

CHINESE RESTAURANTS AS CULTURAL LESSONS

BY IMOGENE LIM

Diners of any cuisine may have an appreciation of fine food; nevertheless, taste is a personal matter. With this in mind, I do query the "authority" of restaurant reviewers especially when they appear to perpetuate cultural misunderstandings. One review in particular by Joanne Kates titled: A fruitless search for "real" Chinese food appeared in *The Globe and Mail* on November 2, 1996, it stirred me to voice. My dismay was her discussion of restaurants with two menus. What does having two menus mean?

According to Kates, a Chinese restaurant having two menus is purposely restricting "better," or "interesting" or "exciting" cuisine (in the words of another reviewer) to Asians. Foods presented to non-Asians "all schmecked very westernized." In other words, Kates feels "most of us seem so happy with Sinoschlock." With those words, there is a presumption of knowledge on her part as to what constitutes "authentic" or "genuine" Chinese cuisine. As noted in the December 1996 issue of *Flavor & Fortune*, several authors note variance found in Chinese food. For example, "Aharoni confesses that his own menu strays from classic purity, partly from cultural considerations and partly because many traditional ingredients are not yet available in Israel" or "The movement of people and food make for continual culinary melting pots....grain [is still used] as the basis and majority component of their diet and they supplement it with old or new foods that look, smell, and taste like Chinese food. Their changing foodways are expressions of cultural continuity over time."

Rather than offering a similar viewpoint as do the authors of *Flavor & Fortune*, Kates takes a very different tone. Her perspective is historical but with a twist that does not illuminate the reality of the development of Chinese cuisine in the Americas. For Kates, her "hypothesis" of two menus suggests that Chinese restauranteurs are intentionally preparing poorly cooked food to spite the non-Chinese patrons. This is a matter "about us and them," or as she states:

A visible minority cannot be treated with such contempt for so long [reference to early immigration policy towards Chinese in Canada] and respond by being warm and cuddly with westerners. They serve us dinner, but the taste of bitter experience has shown them that our interest in their culture goes skin deep.

Her reference to immigration history (head tax and exclusion) is a simplistic response. History is involved but it is one of adaptation as a means of survival. Yes, Chinese pioneers sought opportunity in the hostile environment they found in both Canada and the United States at the turn-of-the-century. (This is a history typically unknown to recent immigrants who operate the myriad of newer restaurants.) The cafe's and restaurants that dot the landscape are testimony to this.

The Chinese adapted their cuisine to the foodstuffs and tastes of the locale wherever they established themselves—much in the same manner described in Judy Ross' article "Culinary promise fulfilled—in the promised land" in the *Flavor & Fortune* December 1996 issue. The evolution of Chinese cuisine is a constant, whether in North America or in China itself. Due to the intersections of history, cultural changes and foodstuffs are more commonly multi-directional than unidirectional.

The fortune cookie created in San Francisco to complete a Chinese meal in North America is found today in Hong Kong-style! Borrowings and changes from around the world are currently a part of "real" Chinese cuisine.

The definition of "real" or "authentic" is a matter of a conscious dialogue between restaurateur and consumer. If the consumer stops requesting the particular foodstuff in question, it will quickly disappear from the menu or the supermarket shelf—as did innumerable products, including, Clear Pepsi. The presentation of a particular cuisine develops equally according to tastes of the restaurant's patrons. As noted in Harley Spiller's food review of restaurants in Japan in *Flavor & Fortune's* December 1996 issue, Japanese tastes tend to lean towards spicy as well as sweet in regard to Chinese cuisine.

On the home front, taste allowed for the development of the chow mein sandwich, or the somewhat similar chop suey sandwich, in southeastern New England Chinese restaurants. In the Twin Cities where I now reside, I am discovering the popularity of deep-fried cream cheese wontons in a variety of Asian restaurants. Having grown up with plenty of dining experience in Chinese restaurants as the daughter of a restaurateur, I can still appreciate and recognize a "good" chow mein sandwich from a bad one. Taste and quality continue to be important markers of valuing a restaurant.

One should refrain from calling any creative response to one's clientele in North American Chinese restaurants "Sinoschlock" as Kates does. She would have difficulty accepting the fact that for some individuals, "real" Chinese restaurants serve chow mein. For these folks, if chow mein is not on the menu, then the establishment is something less and not to be patronized.

Rather than disparaging a restaurant for having two menus, perhaps a commentary on acknowledging cultural differences is more positive and a better way of educating the wider public to standards and traditions within a certain cuisine. Being Asian American does not give one a genetic predisposition to enjoying the cuisine of one's ancestry. I know plenty of Asian Americans who will not venture to sample tripe, or chicken or duck feet from *dim sum* carts. Every culture has standards of what is edible as well as what constitutes adequate and appropriate food preparation. Not everyone cares to eat Steak Tartare or Ceviche because of its "uncooked" nature. In many areas of the world, insects in all their various life cycle stages are eaten (see issues of *Food Insects Newsletter*). For many North Americans, dining on any of these latter might push the limits of acceptance in their "edible" category.

continued on page 22

JADE CHOPSTICKS AWARDS
ON THE NEXT PAGE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

continued from page 7

- 3 Tablespoons Chinese black vinegar
- 2 Tablespoons Japanese miso paste
- 1 small clove garlic, minced

For the Red Chili Sauce:

- 3 Tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 Tablespoons Chinese black vinegar
- 2 Tablespoons minced ginger root
- 2 Tablespoons minced scallions
- 1 Tablespoon minced garlic
- 1 Tablespoon sugar
- 1 Tablespoon red chili oil
- 1 teaspoon Sichuan peppercorns, roasted and ground

For the Topping:

- ½ pound mung bean sprouts
- 2 medium cucumbers, seeded and shredded
- 2 carrots, peeled and cut into thin strips
- 2 medium red bell peppers, cut in thin strips
- 4 large mushrooms, thinly sliced
- 1 cup cilantro, chopped

Preparation:

- 1 Cook noodles according to package directions. Drain well, transfer to a large bowl and toss with sesame oil, then set aside.
- 2 For peanut sauce: Blend olive oil with peanut butter in small bowl, then stir in remaining sauce ingredients and set aside.
- 3 For Sichuan Sauce: Mix all sauce ingredients in small bowl and set aside.
- 4 Blanch bean sprouts in boiling water 15 seconds, then rinse with cold water and drain.
- 5 Toss pasta with vegetables in the topping mix, then in two parts.
- 6 Toss half the pasta with Peanut Sauce and half with Sichuan Sauce. Serve on the two batches of pasta on opposite ends of a platter; sprinkle both with cilantro.

Note: Balsamic vinegar may be substituted for the black vinegar. To roast peppercorns, place them in a small skillet over medium heat and cook, shaking pan occasionally, until aromatic, about 2 minutes. Cool, then finely grind in an electric spice grinder or with a mortar and pestle.

Approximate nutrient analysis:

Given by the newspaper, and per serving for what they said was 16 servings:

Calories	325 Kc
Sodium	485 mg
Total Fat	9 g
Carbohydrates	52 g
Cholesterol	none
Protein	10 g

Thank you Dapeng Ren.

CHINESE RESTAURANTS AS CULTURAL LESSONS

continued from page 13

Yes, some Chinese restaurants have two menus—one in Chinese, another in English. From the viewpoint of a restaurateur, there is understandably a perceived economic reason for them. Based on their own assumptions about their clientele's taste and/or dining preferences, two menus have been created to maximize this capacity. If these assumptions are incorrect, they can affect the restaurant's success. The bottom line is the economic response. However, according to Kates, having two menus is all part of a conspiracy or Chinese vengeance. She asks, "Why are all those Chinese people looking so happy eating at... (many of them eating dishes I can't find on the menu), and my seafood is slightly overcooked and kind of bland?"

Perhaps, Kates needs to pose another question: Are happy faces the result of "real" Chinese food, or is it because family and friends are enjoying one another's company in addition to the pleasures of food? Kates presumes those faces of Chinese ancestry. Unless I hear the Chinese language spoken, I would hesitate to make that conclusion because Asian populations are equally heterogeneous as are European ones. In addition, not all Asians read, write, or speak the language of their ancestry nor can all of them request the menu or order in "Chinese."

"Schmecked very westernized" and "Sinoschlock" are words that deny the evolution and development of Chinese cuisine whether in North America or elsewhere. Kates attempts to address history, not food history. In the end, she refuses the issue in her interpretation of two menus. Yes, there is a lesson about immigration in Chinese cuisine found in North America, but it is one with a positive side—survival, adaptation, and community. It is the history of many families in Canada and the United States, including my own. The two menus presented in some Chinese restaurants and the Kates response are more of a lesson about assumptions made by both parties about one another—in essence, incorrect cultural assumptions. ■

Imogene Lim is an anthropologist with a Ph.D. She has considerable training and expertise in food and culture, and the evaluation of both.



天仁茗茶

高級茗茶 * 人蔘 * 批發零售

TEN REN TEA AND GINSENG CO., INC.

135-18 ROOSEVELT AVENUE
FLUSHING, N.Y. 11354
TEL: (718) 461-9305