

Extra lunar month gives mooncake sales a boost

There are two back-to-back months of June this year—a quirk of a leap year in the Chinese lunar calendar—bringing Shanghai its hottest summer since the city started recording weather 140 years ago. The double Junes have also propelled residents to a five-year record for the number of mooncakes consumed.



A worker displays Disney-themed mooncakes at a store in Shanghai earlier this month. Tang Yanjun/China News Service

The mooncake industry—traditionally dominated by gift buyers—has experienced a 20 percent sales decline nationally each year since 2013, when the central government introduced an anti-corruption measure. That law strictly bans the use of public money to buy the pastries or other gifts considered luxuries, such as Moutai, the specialty baijiu liquor.

Thanks to the double Junes, which postpones Mid-Autumn Festival—the primary season for mooncake-eating—by a month to Oct 4 this year, sales of mooncakes in Shanghai are likely to be back on track with significant growth. Projections by the Shanghai Confectionery Industry Association place the increase at 15 percent.

The city is expected to consume 22,000 metric tons of mooncakes this year.

“On one hand, the late festival is giving consumers more time to buy and enjoy the pastry; on the other, restaurants and bakeries are taking advantage

of the occasion to develop diversified products to boost sales and make up for the massive losses since 2013,” said Chen Fengwei, secretary-general of the association.

The association calculated that there are more than 200 types of mooncakes available this year, up from 150 last year.

Among the new offerings, more than two-thirds are the Su-style cakes—with flaky and crispy shells and savory fillings—baked to order at a low price. This means they are catering to the “real consumers”, according to Chen.

By contrast, mooncakes for gifts are usually the sweet types that have a preservation date extending for months and are luxuriously packaged with liquor and sometimes even gold bars.

Zhang Wen, the manager of Shanghai First Food Mall, said the newly introduced mooncakes—with fried bullfrogs and pickles as fillings—have been so popular that they are usually sold out by noon. Because of the capacity of the kitchen, bakers manage to provide about 10,000 cakes per day, which makes them even more appealing.

“The new types are what get people back to our stores. And once they are coming, the traditional types, like pork-filled mooncakes, also sell better,” Zhang said.

Chef Tang Chi-keun of the Michelin-starred Cantonese restaurant Yi Long Court at the Peninsula Hotel in Shanghai, said the mooncake scene in the city has been so competitive in recent years that even though the restaurant’s pricey egg-custard mooncakes were barely affected by the anti-corruption law, his team has to keep introducing new offerings to keep up the momentum.

Even the most unlikely companies are joining the competition. Disney, for example, has introduced a variety of mooncakes themed around its cartoon characters, and a popular Chinese astrologer is partnering with the century-old Wufangzhai, which used to dominate the rice dumpling market for the Dragon Boat Festival, to launch a pack of 12 mooncakes centered on the zodiac.