

“I’ll Take Chop Suey”: Restaurants as Agents of Culinary and Cultural Change

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For the past 150 years, restaurants have been a central part of the American experience. More than mere eating establishments, they have been important regional landmarks, community meeting spots, and cultural institutions. In restaurants, stories have been shared, romances sparked, plans hatched, and ethnic, regional, and political ties established, strengthened, and reaffirmed. Though many towns, particularly today, lack public gathering places, there have always been local eating houses that have served as thriving social centers.

Although restaurants have often had conservative social functions, preserving established foodways and cultural boundaries, they have also been agents of innovation, and have exposed Americans to a variety of tastes, communities, and social groups they may otherwise never have encountered. In particular, as I illustrate in this article, restaurants have encouraged, even in periods of social and political conservatism, the crossing of formidable ethnic and cultural barriers. In search of cheaper, quicker, and more interesting cuisine, Americans have often suspended traditional racial prejudices and opened themselves to a range of diverse culinary and cultural experiences.

Between 1870 and 1930, a time of great political and social hostility against Asian immigrants, Chinese restaurants drew a thriving business from non-Chinese customers. Lured by the possibility of experiencing “Oriental” sensuality or “exotic” foreign cuisine, thousands of white Americans patronized restaurants owned and operated by immigrant Chinese. Though their encounters with Chinese Americans may have done relatively little to change deeply-held racial prejudices, they did alter middle-class eating preferences. As a result of their experiences in Chinese restaurants, white customers adopted tastes that would eventually transform the American diet.

In this article I examine the history of this cross-cultural interaction, its effects on racial attitudes and food preferences, and ultimately, why restaurants were able to facilitate boundary crossing in a way that other institutions could not. Though the presence of Chinese Americans in nonethnic businesses or social settings might have been threatening, their subservient role as restaurant cooks and servers, I suggest, posed little danger to middle-class white Americans. Moreover, Chinese food, like most ethnic cuisines, lent itself easily to adaptation and Westernization. Though authentic Chinese cuisine was shunned by most whites, “hybrid” dishes like chop suey and chow mein were able to penetrate, and significantly influence, the middle-class diet. In short, Chinese restaurants encouraged Americans to maintain many social, ethnic, and geographic boundaries, and at the same time, to breach others. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, restaurants became the venue, and food the medium, of the first hesitant steps toward culinary and cultural exchange.

*The First Boundary Crossers:
Workers, Epicures, Bohemians, “Tourists”*

In the 1870s, remembers journalist Idwal Jones, hungry workers and travelers in San Francisco’s Chinatown found sustenance and solace in a fragrant, gilded culinary palace called the Balcony of Golden Joy and Delight. With a “monstrous and shiny roast pig” hanging at the entrance, and the “enticing aroma” of smoked meats permeating the air, the Balcony served up to four hundred customers at a time, at prices lower than cheap. If a visitor had little money, he was taken into “the sanctum of Tsing Tsing—a stout mandarin with a beard, peacock’s feathers, a fan, and sheaths for finger-nails—who gave a nod of approval. Then the wayfarer was taken to the kitchen where, standing, he could dine ad libitum.” Having gorged on the cuisine and atmosphere, diners stumbled onto the Chinatown streets, “a realm of banners and scarlet balconies, as colorful as Soochow and twice as odorous” (Jones 455-56). A “quaint, mysterious, gorgeous, hideous . . . hillside, covered with burrows . . . [and] yawning, subterranean passages and chambers,” in the words of another author, Chinatown harbored innumerable restaurants brimming with foods exotic, enticing and wonderfully yet “strangely barbaric” (Kessler 445).

The Chinese immigrants who established San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1850s had little idea that their restaurants and neighborhood streets would attract such an enthusiastic—and imaginative—crowd of white visitors. Built primarily for a local clientele, the eating establishments in Chinese immigrant communities served male workers who, due to legal restriction, expense, and circumstance (many workers assumed their stay would be temporary) had journeyed to America without wives. In 1850, San Francisco's Chinatown housed fifteen apothecaries, five herb shops, three boarding houses, five butcher stores, and five restaurants. By the late 1860s, New York's Chinatown similarly boasted a small but growing array of shops, boarding-houses, and eating establishments. Though few non-Chinese entered the tightly-knit communities during these initial years, by the 1870s, crowds of white Americans could be seen on the Chinatown streets in both cities. Cynical white journalists had a name for them—they were “gawkers,” “slummers,” and “curiosity seekers,” and by mainstream middle-class standards, up to no good (Takaki 17).

The “curiosity seekers” came in search of adventure and pleasure—and more often than not, food. Though many white working-class men were lured to Chinatown by its gambling and prostitution houses, they were also attracted by the possibility of finding cheap and filling meals. Accustomed to Chinese cooks, who had worked with whites on mines and railroads, many working-class men in the mid-nineteenth century began patronizing the eating establishments that had been established by Chinatown entrepreneurs for the growing white tourist trade. Customers dined on American dishes, such as baked beans, steak and eggs, or hash, or on such hybrid “Chinese American” concoctions as egg foo yung (dubbed “Hangtown Fry”), rice casseroles, and fried noodles. Often believing that the Chinese ate rodents or dogs, white workers generally steered clear of more authentic establishments where, according to an 1876 San Francisco guidebook, “rare, but sometimes also disgusting foods were consumed” (Gabaccia 103). In native Chinese restaurants, reported one disgusted white observer, “pale cakes with a waxen look, full of meats, are brought out. They are sausages in disguise. Then giblets of you-never-know-what, maybe gizzards, possibly livers, perhaps toes” (Mariani 77).

For epicures, upper-class thrill-seekers, and other nineteenth century culinary adventurers, however, the possibility of

eating rare foreign foods had definite appeal. Seeking a taste of the exotic, wealthy urbanites occasionally ventured into “high toned” Chinese restaurants—elegant establishments appointed with white tablecloths and gleaming silverware for the upper-class visitor trade. In 1865, Samuel Bowles, a newspaper editor visiting San Francisco, reported attending a sumptuous banquet in a Chinatown restaurant at which bird’s nest soup, reindeer sinews, fried fungus, and dozens of other delicacies were served. Claiming later that the “food was not very filling,” Bowles dispatched to the nearest American restaurant, where he dined hungrily on chops, squab, fried potatoes, and champagne (Lovegren 87). A minister who in 1876 dined in a “respectable” Chinatown restaurant complete with “knives, forks, plates, tablecloths, and napkins,” noted only two drawbacks to his otherwise savory meal: that many of the dishes tasted of “strong butter,” and “the inability of Americans to use chopsticks” (Gibson 71). “The best Chinese restaurants,” a writer for *Living Age* magazine later recalled,

were constantly patronized by white people. Here national delicacies . . . such as bird’s nest soup . . . and the meat of the abalone shell were served to the guest in many strange and mysterious forms. The delicious lichee nut was greatly esteemed by the Americans, as well as . . . various sweetmeats. (Scheffaner 355)

For the upper and working class, traditionally associated with sensual excess, forays into Chinatown restaurants, identified in the popular press as “dens of iniquity” and “places where vice dwells,” hardly compromised their social standing. Nor did they threaten a band of young intellectuals called Bohemians, who found that trips to Chinatown actually enhanced their rebellious image. Dissatisfied with the rigid, morally conservative middle-class lifestyle, Bohemians saw in immigrant Chinese culture great sensuality and freedom, and flocked to Chinatown in droves. Rich with pungent smells and tastes, Chinese restaurants proved particularly fertile ground for the Bohemians’ exotic fantasies. “Though a narrow hall and up dirty stairs brings one to the Chinese Delmonico’s restaurant,” wrote an experienced New York “slummer” in an account for *Once A Week* magazine in 1893. “A good dinner consists of nine courses, served on bare wooden tables and eaten with

chopsticks.” Even more enticing than the meal, he suggested, was the gritty atmosphere:

As the dinner proceeds, some of the natives kick off their slippers, their bare stockings peering through the rungs of their stools. The odor of fuming cigarettes fills the air; an incessant babble prevails; every few moments you will see a Chinese pick up a bone or a bit of refuse food and deliberately send it flying under the table to the dirty floor!

To most Americans, it was “as uniniviting as a pig-sty,” but for the slummers, sheer delight. “The visitors to Chinatown love it dearly,” concluded the author, “and laugh and chatter. Thus today the ‘slummers’ eat, drink, and are merry in their experience with strange new dishes” (qtd. in Bonner 97).

To many middle-class Americans, the Bohemians’ nightly expeditions were evidence of “morbid curiosity” and “innate depraved taste.” “One can easily imagine the effect of the sights witnessed on the girls of tender years, unsophisticated and practically ignorant of the world and its wicked ways,” wrote one reader of the *New York Times*. No “decent” person should be found among the immoral, “heathen” Chinese, he declared, “unless they are on an errand of mercy” (“Seeing Chinatown”).

Ironically, and much to the dismay of social critics, the outcry over the slummers only fueled greater public interest in Chinatown. Intrigued by accounts of the slummers’ adventures, as well as a growing fascination with non-Western cultures, reflected in Orientalist art and literature of the period, an increasing number of white middle-class Americans journeyed into Chinese immigrant communities. Frequently accompanied by paid white tour guides, who led their charges safely through the streets, tourists visited “joss houses,” or temples, attended Chinese plays, shopped in curio stores, and in the process, turned Chinatowns into popular sightseeing destinations. For the immigrant Chinese, struggling for economic survival, the support of the local economy could not have come at a more opportune time.

During the nineteenth century, as historian Ronald Takaki has noted, Chinese laborers played a significant role in nearly every sector of the American economy—agriculture, mining, manufacturing, and transportation. Yet by the early twentieth century, they had been forced out of the general labor market by hostile labor unions, exclusionary legal policies, and racial

discrimination, and segregated into an ethnic labor niche. The new work opportunities available to Chinese Americans centered primarily around service occupations, such as laundry and restaurant work, based in Chinatowns and catering to largely Chinese customers. With opportunities for employment outside Chinatown decreasing—even the laundry business, due to white competition and the increasing feasibility of washing clothes at home, began to decline—the Chinese American community had a strong incentive to build the tourist trade (Takaki 239-40). By 1900, the increasingly powerful Chinatown merchant class initiated a campaign to “clean up Chinatown” by suppressing the local vice industry, and shop owners and theater proprietors began renovating their facilities for a white clientele. Restaurateurs refurbished their establishments with gaudy lanterns, colorful wall decorations, and bright red façades, to match stereotypical white fantasies of “Oriental” decor, and scrubbed their floors and kitchens meticulously, lest rumors of poor sanitation arise. New dishes, too, were created for the visitors—“pineapple chicken” and “stuffed chicken wings,” among others—but even these, for many tourists, still seemed too foreign. Seeking a less intimidating menu, restaurant cooks began serving an ingenious concoction that fused American tastes with a smattering of Asian ingredients. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, in many Chinatown restaurants appeared a new dish called “chop suey,” a concoction typically involving bean sprouts, celery, onions, water chestnuts, green peppers, soy sauce, and either pork or chicken, chopped in small pieces. Though later derided for its inauthenticity—it was “a culinary joke at the expense of the foreigner,” in the words of one commentator—to the first white customers of the “chop suey” restaurants, it seemed genuine enough (Crow 425).

The dish proved an instant success. In 1896, according to one magazine writer, chop suey drew customers to Chinatown in droves. Under the “magnetic influence” of the dish, thousands of white Americans paraded like zombies to Chinese restaurants. “An American who once falls under the spell of chop suey may forget all about things Chinese for a while, and suddenly a strange craving . . . arises [and] he finds that his feet are carrying him to Mott Street” (Bonner 97). A few years later, over one hundred chop suey restaurants operated in New York, a fact that alarmed many observers. “A surprisingly large

number of Chinese restaurants have made their appearance in recent years," reported a journalist for *The New York Tribune* in 1902. "Nothing about them seems attractive," he wrote, "and yet these places thrive and their number increases with astonishing rapidity. Twenty-five cents worth of some kinds of chop suey, served with rice, will make a toothsome dish for two people. Tea is served free of charge and the quantity is not limited" (qtd. in Bonner 97). For the many Americans who had become "chop suey addicts," in the words of one writer, food had become a powerful motivation for frequent Chinatown visits.

In a period of great social and political conservatism, when Chinese immigrants were the subject of racial violence and legal discrimination, thousands of Americans were willing to briefly suspend their hostilities and journey into Chinatown for an evening's entertainment. Due in large part to the efforts of immigrant merchants and restaurateurs, who adapted their menus and decor to suit white preferences, middle-class tourists found in Chinatowns a temporary release from their daily routines and the fulfillment of their colorful Orientalist fantasies. During the first decades of the twentieth century, Chinatowns saw even more fervent boundary crossing, as thousands of Americans continued to seek in Chinese immigrant communities, novelty, relaxation, titillation, and excitement. Tourists brought with them dollars and dreams, and as entrepreneurs hoped, took home souvenirs and memories. They also exported something that the merchants never envisioned—a passion for chop suey. Through the "hybrid" dish, Chinese cooking, albeit in a watered down, highly distorted form, left its Chinatown borders and crossed into mainstream American culture. Though most tourists were still unwilling to embrace racial diversity, Chinese food was another story.

The Chop Suey Craze

Between 1900 and 1920, the Chinese restaurant industry expanded tremendously. Attracted by the growing popularity of chop suey and physical improvements in many Chinatowns—following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, Chinese American merchants refashioned their establishments to resemble glittering pagodas and advertised the "new" Chinatown as "clean, healthfully and morally"—white Americans visited Chinatowns and Chinese restaurants in increasing numbers

("Historic Chinatown" 10). Between 1870 and 1920, the number of Chinese restaurant workers increased from 164 to 11,438, even though the total number of Chinese employed had declined during the period, and in many cities, the number of Chinese restaurants doubled between 1900 and 1920 (Takaki 247). The growing public interest in chop suey, chow mein, and other Chinese-American dishes not only boosted the fortunes of immigrant restaurateurs, but also, unexpectedly, the careers of aspiring journalists, who turned Chinese restaurants into the subject of fanciful stories in the popular press. After eating a dinner in a Chinatown tea house, claimed a writer for *Overland* magazine, she was possessed with terrifying nightmares. After dreaming that she had been kidnaped by a sadistic Chinese merchant, she vowed to stay away from the "Chang Foo dining room" and instead eat "more sensible suppers" (The Stevensons 45). "Chop Suey," declared one journalist, was "the Oriental device which makes our poor old hash blush for its simplicity." Made of "a few old shoes, brass-buttons, and a wornout pipe . . . it swims about in a bedragoned bowl, and you eat it if you can" (Harrison 529). Chop suey restaurants appeared in popular films, and the dish was even celebrated in song: "Who'll Chop Your Suey When I'm Gone?," it asked (Lovegren 89). By 1920 if not earlier, millions of Americans had become familiar with chop suey, and more than a few had crossed into to Chinatown to taste it.

In fact, as many "chop suey addicts" were discovering, trips to Chinatown were becoming increasingly unnecessary. Many first and second generation Chinese Americans, sensing the popularity of Westernized Chinese dishes, had moved outside the boundaries of Chinatown into ethnically mixed urban and suburban neighborhoods, where they opened "chop suey parlors" and "Chinese American" restaurants catering to white customers. Carol Kennicott, the main character in Sinclair Lewis' novel *Main Street*, from 1920, dines in one such restaurant in Minneapolis—a "Chinese restaurant that was frequented by clerks and their sweethearts on paydays. They sat at a teak and marble table eating Eggs Foo Yung, and listened to a brassy automatic piano, and were altogether cosmopolitan" (Lewis 208). Other establishments, like the Culver City Chop Suey Café near Los Angeles, served filling, inexpensive meals without the pretentious decor. In addition to chop suey, several restaurants featured such popular lunchroom standards as roast

turkey, beef stew, and sandwiches—one Los Angeles restaurant featured an “extra special merchant lunch” of soup, bread, and potatoes in addition to its “Chinese chop suey,” “American chop suey,” “Mushroom chop suey,” and “Li Hong Chong chop suey” (“Culver City Chop Suey Café”). Chop suey was moving well beyond Chinatown, and winning the support and loyalty of an increasing number of white customers. By 1920, some were so devoted to the dish that they began requesting chop suey in non-Chinese restaurants. “I operate a medium size restaurant and recently I have received a number of calls for chop suey,” wrote one proprietor to a restaurant industry trade publication. “As neither myself nor my chef have any experience in preparing the dish, we ask you to help us out and send us a good recipe for chop suey.” “I am interested in Chop Suey,” wrote another, “and I would be very grateful if you could tell me how to sprout beans” (Hancock 26). During the early 1920s, the pages of *National Restaurant News*, *The American Restaurant*, and other food service journals filled with similar requests. Restaurant customers across the nation were suddenly requesting chop suey, and bewildered cooks, not knowing how to prepare the dish, went in frantic search of recipes. “Cut up a pound of onions into slices. Then cut up ten pounds of beef . . . (and) six or seven stalks of celery. Mix the concoction and cook as a pot roast on top of the stove,” advised one magazine. “Brown the onions slightly, add the shredded peppers, pork, mushrooms, and celery,” suggested another. “Serve with bran corn flakes, pouring the chop suey over them” (“Food Bureau” 18).

Simple and inexpensive, chop suey was an ideal dish for lunchrooms, cafeterias, and other quick-service restaurants. Requiring little if any preparation, particularly if canned vegetables were used, it could be cooked in bulk during the morning, preserved in large vats, and reheated and served throughout the day. The only difficulty, restaurateurs complained, was that many of the key ingredients—in particular, bean sprouts and soy sauce, commonly found only in Chinese groceries—were hard to obtain from restaurant suppliers. In 1924, the newly-formed La Choy Food Products company, started in 1920 by University of Michigan student Wally Smith and his Korean-born partner, Ilhan New, solved the problem with bottled and canned chop suey ingredients for restaurants, hotels, and other food service institutions. Featuring canned bean sprouts, soy sauce, “brown sauce,” and a vegetable mix

called La Choy Sub Kum, the new line was promoted at the 1924 National Restaurant Association convention, along with chop suey recipes “which follow the traditions of centuries of Oriental domestic cookery, and which have been tested and approved by a score of famous Chinese chefs” (“La Choy Food Products Co.” 30). By the end of the decade, a competing brand, marketed by the Fuji Trading Company of Chicago, featured bean sprouts, “chop suey sauce,” and even canned chop suey for speedy lunchroom and cafeteria preparations. “The Chinese restaurants have rendered a valuable service to the American restaurateur by developing a great demand for Oriental foods,” reported a restaurant industry journal. “Nothing remains for our chefs, now that they may obtain the materials and master the simple technic [sic] of Chinese cookery, but to add these very profitable dishes to their menus” (“La Choy Food Products Co.” 30). And judging from reports from restaurateurs across the nation, many in the 1920s did.

“A number of Detroit restaurants are cashing in on the sale of chop suey and chow mein,” announced *National Restaurant News* in 1923. “The Ueata Lunch Company ran chop suey on their bill of fare every day . . . and found it to be a good seller, especially at night. The average sale was 100 gallons a day” (“Chop Suey and Chow Mein Good Sellers” 46). Several automobile manufacturers began using chop suey in their factory cafeterias, and even restaurateurs in small towns in the Midwest and South, where Chinese Americans were relatively few, reported significant interest in the “smooth, tasty and nourishing” dish that had become “so popular” in recent years (“Feeding 50,000 Men a Day” 29). The Walton’s Cafeteria chain of Augusta, Georgia, reported *Cafeteria Management* magazine, had achieved local acclaim for its “chop suey of all varieties . . . prepared by an experienced cook”; one North-western café owner, claimed another journal, successfully garnered the after-theater crowd in his city with his “fresh mushroom chop suey” and “eggs fou young” (Oliver 481). By the end of the decade, chop suey, egg rolls, fortune cookies, chow mein, and other hybrid Chinese-American foods had become so popular among restaurant goers that white entrepreneurs in major cities began opening their own “Chinese” restaurants. In 1929, two San Francisco businessmen opened the Mandarin Cafe, the first “American-managed” Chinese restaurant in the country, according to *Restaurant*

Management magazine. Featuring chicken chow mein, "Mandarin Chop Suey," and the questionable "Chow Yuke"—"green Chinese vegetables with mushrooms and water chestnuts"—the restaurant served between four and five hundred customers each day ("This Chinese Café" 381).

"Delicious," "novel," and even "nutritious"—bean sprouts, reported *The American Restaurant*, were high in vitamin C—chop suey, like Chinese restaurants, had facilitated the crossing of significant geographic, culinary, and cultural boundaries ("Interesting Facts" 106). "Tourists" continued to travel to Chinatowns in search of Chinese restaurants, while immigrant entrepreneurs gradually moved away from their ethnic communities to capitalize on the growing interest in Chinese American meals. By the late 1920s, white restaurant goers had become so familiar with chop suey that they transported it over another cultural boundary, this one perhaps even more formidable. Through chop suey, "Chinese" food found its way into the ultimate bastion of culinary conservatism—the American middle-class home.

"Be Your Own Chinese Chef"

Throughout the early twentieth century, the recipes that appeared in middle-class cookbooks could best be described in three words—creamy, meaty, and sweet. Dominated by home economics or "domestic science," a movement of cooks and nutritionists with decidedly conservative food preferences, most cooking literature of the era promoted the traditional New England menu—such dishes as baked beans, brown bread, boiled vegetables, and beef stew. Though a few "international" recipes, for spaghetti or macaroni and cheese, for example, appeared occasionally in mainstream cookbooks, even such timid forays into culinary diversity were few and far between. Heavy, starchy, and plain if not bland, most middle-class American cooking followed a tradition hostile to excessive spices, sharp flavors, and any "foreign"—non-English or non-Western European—ingredients.

Thus the appearance of Chinese recipes in mainstream cookbooks and women's magazines of the 1920s marked a significant departure from established culinary preferences and patterns. Requiring no salt, bread, or dairy products, and instead such rare and unfamiliar ingredients as bean sprouts, ginger root, soy sauce, and water chestnuts, the new recipes for

“Chinese Chop Suey” and chow mein must have seemed strange if not daunting, but for those who had eaten in Chinese American restaurants, perhaps slightly less challenging. In fact, as many writers for *Good Housekeeping* and *The Ladies’ Home Journal* confessed, the reason that “Chinese cookery” appeared so commonly in women’s magazines of the 1920s was linked directly to Chinese restaurants—women who had tasted chop suey and chow mein in Chinatown cafes, as well as non-Chinese cafeterias and lunchrooms, had become so enamored with the dish that they wanted to prepare it at home. “Have you ever attempted to make Chop Suey at home and wondered why it didn’t taste so good as it did in a Chinese restaurant?” asked a writer for *Good Housekeeping*. The key to good chop suey lay in two crucial ingredients—“Chinese sauce, or soy sauce, as we Americans call it,” and “Sesamum-seed oil, a strong delicious oil, a few drops of which will greatly improve a dish and give it a real Chinese tang” (Evans 67). Both products, magazines assured, were available in mainstream grocery stores. “Though heretofore Chinese vegetables and sauces could be purchased only in Chinese shops, today bamboo shoots, noodles, soy bean sauce, brown sauce and kumquats . . . are all being packed in tin cans and bottles and sold in our retail markets,” *Good Housekeeping* explained. With a few bottles of soy sauce, some canned bean sprouts, and simple instructions, any woman could be her own “Chinese chef” (Allen 72).

Judging from popular accounts of the period, many middle-class housewives of the 1920s were, in fact, using soy sauce, bean sprouts, water chestnuts, and chow mein noodles to prepare their own “Chinese” meals at home. In particular, chop suey and chow mein were frequently the centerpiece of elaborate luncheon parties and “theme dinners” thrown by ambitious middle-class women of the 1920s for their titillated—or in some cases, bewildered—guests. In *Main Street*, city-bred Carol Kennicott shocks her small-town neighbors with a lavish Chinese dinner party featuring “blue bowls of chow mein... and ginger preserved in syrup” (Lewis 81). Other wives of the period held “mah jongg parties” featuring, as mid-game refreshments, egg foo yung, lichee nuts, and tea. Guests took in the meals with “agreeable doubt,” in Sinclair Lewis’s words, and ventured bravely, with forks and chopsticks, into new culinary territory. Some left dinner less than satisfied, but others with interest in the “exotic” cuisine, which many Americans, even by the

late 1920s, thought was truly foreign. In 1930, the Fuji Food Company shocked many “chop suey addicts” by announcing that “contrary to general understanding,” the dish was “purely American and to procure it in China is practically an impossibility” (“Making Oriental Dishes” 28). Restaurants, magazines, and cookbooks, however, continued to classify chop suey as Chinese, and during the 1930s, many families who ate chop suey for dinner seem to have genuinely believed that they were “eating ethnic.”

By the 1930s, chop suey, chow mein, and other Chinese American foods had become popular dinnertime staples. During the Depression and World War II, the inexpensive, filling dishes were lauded by women’s magazines as an effective way to stretch the family food budget. “Chop suey parlors” continued to flourish both in and out of Chinatown, attracting an increasing number of middle-class patrons, and during the 1940s, thanks in part to the US Army, frozen and canned chop suey and chow mein began appearing on mainstream grocers’ shelves. Italian American entrepreneur Jenò Paulucci, noticing that returning veterans had developed a taste for chop suey, which had been served in Army mess halls, started a line of prepackaged “Chinese” dinners, marketed under the brand name Chun King. With their trademark red labels and inventive packaging (chow mein was sold in two separate cans, one for vegetables and one for the crispy noodles), Chun King dinners can still be found in grocery stores today. Due in large part to the initial efforts of Chinese immigrant restaurateurs, flavors and ingredients once considered exotic—soy sauce, bean sprouts, water chestnuts, ginger, among others—had become an accepted part of the mainstream middle-class diet.

Cuisine, Identity, and Culture

The story of chop suey and Chinese American dishes in the first half of the twentieth century illustrates the way that restaurants have been able to initiate, however slight, cross-cultural interaction and culinary diversification. It also raises important questions about why food and eating establishments have often been more successful in promoting exchange between diverse cultural groups and traditions than other social institutions—why many Americans, during a time of intense anti-immigrant sentiment and hostility toward Asian

Americans, seemed more than eager to adopt “Chinese” food into their diets. There are a number of possible explanations for this paradox, having largely to do with traditional attitudes toward non-Western cultures and the longstanding image of subordinate peoples as preparers and servers of food. As anthropologist Lisa Heldke has suggested, eating foreign food has long been a form of cultural and “culinary imperialism,” in which colonizers confirm their dominance over a culture by appropriating and subverting its cuisine (175-93). For white Americans struck by the Orientalist craze of the 1920s—the same craze that gave rise to Rudolph Valentino, Fu Manchu, and other popular “Oriental” images and icons of the era—eating chop suey became an inexpensive and safe way, quite literally, to taste the Other. Moreover, the image of Chinese Americans as restaurant servers or cooks posed little threat to most Americans—although they could not accept the presence of Chinese Americans in mainstream social settings or businesses, they had little trouble envisioning them in subservient roles. Chop suey became more popular, in fact, the further it moved from Chinese American people—though hybrid dishes achieved their initial popularity in Chinatown restaurants, the real “chop suey craze” began when the dish entered non-Chinese restaurants and homes. As culinary historian Harvey Levenstein has noted, Chinese American food became extraordinarily popular in the Midwest, a region where, not coincidentally, Chinese immigrants were fewest (Levenstein 216).

Indeed, Americans’ exposure to Chinese American food in the early twentieth century seems to have done little to change dominant attitudes toward Asian immigrants. Many white restaurateurs who served chop suey often used popular racial stereotypes as a means of attracting customers. Hoping to stir up enthusiasm for his chop suey and chow mein lunches, one cafeteria owner advertised that “the dishes are not made by a Chinaman, which only means that the food is cleaner” (Oliver 481). Eating chop suey in Chinese-run, rather than white-owned restaurants, joked *The American Restaurant*, was a sure way to contract a disease—if not commit “chop-suey-cide” (“Sad Indeed” 126). Food manufacturers in the 1920s perpetuated popular images of Chinese and Chinese Americans as unclean, and cookbooks, as scholar Sherrie Inness has written, often portrayed Chinese Americans as foreign, exotic, and

“inscrutable” (107). The growing acceptance Chinese American food clearly did not extend to Chinese Americans.

By distancing foods of Chinese origin from people of Chinese origin, and by reaffirming Chinese Americans’ subordinate status through the repeated invocation of racial stereotypes, white Americans were able to adopt Chinese American dishes into their diet in spite of their hostilities toward Asian immigrants. Because it did not disrupt traditional social relationships and often involved little contact with Chinese immigrants, the cultural, geographic, and culinary boundary-crossing initiated by Chinese food and restaurants in the early twentieth century seemed, to many Americans, acceptable and safe. It is important to note, however, that not all Americans of the period were hostile toward Asian immigrants, and that many embarked on their forays into Chinatown, and into Chinese cooking, with legitimate desire for cross-cultural exchange. Many housewives who prepared chop suey and chow mein, like Sinclair Lewis’s Carol Kennicott, found their interest in Chinese cooking a catalyst for further explorations into Asian art and history. Similarly, many women’s magazines printed tidbits of Chinese history and culinary lore along with recipes for chop suey and chow mein, and featured articles on Asian cooking written by Chinese American women. Even more notable, and what perhaps may be the most important result of the chop suey craze of the 1920s, is that it lay the groundwork for more respectful and fruitful culinary and cultural exchange in the latter part of the century. During the 1940s and 50s, many Chinese restaurants expanded their menus to encompass more authentic dishes and flavors; cooking literature of the era also reflected greater openness toward more traditional Chinese cooking styles. In 1945, Buwei Yang Chao achieved significant attention for *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese*, perhaps the first popular cookbook in English devoted exclusively to Chinese cooking. Unlike the standard “chop suey and chow mein” repertoire in most cookbooks, Chao’s book featured recipes for chicken with oyster sauce, fried rice, pork in wine glaze, and stuffed cucumbers—revolutionary for home cooks of that era. In the 1950s, Chinese American women offered Chinese cooking courses at YWCAs and community centers throughout the nation, and by the 1970s, a wide range of dishes from a variety of Chinese regions appeared in cookbooks, restaurants, and even mainstream

grocery stores. Political, cultural, and demographic factors—growing tolerance for ethnic diversity, greater foreign travel, and increasing numbers of Asian immigrants, among others—have played a significant role in the recent popularity of Asian foods, but the influence of Chinese restaurants and their “hybrid” dishes must also be taken into account. By introducing Americans to new ingredients and flavors—and most important, to the very idea of eating outside their own cultural tradition—dishes like chop suey and chow mein helped transform America into a nation of multicultural diners.

What this case study of Chinese restaurants and Chinese American food may suggest is that culinary preferences do not always correlate with racial and social attitudes—that cultural minorities, for example, may seem far less threatening to dominant social groups when placed in the context of food and dining. For that reason, restaurants, particularly ethnic restaurants, may be more interesting and lively sites of cross-cultural exchange and interaction than scholars have traditionally assumed. Notably, Harvey Levenstein has written that Italian American restaurateurs initiated boundary-crossing in the 1920s and 30s—Italian restaurants were largely responsible for the popularity of pasta and pizza among mainstream American consumers—and historian Donna Gabaccia, in *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*, has suggested that Jewish and Mexican American restaurants may have sparked similar patterns of culinary transmission and exchange. What is needed in the fields of American studies and American culinary history are more case studies and explorations into the ways that particular foods and restaurants have facilitated cultural and dietary diversification, transforming how we cook, what we eat, and ultimately, who we are.

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