

Food Intro Chopsticks KFC Pizza Hut Starbucks Congee Food to bring along
Tropical Fruits Raves and Regrets

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Navigation

Home

Site Map

Topics

Lodging

Food

Travel and Tourism

Money and Shopping

Safety and Health

People and Culture

Entries

Chopsticks

KFC / Pizza Hut

Starbucks

Congee

Food to bring along

Tropical Fruits

Raves / Regrets

Related Entries

► Lodging: Breakfast Buffet

External Links (will open in a new window)

Congee

The mystery revealed

We saw this word before we left, and we knew it was supposed to be a "rice porridge" that kids ate. Outside of that, we knew nothing.

Our first experience with it was at the breakfast buffet at our hotel in Beijing - specifically, seeing it sitting there, and deciding to pass. The color and consistency was not exactly appealing to Western eyes - a goopy, translucent thin gelatin with overcooked rice and who knew what else suspended inside. The smell was a mystery - hot and steamy, familiar somehow, but without a distinct aroma.

Some people are tempted to call congee the Chinese equivalent to grits, or Cream of Wheat, especially since it's so often eaten at breakfast (by young and old alike, as it turns out.) Don't fall for the Congee = Grits line. Even a Southerner would never pick this food unless absolutely necessary, which so happened to be our next experience...

When we were united with our daughter, the instructions we received from the Child Welfare administrator told us she ate congee twice per day. So, that night we ordered a bowl from room service and held our breath.

She knew immediately what was in the bowl and greedily devoured spoon after spoon. Since she wasn't a terribly tidy eater, plenty splattered on her bib, and the table, and me. Congee is not easy to wipe up with a cloth napkin (bring a roll of paper towels from home! you can't easily find them in China.) Since it was all over my fingers, I had a taste...

...and found it to taste almost exactly like Chicken 'n Stars soup. The goopy consistency was more like gravy than the mucus I was fearing. The tiny shreds of meat were full of flavor. In fact, that bowl tasted pretty good!

Over the next two weeks, we experienced several variations of congee -

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some quite tasty, others quite tasteless. Often minced meat, vegetables, and/or beans were added. Much like a stew, the flavor depends on the ingredients. The texture depends on how much water is used (usually 2 to 4 times the amount to make regular sticky rice), and how many hours the congee has been simmering. Every cook makes it differently.

The constant ingredient is overcooked glutinous rice, which gives congee its translucent color and bloppy texture. Unfortunately, this also has the effect of cooking many of the nutrients out. Filling, often. Tasty, sometimes. A good source of nutrition and calories for your growing toddler, not so much.

In our daughter's case, while initially she was happy to eat her congee for breakfast and dinner, by the time we had gotten settled in at the White Swan and experienced their amazing breakfast buffet, she would have none of it. Oatmeal, fresh fruit, and French toast with syrup - packed with nutrients and calories - were what her hungry body was craving.

While we still get plenty of use from our rice cooker now that we are home, making congee is not something we do - too much work and time for something our little girl isn't very interested in. However, stews, soups, and chili touch on many of the flavors and textures she'll remember.

