

LIFE

A melting pot of fiery flavors

From raw ingredients to simmering broth, an immersive hotpot park reveals heritage, craft and steaming innovation, **Tan Yingzi** and **Deng Rui** report in Chongqing.

Embarking on an immersive tour at a renowned hotpot industrial park in Southwest China's Chongqing, known as the nation's hotpot capital, is a surreal yet exhilarating experience for food lovers and culinary pilgrims alike.

On Nov 28, 56-year-old Bu Qifang from Chuzhou, Anhui province, completed what she described as a long-planned post-retirement pilgrimage to Zhoujunji Hotpot Food Industrial Park in Jiulongpo district. A life-long fan of hotpot, Bu left the place with a large box of spicy Chongqing hotpot soup base, to take home to fellow hotpot enthusiasts in her family.

"The hotpot soup base is the real deal and reasonably priced, plus the whole tour is a full-on sensory adventure," she says.

A decade ago, the industrial park was known strictly for large-scale production of hotpot ingredients. Today, it has transformed into one of the city's signature destinations — the first and only industrial tourism site themed around Chongqing hotpot — drawing over 400,000 visitors in its peak year.

Its most recent expansion came in late September, when the Zhoujunji Hotpot Seasoning History and Culture Museum opened to the public, enriching the experience by showcasing the history and cultural significance of Chongqing hotpot.

Visitors step inside to find playful panda sculptures perched atop an enormous red chili, whimsical guardians of the fiery kingdom ahead.

The museum's ongoing show, the *Bashu Traditional Seasoning History and Culture Exhibition*, highlights the rich history of the region's five key tastes — saltiness, sourness, bitterness, sweetness, and spiciness in Sichuan province and Chongqing. Another show, the *Modern Hotpot Culture Exhibition*, offers a captivating glimpse of the evolution of hotpot flavors.

The story begins with salt, known as the root of all flavors, showcasing traditional production methods, along with the art of making soy sauce and pickles.

The spicy section unfolds like an aromatic atlas — ginger, evodia, scallions, and chives mingle with exotic spices introduced from the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220).

One of the museum's most striking installations is a towering apothecary-style cabinet, neatly sorting more than 50 spices and ingredients into labeled drawers and viewing windows.

Chili peppers and Sichuan peppercorns, the two most beloved spices in the region, known for their signature spicy and numbing tastes, take center stage in the exhibition. In the numbing spice section, six out of 10 exhibited varieties of peppercorns hail from Sichuan and Chongqing.

Another section is alive with the rustic charm of local life. A traditional kitchen set-up features two stone mills at the entrance, with the smaller one dedicated to grinding dried chilies. Tools for processing chilies and large bamboo trays for sun-drying them vividly recreate the entire chili preparation process. Meanwhile, four massive jars seem to hold the very essence of fermented spices.

As visitors move into the *Modern Hotpot Culture Exhibition*, they enter a scene modeled after Chongqing's iconic "docksideside food" culture, with the origin story of the city's signature tripe hotpot and various partitioned pots on display.

Further along, a glass wall offers a glimpse into the modern production and packaging lines for hotpot bases, where the cooling of beef tallow hotpot bases and the packaging of spicy fish seasoning are mechanized marvels that blend precision with tradition.

Descending to the first floor, guests arrive at a vast tasting hall echoing with excited chatter. Long queues form at the tasting stations for spicy hotpot, pickled fish broth, noodles, chicken soup, and mushroom soup.

"It's fascinating to learn the long history of Chongqing hotpot and how every spice plays a role," says Zhao Jiashu, a high school student from Beijing, who visited in October on a week-long study trip.

His class joined a workshop to create personalized sachets, a folk tradition believed



Students from Chongqing participate in a study tour in November at the Zhoujunji Hotpot Seasoning History and Culture Museum in Zhoujunji Hotpot Food Industrial Park, where they learn to identify different types of chili peppers used in hotpot (top), create their own hotpot base (above left), and explore various hotpot side dishes. PHOTOS BY ZHOU BANGJING / FOR CHINA DAILY



to ward off insects and bring good health.

For many students, the highlight was crafting their own mini hotpot bases — packages they proudly took home to cook later with friends and family. "I can't wait to try it after we get back," Zhao says.

Hotpot's origins are elusive, though historical sources suggest it spread through northern China during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and became popular nationwide by the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Folklore holds that its modern Chongqing form began among river porters in the late 19th century.

Chongqing is a port city on the Yangtze and Jialing rivers. In the late 19th century, livestock shipped from neighboring Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan provinces supplied prime cuts to wealthier households while offal was discarded or sold cheaply. Porters simmered these scraps with chili oil and wild herbs on the riverbanks, creating the humble ancestor of today's hotpot.

According to Fengtu Shizhi (The Folkways), a folklore magazine published in the 1940s, the first hotpot restaurant in the city was Maji Laozhengxing, owned by two brothers surnamed Ma. Legend has it that the two brothers tasted the docksideside stew, saw its business potential, and introduced hotpot to their restaurant in the 1930s.

In 1937, Chongqing was the country's political center. At the time, the city witnessed a sudden influx of government officials, bankers, businessmen, scholars,

diplomats, writers and other professionals from other parts of the country. Many eventually left the city, but carried their newfound love for hotpot with them, helping fuel its nationwide popularity.

Today, Chongqing hosts more hotpot restaurants than any other Chinese city. In 2007, the China Cuisine Association officially named it "China's Hotpot City", a title it still holds with pride.

According to the Chongqing Hotpot Association, by the end of 2024, the city had approximately 18,900 hotpot-related enterprises and 39,600 hotpot restaurants. The hotpot industry generated a total revenue of 82.43 billion yuan (\$11.66 billion), accounting for 32.7 percent of the city's total dining income, while the upstream-downstream industrial chain surpassed 300 billion yuan in value.

Chongqing Zhoujunji Hot-pot Food Co, the company behind the industrial park, has blended industry with tourism, creating a model of industrial tourism since 2007.

"We launched industrial tourism not only to address food safety concerns, but to enhance brand value, and generate new revenue opportunities across diverse market segments," says Wang Yujin, vice manager of Chongqing Zhoujunji Hot-pot Food Co.

"We are expanding our educational initiatives in the park, hosting extracurricular activities and parent-child projects for students, and earning recognition as a science

education and study-tour base in Chongqing," says Wang.

She adds that the company collaborates with travel agencies and educational institutions to enhance cultural and industrial experiences. Plans are underway to partner with the nearby Huayan Gecko King National Climbing Demonstration Park to further enrich the tourist experience.

"The industrial park provides a replicable model for the high-quality development of Chongqing hotpot and the national food industrial tourism sector. It pioneers a new integrated approach of industry, tourism, and culture," says Zhang Xueying, director of the Jiulongpo district culture and tourism committee.

Zhang adds that the development of Zhoujunji's industrial tourism project has further invigorated the cultural and tourism economy of the surrounding areas. It deeply integrates the hotpot IP with the city's cultural and tourism image, creating a distinctive, high-quality tourism route.

China's industrial tourism began tentatively in the early 21st century, gaining momentum as manufacturing modernized and cultural travel diversified. Factories — especially in food sectors — are increasingly opening their production lines to the public, offering interactive workshops, flavor experiences and behind-the-scenes transparency. Though industrial tourism still represents a small slice of China's tourism revenue, it holds significant growth potential. An industrial report issued recently predicts that the market will exceed 45 billion yuan in 2025 and is expected to surpass 100 billion yuan by 2030.

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Post of *Kaixinling Station*, a film highlighting signal workers on plateau railways. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Plateau rail workers' lives documented in noted film

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The domestic film *Kaixinling Station*, the first to focus on the theme of plateau railways, has earned major recognition at the Asia International Film Festival, winning the Best Feature Film Award, according to China Railway Qinghai-Xizang Group.

The film was praised for its deep spiritual resonance and exceptional artistic quality, shining a spotlight on the lives of railway signal workers on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

According to the group, the film has some rare distinctions in Chinese cinema: it was filmed on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, it features railway workers and cadres, and the plot is based on real-life stories from the group's employees.

Adding to its acclaim, lead actor Wu Gang was honored with the Outstanding Asian Actor Award for his compelling performance in the film. The accolades help cement *Kaixinling Station* as a groundbreaking cinematic tribute to the dedication and perseverance of China's plateau railway workers.

Last month, a special viewing and discussion session on *Kaixinling Station* was held in Beijing, where experts and scholars from film and academic circles lauded the movie for its realism, cultural importance, and artistic merit.

Shot entirely on location on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and completed earlier this year, the movie highlights Kaixinling Station's signal work area at an altitude of 4,200 meters.

It vividly portrays the challenging daily lives of railway signal workers in extreme conditions, dramatizing emergencies such as snowstorms to emphasize their vital yet often-overlooked role.

The film follows Yang Zhenshan, a veteran soldier who, after participating in the historic construction of the Qinghai-Xizang Railway, chose to stay and serve as a signal worker on the plateau.

Over three decades, Yang's perseverance and devotion embody the spirit of "challenging limits and striving for excellence" — a legacy he passes down to his apprentice, Diwu Xiaojun, a retired soldier.

Through its intergenerational narrative, *Kaixinling Station* explores themes of loyalty, sacrifice, and unwavering commitment, offering audiences a moving portrait of dedication to one's work and ideals.

Rao Shuguang, president of the China Film Critics Association, describes *Kaixinling Station* as "a film that exudes warmth, faith, and profound humanistic values".

He commends its artistic representation of the Qinghai-Xizang Railway's spirit and the depth of its characterizations, which make the protagonists relatable and impactful.

"The blend of stunning natural scenery, heartfelt performances, and a moving musical score enhances the film's emotional impact," Rao says.

Qin Weiqing, deputy Party secretary of the China Railway Qinghai-Xizang Group and executive producer of *Kaixinling Station*, expressed his pride in the project.

"This film is a heartfelt homage to the spirit of the Qinghai-Xizang Railway and the workers who dedicate a lifetime to their posts," Qin says.

"It highlights the perseverance, sacrifice, and commitment of plateau railway workers, bridging the gap between the audience and the stories of these unsung heroes."



From left: A visitor samples the aromas of different hotpot spices at the Zhoujunji Hotpot Seasoning History and Culture Museum. Visitors from Russia are captivated by the variety of hotpot side dishes on display at the museum in July. A guide shows visitors the different types of peppers used in hotpot. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

