

This Flavor Belongs Only to Suzhou

How lovely is Suzhou —

In the waters of Feng Creek grow chicken-head kernels¹.

Lustrous and glistening, they seem like ten bushels of pearls;

Their tender fragrance I love most, filling a bowl with sweet milk.

Carefully peeled in the quiet little courtyard.

— Shen Chaochu (Qing dynasty),

“Remembering Jiangnan: Seasonal Foods of Gusu”

In Chapter 37 of *Dream of the Red Chamber*², author Cao Xueqin casually slips in a small but vivid detail while describing the founding of the Begonia Poetry Club. Xiren, following Baoyu’s instructions, has someone send seasonal delicacies to Shi Xiangyun: “She brought over two small cloisonné boxes. Opening the first, one found fresh red water caltrop and chicken-head fruit; opening the second revealed a plate of new chestnut cakes steamed with osmanthus sugar.” She explains that these are all fruits newly harvested in

¹ Chicken-head kernels (*jitou*, 鸡头): refers to the peeled seeds of gorgon fruit (*Euryale ferox*), known in Chinese as *qianshi* (芡实). The plant grows in ponds and lakes in the Jiangnan region, especially around Suzhou. Its round seeds, harvested and peeled by hand, are prized for their delicate sweetness and creamy texture and are often used in desserts and seasonal dishes.

² *Dream of the Red Chamber*: One of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, rich with descriptions of elite life, poetry, and seasonal foods in eighteenth-century China.

the Grand View Garden (Daguan Yuan)³, the great garden estate of the Jia family, sent along for Miss Shi to taste the season's first freshness.

The “chicken-head” mentioned here refers to gorgon fruit, commonly called *jitoumi* (鸡头米) in the Jiangnan region. Together with the rosy water caltrop, it is one of the aquatic fruits and vegetables that come into season around the Mid-Autumn Festival. Add to this the chestnut cakes scented with drifting threads of osmanthus fragrance and the crab feast that follows soon after in the story, and suddenly what seemed to be merely a gathering of poets composing chrysanthemum verses begins to look less like a literary salon and more like an entire Jiangnan autumn unfolding on the tip of the tongue.

Such devotion to eating with the seasons strikes a deep chord with the people of Suzhou.

Suzhou's delicacies are often things enjoyed quietly on their own terms, tied to particular moments of the year: green rice dumplings at Qingming, winter-brewed rice wine at the solstice, savory meat mooncakes at Mid-Autumn, pan-fried meat-stuffed buns in early summer, and three-Shrimp Noodles around the Dragon Boat Festival. Even nearby Shanghai, close as it is, cannot keep up with these rhythms. When Shanghainese gourmands grow tempted, they simply catch an early train to Suzhou, buy what they crave, and carry it back home on the very same day. Chicken-head seeds are no exception. It

³ Grand View Garden (Daguan Yuan): The large landscaped residential compound inside the Jia family estate where many of the novel's young protagonists live. Built as an imperial garden to receive an imperial visit, it functions in the story as an enclosed world of pavilions, courtyards, and gardens where much of the narrative takes place.

must be harvested fresh and eaten fresh. From August through October each year, it occupies center stage on the tables of Suzhou households.

“Most beautiful is Jiangnan in the eighth month of autumn,
gorgon seeds round as pearls from a clam.”

The fruit of the Euryale plant is properly called *qianshi* (芡实). It is oval and brown, with a small pointed tip that resembles a chicken’s beak, hence the name “chicken-head.” Once the shell is peeled away, the seed inside is called “chicken-head kernels,” following the same naming pattern as “peanut kernels” in Chinese. Suzhou people also like to call the edible seed hidden inside a shell the “flesh.” In the Suzhou dialect, peanut kernels are referred to as *guorou* (果肉), literally “fruit flesh.” That is how the name “chicken-head flesh” came about as well.

Chicken-head kernels, also called chicken-head flesh, are formally known as *qianshi* (gorgon fruit). They come in two varieties: northern and southern. Northern gorgon grows widely across China. Its stems, leaves, and fruit are covered with sharp spines, and its fruits are relatively small. Southern gorgon, however, is found only in Nantang, south of Feng Gate in Suzhou, and is therefore also called *Suqian* (苏芡). This variety has no spines; its fruits are several times larger than those of the northern kind and yield far more seeds. Most important of all is its texture: *Suqian* is especially tender and glutinous. For this reason, only Suzhou people have the habit of eating fresh chicken-head seeds. In places

such as Shanghai and Hangzhou, as in northern China, people typically encounter them only in their dried form, sold in traditional “north–south goods” shops⁴.

Dried *qianshi* can be ground into *qianshi* flour, which—like water-caltrop flour and lotus-root starch—is often used in cooking to thicken sauces. But in Suzhou kitchens, cooks more often use caltrop flour for thickening. In the Suzhou dialect, this technique is called “*za ni*” (着膩). The phrase itself sounds soft and gentle on the tongue, a pronunciation that somehow suits the rich fragrance and delicate sweetness of Suzhou-style cuisine particularly well.

People of this land of fish and rice seem scarcely aware that this abundance is nature’s partial and generous gift. They accept, with easy contentment, the beauty that each season brings.

“In the third month, the gorgon stems sprout. Its leaves spread flat upon the water, larger than lotus leaves, their surfaces wrinkled like a drawn bow and puckered as if bubbling. The upper side is green, the underside purple; both stems and leaves are covered with spines. The stalk may grow more than a *zhang* (over ten feet) in length, hollow within and threaded with fibers; when young, the peeled stem may be eaten. In the fifth or sixth month, it produces purple flowers that open toward the sun. Then a pod forms, covered with green spines like the quills of a hedgehog, shaped like a chestnut burr.

The blossom sits atop the pod, resembling the beak of a chicken or a hedgehog. When split

⁴ North–south goods shops (南北货店): Traditional Chinese stores specializing in dried regional products and preserved ingredients from across the country, such as dried seafood, nuts, medicinal foods, and grains.

open, the interior reveals mottled soft flesh, packed with seeds, clustered together like pearls and jewels.”

Reading this passage from *The Compendium of Materia Medica*, a series of luminous images begins to shimmer before my eyes. It feels as though I myself am standing by the ancient waters of Feng Creek, a daughter of the Wu region, quietly awaiting the autumn harvest.

“The daughters of Wu are gentle and lovely,
gathering gorgon seeds and water caltrops to sell.”

In Suzhou today, the season for fresh chicken-head seeds arrives earlier with each passing year. Perhaps life has grown harder for the farmers who cultivate them. Although the price climbs steadily year after year, competition in the market remains just as fierce.

Beginning around the start of autumn in the traditional calendar, stalls selling fresh chicken-head seeds begin to appear along Fengmen Cross Street. Most of the vendors are middle-aged women, wearing brass fingertip guards⁵ as they peel the seeds on the spot, selling them fresh as they work. The men, meanwhile, usually rise at three or four in the morning to wade into the ponds and harvest the gorgon pods, bringing them back for the women to shell. The pods pulled from the water that day must be peeled that very day. If the seeds cannot all be sold, they are sealed in plastic bags filled with water and quickly

⁵ Brass fingertip guards (铜指甲): Small metal caps worn on the fingers while peeling gorgon seeds. The shells are tough, and the guards protect the fingers during the long hours of hand-shelling required to prepare the fresh seeds.

placed in the freezer. And of course, there are always knowledgeable Suzhou women who will carry these beautiful, hibernating little spirits home.

Shelling chicken-head seeds is both hard work and skilled craft. Unlike in many places where crops are harvested all at once, Suzhou gorgon fruit has long been gathered in successive batches. From the earliest days of the season, when harvesting follows a rhythm the farmers call “two pickings every seven days,” to the final rounds, it becomes “two pickings every four days,” Suzhou growers have developed their own hard-won techniques over generations.

When harvesting the pods, farmers use specially made bamboo knives to make a few careful cuts at the base of the fruit. The stem must not be injured in the slightest. If the stem is damaged, water will seep through the wound into the plant, and the entire stalk may die.

Since the Feng waters are where gorgon fruit is grown, it is only natural that the women around Feng Gate are the most skilled at shelling chicken-head seeds. The shells are extremely hard and must be cracked open with force. Yet inside lies the white *qianshi* kernel, delicate and tender. Apply even the slightest excess pressure and it will burst into paste. Only by balancing hard and soft strength with a subtle, controlled touch can the seed be removed perfectly intact.

Machines can now do the shelling as well. But each kernel is wrapped in a thin outer skin, and machines tend to scrape it away. Once that protective layer is damaged, the milky juices inside seep out, and the flesh loses its prized texture.

Human fingernails cannot endure the hardness of the shells for long. So the women devised their own clever method for cracking them. Maybe it was a skill honed from years of cracking sunflower seeds between their teeth, but in any case, they could split open the shells with a quick bite. The most skillful among them could crack a shell cleanly into two halves without the slightest damage to the kernel inside. Later, with growing concerns about food hygiene, this practice was abandoned, and all shelling returned to handwork. Yet the ingenious daughters of the Feng waters soon invented another specialized tool for the task: brass fingertip guards, known locally as “copper nails.”

Copper fingernails are, in fact, small fingertip caps with flattened tips, reinforced with a thin strip of brass. Using these tools greatly improves the “survival rate” of the kernels. In Suzhou, perfectly intact gorgon seeds are called “big pearls” (*da dan*), while those that are damaged are dried and sold as dried goods in traditional provisions shops. Although copper fingernails solve the problem of aching fingers, the work itself remains painstakingly slow, something that seems to require the particular patience of Suzhou people. Look at a large tray piled high with gorgon pods: after hours of shelling, the yield is no more than a small basin of kernels. It is much the same as the way Suzhou cooks hand-shell river shrimp, extract shrimp roe, or gather crab roe. What people savor in the end is not merely the ingredient, but the labor and skill behind it.

When it comes to food, Suzhou people never fear trouble, nor do they mind distance.

When I was in New York, I joined a group-buying chat for food lovers. Through that group, one could order Suzhou-style pork mooncakes, *qingtuan*, and even crab-roe soup dumplings. But chicken-head seeds were nowhere to be found, which felt like a small but persistent regret.

I once thought of a distant relative who carefully wrapped layers of frozen blocks of chicken-head seeds in ice, packed them into a box, and checked them through customs all the way to Spain. Then, at her dining table in Madrid, she served herself half a bowl of chicken-head seeds in osmanthus-scented syrup, savoring slowly the pleasure of “*freshly shelled, softly warm kernels.*” One wonders whether, in that moment, she might have felt something like Emperor Xuanzong gazing dreamily at his beloved Yang Guifei⁶.

“Whenever I think of the flavor of home in a dish of gorgon seeds, suddenly pearls and jewels seem to slip into my throat.”

There is a popular variety show called “Go Fridge,” where guests open their refrigerators and talk about the foods stored inside. From the contents of a refrigerator, you can often glimpse an entire way of life.

My own refrigerator is unmistakably Suzhou-style: my chicken-head seeds and my husband’s Biluochun tea together occupy more than half its territory. Every autumn, I buy a dozen or more bags of chicken-head seeds and store them in the freezer so that we can enjoy them throughout the year.

⁶ Emperor Xuanzong and Yang Guifei is a famous imperial romance in Chinese history. The Tang emperor Xuanzong was said to gaze upon his beloved consort Yang Guifei with intoxicated admiration; the comparison here humorously elevates the pleasure of tasting a beloved delicacy.

The idea of “eating with the seasons” ultimately comes down to freshness. If stored properly, frozen chicken-head seeds taste almost no different from fresh ones. When the time comes to cook them, however, they must be thawed naturally. After thawing, the seeds should remain submerged in water and must not be allowed to dry out before they go into the pot. Once thawed, they cannot be frozen again; they should be kept refrigerated in water and eaten as soon as possible.

There are many ways to prepare chicken-head seeds, and everyone has their own preference. But if you want to preserve their delicate tenderness, one rule must never be broken: once the water comes to a boil, they should cook for no more than thirty seconds. My own favorite is chicken-head seeds in osmanthus syrup, a very contemplative, almost Zen way to enjoy them.

To prepare them, bring water to a boil in a clay pot, ceramic pot, or heat-resistant glass pot (never an iron wok). Spoon the chicken-head seeds into the boiling water; once the water returns to a boil, immediately turn off the heat. Quickly ladle the seeds and their broth into a bowl, add fine white sugar, and scatter a pinch of osmanthus blossoms on top. Cooked this way, the seeds retain a soft molten center, releasing a delicate fragrance—both crisp and tender between the teeth.

Chicken-head seeds can also be used in stir-fries. They pair well with water celery, another member of the famed “Eight Aquatic Delicacies” of Jiangnan, or with red water caltrop, water chestnut, and lotus root, sometimes joined by ginkgo nuts, lily bulbs, and green peas. Many restaurants call this dish “Lotus Pond Stir-Fry.” Paired with river shrimp,

chicken-head seeds make an especially well-matched duo, each elevating the other's worth. Cooked together with white rice porridge, they become a meal of quiet refinement in Suzhou households.

There is, however, one rule: fresh chicken-head seeds must never be stewed or boiled for long. Any recipe that calls for cooking them for three minutes, or leaving them to simmer slowly on the stove, would be considered nothing less than a culinary crime. When used in stir-fries, the seeds are added only at the very end—tossed briefly in the pan, then served at once.

“Freshly shelled gorgon seeds, pearls of flesh;
light and round, still touched with the fragrance of rouge.”

According to the Chinese gastronome Tang Lusan (唐鲁孙, 1907 – 1985), some famous restaurants in old Beijing used to prepare a summer delicacy using freshly formed gorgon seeds—still tender and not yet fully set. Combined with fresh lotus root, lotus seeds, and water caltrops, they were served in lotus leaves over crushed ice, creating a chilled platter called “assorted ice bowl.” It was offered as a cooling appetizer for officials and aristocrats during the heat of summer.

Suzhou people might smile at this. Such refined culinary fashion is, after all, nothing more than everyday fare for ordinary families in Suzhou.

In truth, the world's great cuisines tend toward two paths. One pursues complexity, layering flavors upon flavors to achieve richness without end. The other strips away excess, preserving only the ingredient's natural taste, undisturbed.

Chicken-head seeds belong to the latter.

In the misty waters of Wu Gate, where adornments fade away, this bowl of chicken-head seeds is like a heart of pure ice held in a jade pot – the quiet soul of a city.



Chicken-head kernels