

# Make Your Own Congee – The Ultimate Comfort Food

## IN CHINA AND IN CHINATOWNS

all over the world, CONGEE – a creamy rice soup – is known as comfort food with a capital C. In China, it's also known as zhou (pronounced like "Joe") and shifan, in Korea it's called jook, and in Japan okayu.

Congee is a light meal and a nourishing and healing food for the very young, the elderly, the sick and the weakly. It is probably the most easily digested meal in the world and soothes troubled stomachs. It gives energy quickly and helps your digestive system regain its strength.

Basically, congee consists of white rice cooked in water for a long time until the rice starts to disintegrate and the liquid becomes thick and creamy. By itself, congee tastes rather bland, but that is perfect for adding other foods with more interesting flavours. Congee is like a neutral stage for flavourful foods and brings out their taste to the fullest.

## BASIC INGREDIENTS

1 cup white rice  
5-10 cups water  
Tasty additions (see below)

The thickness of your congee can vary a lot. At 1:5, it's quite thick and pudding-y, a consistency nearly like creamed rice. At 1:10, it gets very soupy. A rice-water ratio of 1:7 or 1:8 is neither too stodgy nor too thin. Experiment to find the thickness you prefer. If you want to poach eggs, meats or seafood in it, slightly thinner is better.

## BASIC METHOD

Cook rice slowly in water for a long time until it starts to break down and the liquid around it gets creamy. There are as many ways to do this as there are Chinese mothers. Here are two methods:

Put rice and water in a slow cooker or crockpot or in a lidded casserole dish in your oven at 80-95°C and cook for 4-8 hours. This is a perfect slow-cooker dish - prepare before going to bed, turn on, wake up to a warm, nourishing breakfast!

A bit quicker, with a slightly different consistency: Put water and rice in a heavy-bottomed pot without a lid and bring to an easy boil. Immediately lower the temperature to medium/low and gently simmer for 30-90 minutes, depending on your patience and on how creamy you want your congee. Stir occasionally to prevent it catching at the bottom.

In a nutshell, the slower and longer it cooks, the more nutritious it is considered to be. You can also use cooked rice (1 cup cooked rice, at least 4 cups water), but the starch behaves a bit differently here: It doesn't turn out as creamy as when you make it from uncooked rice.

It is nearly impossible to make congee in small amounts. If you only need one or two servings at a time, make a big pot of basic congee (without much additions) and let cool what you don't eat immediately. For each meal, reheat only what you need in a small pot and add your tasty variations to this. As long as you use a clean ladle, your big pot of congee will keep for two to three days at room temperature, and longer if you keep it in the refrigerator.

## TASTY ADDITIONS AND VARIATIONS

There are basically three ways to 'pimp your congee'.

a) Add ingredients at the beginning of the cooking time, like small amounts of meat, or use broth instead of water. You can also exchange some of the rice with other grains or with beans. This may change the colour from its usual 'clean' white to something else, but will give a deeper flavour. For a slightly sweet congee, dried red dates are a nice addition. For a deeply nourishing and flavourful congee, cook some washed bones with your congee and remove them at the end of the cooking period.

b) Add ingredients just before the congee is finished. This is a good way to add herbs, spices, delicate ingredients like prawns, shellfish, fish, miso, julienned veggies, and previously cooked ingredients like ham, meat or smoked fish that just need to heat through. Fresh eggs are a nice addition, too: Either crack them gently into the congee without stirring (congee-poached egg) or stir in one or more scrambled eggs. When you stir very slowly, this creates fluffy egg-clouds in your congee, when you stir fast, it adds a custard-like consistency to your congee.

c) Sprinkle ingredients on top after putting the congee in a bowl. The contrast between the soft and mild congee and crunchy, zesty ingredients can be quite exiting! Try Japanese or Korean "rice sprinkles" (see end note), cooked meats or fish, roasted seeds or nuts, stir-fried vegetables, or whatever else strikes your fancy.

As you can see, your congee can be varied endlessly. Keep in mind, though, that too many ingredients aren't necessarily better than two or three well-matched ones. The beauty (and yumminess) of congee lies in its simplicity.

## SIMPLE SAVOURY CONGEEES

No. 1: At the end of the cooking time, stir in a bit of salt, sesame oil, and julienned ginger. Sprinkle thinly sliced spring onion and roast peanuts or "rice sprinkles" on top. A drizzle of soy sauce is nice, too.

No. 2: As No. 1, but prepare the congee with chicken broth instead of water.

No. 3: As No. 1 or 2 plus: 5 minutes before serving, add thin slices of chicken to the congee. Use roasted sesame seeds instead of peanuts.

No. 4: As No 1 or 2, plus: 5 minutes before serving, gently crack one raw egg per person on top of the congee. Don't stir, but let it set, and serve each person 1 'poached' egg in their congee.

## SIMPLE SWEET CONGEEES

No. 1: Add pieces of dried apricots at the beginning, and finish with almond slivers, butter, and honey.

No. 2: A few minutes before the end of cooking, add pieces of fresh apple, apricot or peach, and serve with a sprinkle of cinnamon and a teaspoon of honey in each bowl.

No. 3: Add a handful of dried coconut shreds or coconut milk in the beginning, serve with pieces of fresh pineapple, roasted coconut shreds and banana chips.

## YOUR CONGEE PRESCRIPTION

Specific foods in your congee change its effect on your body and direct its energy towards particular organs. In return, the congee allows these foods' effects to be more easily assimilated. To address your current health concerns, please pick and choose one to four different ingredients that appeal to you on the day from the ticked list(s), and add small amounts (a total of 50-75g per serving) to your congee, and/or use broth from the mentioned meats.

Whenever you use meat or seafood in congee, also add a little bit of fresh ginger to counteract possible toxicity.

BUILD QI: chicken, beef, veal, prawns, tuna, carrots, peas, yams, sweet potatoes, ginseng, coconut, figs, cherries, dates, raisins

BUILD BLOOD: pork, beef, bone broth, liver, black beans, mussels, oysters, prawns, spinach, watercress

MOVE QI AND BLOOD: mushrooms, aubergine, onion, spring onion, mustard greens, saffron, bay leaves, thyme, chilli, dry ginger, chives, marjoram, peach

COOL / NOURISH YIN: pork, rabbit, duck, tofu, clams, mussels, oysters, crab, bone broth, eggs, asparagus, spinach, seaweed, miso, mung beans, mung bean sprouts, string beans, peas, cucumbers, tomatoes, pine nuts, peanuts, sesame, sesame oil, mangoes, honey, malt, pineapple, lemon, pear

WARM / NOURISH YANG: Avoid using rice, aduki beans and mung beans. Instead use millet, corn, spelt, or wheat. Additions: Lamb, kidneys, shrimp, tuna, lobster, chestnuts, all members of the onion family, ginger, black pepper, chilli flakes, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, capers, rosemary, walnuts, raspberries, cherries, peach, coconut milk, coconut, butter

RESOLVE DAMPNES: aduki beans, kidney beans, corn, Job's tears barley, rye, anchovies, mackerel, radish, turnip, pumpkin, onion, kohlrabi, button mushrooms, celery, garlic, lemon, parsley

RESOLVE PHEGEM: clams, shrimp, seaweed, shiitake or button mushrooms, onion, garlic, pepper, marjoram, mustard seeds, watercress, almonds, citrus peel, apple peel, pear, licorice

OTHER INGREDIENTS:.....  
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## FOR COLDS AND 'FLUS

If you catch a cold, have the following congees instead until your cold is resolved:

TO HELP "WIND-COLD" (nose is more runny, sneezing, feeling shivery or cold): spring onions, dried ginger and garlic.

TO HELP "WIND-HEAT" ("head cold", more stuffy, headachey, feeling hot): spring onions, fresh ginger and mint.

FOR MORE CULINARY INSPIRATION, search for CONGEE on Wikipedia or Google.

For great rice sprinkles recipes, search for FURIKAKE on [www.justhungry.com](http://www.justhungry.com)