

chengduspecial

Sharpening its competitive edge through 'soft power'

By YANG CHENG AND LI YU

Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, was recently granted a "world gastronomic city" by UNESCO and now the city is ready to show its unique "Sichuan Cuisine" to visitors from all over the world during a national day festival.

The title was granted back in February 2010, but Westerners get more familiar with its food, thanks to the DreamWorks animated film, Kung Fu Panda 2, which was shown on screens worldwide this year. But one film is far from enough to demonstrate the city's real charm.

For that, it has the Eighth International Food and Tour Festival, in Chengdu, which began on Sept 28 and will run through Oct 8.

One highlight of the festival is the 2011 International Gastronomy City Summit Forum on Sept 29, which is designed to promote the city's image as an ideal tourist place — and an ideal investment destination.

Huang Jiafa, a city government official, remarked at the forum that his city is sharpening its competitive edge through the use of "soft power", meaning of course its rich food culture, and its history as well.

"Sichuan Cuisine", which actually came from Chengdu, has an open spirit and, as a result, the city has now decided to embrace gourmets from around the world," Huang explained.

That same feeling of openness can be found in the city's approach to global investors and entrepreneurs, thanks in no small part to its increasing economic power.

During the first half of this year, its GDP was 310.7 billion yuan, an increase of 15.1 per-

cent year-on-year.

And, in the first eight months, the number of tourists visiting the city was 652.7 million, up 37.1 percent from the same last year period. Of that figure, 739,200 came from overseas, a 64.9 percent increase.

As for business environment, Chengdu was listed as one of the world's prime business locations by Forbes magazine.

Higher standards

He Tao is president of the Chengdu Gastronomy Association and Sichuan Hospitality Industry Association and said they have already started a major campaign to turn the city into a top international gastronomic center.

This, he said, accords with the national strategy of using each city's soft power, but, of course, the city got a boost after it received the UNESCO's global gastronomy label.

Chengdu was the second city in the world, and the first in Asia, to win the honor.

Now, the city government is telling everyone in the catering business to meet higher standards, more in line with the level that the award implies and, it has held a number of cooking and gourmet competitions over the past year and a half.

The campaign has also taken an international turn by inviting six celebrities from abroad to act as ambassadors for the city's image.

One example of this approach is Bill Sy, chairman of the American Culinary Federation's national education committee, who will be a new ambassador during this year's food festival.

In addition, this past May, there was a "Sichuan Week"

held in Taiwan, with 120 catering people promoting their stuff on the island.

Meanwhile, international business contacts are being strengthened and the city recently published its 2010 Chengdu Restaurant and Food Enterprise Survey results, along with its Top 100 Industry Leaders to spread more information.

The catering industry has also increased cooperation with the media, so more than a dozen Chinese and foreign media have carried positive, in-depth profiles of the local industry's development in recent years.

One of these, a TV documentary titled "Wei and Dao" — or "Taste" — is being broadcast during the National Day holiday, with the first series introducing Chengdu dishes.

He Tao said that during the festival, the association has signed an agreement with a Taiwan counterpart to increase exchanges.

Food gala

The festival's main venue is the Chengdu International Intangible Cultural Heritage Exposition Park. Other venues are scattered across various districts of the city and neighboring counties.

There is a green food expo, a Sichuan culinary history exhibit, and many interactive forms of entertainment and information.

There are even special "passports" with coupons and tickets available for tourists during the festival and, unique routes to old towns and villages to give tourists some beautiful sights and a taste of more good food.

Du Surong contributed to the story



Government officials, specialists and industry insiders at the gastronomy summit.

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Local vendors treat tourists to a tasty, spicy Sichuan snack.

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