autumn, home-grown potatoes, cabbage and round vegetables can be eaten cold with Avena noodles. In winter, when it is freezing cold, most people choose hot soups, such as lamb and potato soup, lamb and mushroom soup, pork and sauerkraut soup, pork and tofu soup and many other types. In the cold and long winter in the north, there is a lack of fresh vegetables and almost every household has pickled cabbage.

## **4 The Function of Wuchuan Avena Noodles in Folk Life**

After sorting out the origins of Avena noodles, their production and how they were eaten, the question of why they were eaten becomes a deeper question in the analysis of Wuchuan Avena noodles from a dietary anthropological perspective. Eating Avena noodles was not only a dietary habit of the local people, but also an important expression of the society and culture of the time.

### **4.1 Nutritional Functions**

*Avena sativa* is resistant to drought, cold and barrenness and grows in conditions of lack of fertiliser and water, thus producing more nutrients. Its protein and fat content

is the highest among the grains, and it is also rich in calcium, phosphorus, iron and many other nutrients and medicinal ingredients that the human body needs, making it one of the “nine grains”. Because its nutritional value is considerable, in weight loss, lowering blood fat, lowering blood sugar and other aspects of good therapeutic health effects, according to the “Health Times”, the first hospital of Shanxi Medical University nutrition department chief physician Sun Ping often to hospital treatment of diabetic patients and some elderly patients recommended to eat Avena noodles. Plus it is rich in linoleic acid, which is also significantly effective in promoting human metabolism.

In the autumn of 1938, the Daqingshan detachment of the Eighth Route Army advanced into Daqingshan and created the Daqingshan Guerrilla Base, one of the 19 bases in the country, with the whole county as a guerrilla area. The Avena noodles, with their “forty miles of Avena noodles, thirty miles of cake, ten miles of buckwheat noodles and a broken waist” hunger-resistant properties, fought against the cold with the heat transformed in the body by the Avena noodles, nourishing the people’s sons and daughters who fought in the Daqing Mountains back then.

## 4.2 Cultural Functions

### The Cultural Connotation of Avena Noodles

#### *Avena Noodles and Dialect*

The modern folklorist Wang Xianzhong said, “Dialect is the carrier of a region’s folklore, and it is the medium through which folklore culture survives and is passed on. It is not only the expression of folk culture, it is also the content.” The long history and widespread use of Avena noodles in Wuchuan County has led to the existence of many dialectal sayings related to them and widely circulated in the area. The jingle “fish fish rolled fine needle needle child, nest pushed thin Ling Ling child, yam boiled sand teng child, aubergine roasted sheep dun child, cucumber, water radish, bean sprouts, taro seasoned crisp clang child, coriander leek cut a flurry of children, onion Zameng choked yellow rushing child, salt soup blended sour Yin Yin child..... Eat in the mouth The “Aroma in your mouth. [4] The Avena noodles are described in such a way that they have all the colours, aromas and tastes that one cannot help but be fascinated. The song “Love Song of Avena” is a song about the love of Avena: “In the ditch, in the fork, with a scythe in my hand, in the waist of the two mills, up and out, back and forth, hissing and hissing, cutting Avena yo, - kissing! Brother I am on the south slope, sister I am at the front of the pot, white shoulders, silver bracelets; push the nest, thin; roll the fish, fine; yam mustard, white; mix some coriander, green; choke some chilli, red, eat Avena noodles, - kiss!” The spark of love gives the labour and cooking a touch of affection.

#### *Avena Noodles and Ethnic Identity*

“It is the recognition of the identity of the community, the cognitive and emotional attachment of the members to the community to which they belong, based on cultural identity and using culture as a carrier, ultimately forming a signifier of community identity. This marker is not only limited to material culture, but also intangible culture as a cultural marker of a certain region. [5] As intangible cultural heritage, the Wuchuan Avena noodle production technique carries a common social identity and displays specific cultural

values. A writer, born in Wuchuan and settled in the south, once described in an article “After coming to Jiangnan, I went back to visit my relatives and brought back Avena noodles, my mother-in-law also sent Avena noodles from Ulanhua, and nowadays I buy Avena noodles from Wuchuan and Qingshui River on Jingdong and Tmall, and often steam a cage for myself, butchering the meat soup and talking about a small scene. At first, I thought the Avena noodles were not cooked in Jiangnan, so my wife was careful to make them for fear that they would not be edible; in fact, the Avena noodles in the back of the mountain are just as tasty when they meet the soft water of Jiangnan. Once I ate so well that my thrAvena rumbled, my wife joked, “A loud thrAvena makes Avena noodles smell good. The Avena noodle gene that I had hidden in my body since I was a child was activated.” Not all people who eat Avena noodles are Wuchuan people, but we have to admit that Avena noodles play an important role in the identity of the ethnic group in the Wuchuan region. “A nation’s intangible cultural heritage is a living memory of her unique national spirit for all, an important symbol of cultural identity and a lifeline that sustains the nation’s existence.”

### **The Symbolic Meaning of Avena Noodles**

#### *A Good Wish for a Prosperous Year Ahead and Good Weather*

On the 28th day of the 28th month of the Chinese lunar calendar, every family has to eat a meal of Avena noodles to symbolise good luck and celebration. On this day, the Avena noodles are eaten with a surplus, which means “surplus for the coming year”.

On the tenth day of the first month of the lunar calendar after the New Year, it is the day when the legendary “rat marries a bride” in the Jin-Mongol region, the rat is commonly known as the “son god”, the god of life and reproduction, and it is said that the rat marries a bride on this day. It is said that on this day the rat marries a bride. The rat sacrifice is actually a common tradition of human fertility worship, in the hope that the family will have many children and grandchildren and that the family will prosper. According to a custom that has been handed down to this day in the central and western regions of Inner Mongolia, every family eats a steaming meal of Avena noodles to pray for a year of good weather and rain. When rolling the Avena noodles, five in one hand, both hands moving at the same time, the panel is rolled with 10 long, thin “fish”, hence the name “ten fingers” for the day. When rolling the Avena noodles, the dexterous women also pinch some palanquin and steam them at the same time, placing them in corners and at the bottom of urns for the mice to use in their marriages.

#### *Patience and Dedication to National Character*

The local Wuchuan people often hear the philosophical saying “if you have a temper like Avena noodles, you will have people for life”. In fact, the person who can make good Avena noodles has to have full patience in addition to his or her handy skills. The Avena noodles are different from others, as they have to be made in small pieces, rolled to the same thickness and pushed to the same height. You can’t make good Avena noodles if you’re upset and don’t have full patience. As the local saying goes, “the fish must be thick and the nest must have an egg”.

In addition to patience a good Avena noodle is also dependent on the dedication of the maker. The housewife devotes her labour to making Avena noodles for her family

through the tedious production process, and even if the noodles disappear like a storm after ten minutes of cooking, her heart is still full of joy. The old climbing tune “Half a catty of Avena noodles pushes a nest, true love for my brother” expresses the same dedication to love.

## 5 Conclusion

In the age of new media, Wuchuan Avena noodles, as a unique regional speciality diet, is the perfect object to spread Wuchuan culture. The annual Wuchuan (International) Avena Culture Festival and Avena Food Skills Competition and the local netizens’ farming life recorded through the ShakeYin and Crypto platforms present the most authentic Wuchuan Avena noodles, helping to promote the heritage of non-traditional food culture.

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