

## CHINESE CUISINE MEETS THE AMERICAN PALATE: THE CHOW MEIN SANDWICH

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For many generations of North Americans who grew up on Chinese food prior to 1965, its essence was an order of Chow Mein and/or Chop Suey. There was always a neighborhood Chinese restaurant dotting the landscape, whether one lived in the city, or in the suburbs. The food was prepared quickly, was tasty, inexpensive, and the restaurant itself was a place to "hang out" to be with one's buddies. During those more innocent bygone days, Friday and Saturday evenings were reserved for enjoying a meal at the local restaurant with the family, or bringing a take-out order home.

Where was everyone going for these end-of-the-week treats? Chinese restaurants! They certainly were going there in Fall River, Massachusetts where a Chinese eatery was found in every section of the city. Whether everyone liked Chinese food did not matter; these restaurants had something for everyone. If Dad did not like Chow Mein, he could always have a pork chop or veal cutlet. The same was true for the children; they could have french fries, fried chicken, or even a hamburger. As related by one Fall Riverite: "Every Friday, Mother and Father would get for us (five boys), two orders of Chow Mein, with gravy separate, french bread stick, and fish and chips; it was a potpourri." Admittedly, our tastes change as we grow older, but many continue to find Chow Mein and Chop Suey satisfying -- in fact, even evoking a "nostalgia" of our childhood or youth. It might even be said that these are our ethnic "comfort foods." In any case, Chow Mein and Chop Suey were/are identified with Chinese restaurants in North America.

The American eating public has had a long term "love affair" with Chinese cuisine. In fact, the words "Chow Mein" and "Chop Suey," and the dishes themselves (in the American context) have become synonymous with Chinese eateries. Rather than saying "Let's go to a Chinese restaurant (for Chinese food)," one might instead hear, "Let's go eat Chow Mein." The early Chinese restaurant owners knew this, so if one happens to visit a Chinese restaurant, in or out of Chinatown, with original signage dating from the first half of this century, one is likely to see the words "Chow Mein" and/or "Chop Suey" prominently displayed near the restaurant name. In some cases, these words were all that could be seen from a distance; the type of business was more important than its name. If the establishment's name was not recognizable as an eatery, the words "Chow

Mein" or "Chop Suey" identified it as such and, of course, the type of menu to be expected.

For example, in Portland, Oregon's small Chinatown, there are two businesses with "Chop Suey" on their signs. A quick look through the local Yellow Pages reveals that these restaurants date from 1922 and 1928 (and were presumably the oldest establishments in 1994); they are the Republic Cafe and the Hung Far Low, respectively. The word "cafe" establishes the former as a dining place, but Hung Far Low -- what do these words signify? With the addition of the two short words "Chop Suey" on the building sign, all that is necessary is said to the American eating public: a Chinese restaurant.

No matter where else in the world, those standard names (as well as egg rolls, fried rice and sweet & sour) represent the familiar foods that are also identifiable as "Chinese." Whether in East Africa or India, the inhabitants will enthusiastically describe these dishes. But are they the same? One individual said that in her travels throughout the United States, she had been unable to find the sweet and sour dish she fondly remembers from India, that is, a mélange of vegetables over deep-fried noodles topped with a sweet & sour sauce. How can something so familiar be so different? Where did "Chow Mein" and "Chop Suey" come from?

The Chow Mein served in Chinese restaurants in America is different from what is likely to be found in East Asia and elsewhere. "American" Chinese Chow Mein can be described as a thick stew composed of chopped (or ground) meat and vegetables over deep-fried noodles. But, the etymology of the word "Chow Mein" is that, in Cantonese, "chow" means to stir or pan-fry, and "mein" means noodles. Cantonese-style Chow Mein, then, is a truer version of what might be expected if ordering a Chow Mein dish in East Asia (Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc.); the meat-vegetable mixture is less stew-like and the noodles are pan-fried rather than deep-fried. As with most foods that have been brought to this country, there has been some modification to accommodate available ingredients and tastes; the type of Chow Mein served in America was no different as a newcomer.

This was also true of Chop Suey. Prior to 1890, Chop Suey had not been invented; in fact, Chop Suey and Chow Mein first appeared in the American language in 1898 and 1903, respectively (Oxford English Dictionary; Mathews, 1951). Different stories have been circulated as to the origin of the dish called Chop Suey, from railroad gang cooks to Chinese cooks. According to one story, railroad gang cooks created Chop Suey with the Chinese laborers in mind; since the cooks' knowledge of Chinese

cooking was limited, they turned to vague ideas acquired from San Francisco's Chinatown. They did their best; the reputed result: Chop Suey (Root and de Rochemont, 1976: 277). In another story, Li Hung Chang, a special envoy of the Chinese emperor, is said to have visited the United States in 1896, after attending the coronation of the Russian Czar Nicholas II and touring Europe. Even though he was honored with feasts and banquets during his visit, he was said to have preferred the Chinese food of Chinatown to the American dishes served him; the dish he liked the most was, reputedly, Chop Suey (Yu, 1987: 87). In this way, Chop Suey is said to have become popularized in the United States.

Certainly, historic circumstances affected the development of these two Chinese foods in America, but more likely are a result of taste preferences and ideas about cooking and nutrition. No doubt the changes were not immediate; the Chow Mein or Chop Suey found today evolved in various locales, each variation somewhat similar yet different. In a 1896 newspaper article on Chinatown in Providence, Rhode Island, the reporter commented on "Chop Suey," sampled at a Chinese restaurant, which he described as a "stewed mixture of meat." Readers were provided with a list of the ingredients, namely, "celery, onions, fresh pork, green string beans, mushrooms, Chinese water nuts, imported Chinese sauce, a little water, some sugar and salt," so they might try the dish themselves (*Providence Sunday Journal*, 1896).

The only cooking instructions provided were to "mix well and fry." It can only be speculated that these instructions later translated into a more American dish that was served the reporter.

At that time, boiling or stewing, especially vegetables, was the typical cooking method, not the stir-frying or quick sauteing known today as the standard of Chinese cuisine. In the 1932 *Pictorial Review Standard Cook Book*, the recipe for Chop Suey called for an hour and one-half cooking time (Hooker, 1981: 287). With present-day cooking techniques, few would prepare a vegetable dish that took such attenuated cooking, especially one that does not contain root vegetables like potatoes or carrots.

Chow Mein and Chop Suey were recognized by Americans as Chinese; whether they were identifiable to the Chinese in China when they first became popular in America did not matter. In fact, while growing up in Canada, the restaurants I saw in Vancouver's Chinatown offered "AMERICAN Chop Suey," because the method of preparation was identified as being American. This is true also of that proverbial after-meal

treat of Chinese restaurants in America: the fortune cookie. It, too, is an invention of American ingenuity; only in the last few years has it begun to be marketed in Hong Kong and China. One enterprising individual, who imports fortune cookies in Hong Kong, sells them as an upscale food item, marketing them as "Genuine American Fortune Cookies" (Kaufman, 1992: 25).

Two culinary historians, Root and de Rochemont, have commented on the tendency towards the Americanization of foods by restaurateurs instead of presenting a genuinely foreign dish that might prove economically risky. This might mean creating "an American dish with a foreign name and a vague resemblance to a foreign creation, but which is actually, and reassuringly a native-born citizen of the American kitchen" (Root and de Rochemont 1976: 276-277). And so, Chow Mein and Chop Suey were born, more the product of the English cooking tradition of boiling and stewing.

In this creative mode, Polynesian cuisine also became a part of the repertoire of the American Chinese restaurant. Remember Trade Vic restaurants . . . ? Who has not had "exotic" drinks with paper parasols while growing up in North America? One friend (who grew up in Massachusetts) commented that playing with the parasols from the drinks her parents ordered when she was a child, was an additional treat with the Chinese fare that was completely different from food at home. As noted by Jane and Michael Stern, chroniclers of American popular culture, "in the late 1940s and early 1950s, exotic frequently equaled *soigné* (1991:53)."

French food was being embraced and Polynesian dining implied a cuisine touched by France via Tahiti. It was definitely viewed as exotic, an upscale version of Chinese, a point often commented on by restaurant reviewers of the time. But the "secret of Polynesian food, as conceived by Trader Vic, was that it was different, but not *too* exotic" (Stern and Stern, 1991: 54, original emphasis). And so the Chinese restaurant in America evolved as the tastes of its consumers changed, as evidenced by the current trends of Szechuan-style and Hunan-style foods today. With many of the older restaurants, remnants of those "Polynesian" days are found on the menu in the exotic drinks and pupu platters. In fact one restaurant, renamed the drink known as the "Pina Colada" after its owner; the drink became known as "Doctor Ming of Tahiti." To add to the exotic nature of the experience, drinks were typically presented in glasses molded into tropical dancers or sculpted heads or fruit (e.g., pineapple).

The evolution of Chinese food in America followed much the same process as other cuisines. Immigrants brought many foods from their countries to America and modified them according to the availability of ingredients and their tastes. Apple pie is a classic example of this re-identification and/or rediscovery of immigrant food. One commonly hears the expression, "as American as apple pie," yet the birthplace of apple pie is in Europe. In many ways, the Chow Mein and Chop Suey found in American restaurants and described here are comparable to other foods that have become identified as American. Besides apple pie, there are hot dogs and hamburgers, as well as America's favorite: Pizza! Anyone who has traveled to Italy knows that pizza in Italy is not the same as pizza in America. Like pizza, Chow Mein and Chop Suey have not shed their ethnic identity, as have the hot dog and the hamburger. All of these foods have immigrant roots and have found a niche in the culinary repertoire of everyday America; in fact, it might be said they are "as American as apple pie."

One aspect of Chinese cuisine in America that is similar to the cuisine of China is the development of regional specialties. In the Northeast, the Chow Mein sandwich appears to be unique. For those who have never tasted one, the question will be: "What is it?" The Chow Mein part is easy enough to describe, a mixture of minced meat (pork), celery, onions and bean sprouts in gravy over deep fried noodles. The Chow Mein is placed between a hamburger bun or sliced white bread. The hamburger bun sandwich might be thought of as the Chinese version of the "sloppy Joe" and the sliced white bread sandwich as the Chinese variant of the "hot turkey sandwich," since the latter sandwich also has a ladle of brown gravy poured over it. And, as with any category of Chow Mein, there are variations. One can have pork (standard in the Fall River/New Bedford, Massachusetts and Rhode Island areas), or chicken, beef or shrimp. For those who do not like noodles in their Chop Suey or Chow Mein, there is the Chop Suey or Chow Mein sandwich (with the same variations, but a difference in gravy color, i.e., lighter), and even a Chow Mein/Chop Suey sandwich combination for the indecisive diner.

As discussed, Chow Mein and Chop Suey are creations that were born in America. The Chow Mein sandwich may, in fact, be more quintessential American than its older siblings. American foods, rather than being defined by specific flavors such as Japanese cuisine (soy-sugar-sake) or Indian cuisine (curry-cumin-mustard seed), are more likely to be characterized by texture and presentation than by taste. If one were to describe American food by taste, one might say that it is bland. This was certainly true up until the last decade or so. In the early part of this century, bland was considered healthy. Prior to World War II, it was also

viewed as more patriotic than food containing exotic seasonings (Stern & Stern, 1991: 12). Other characteristics of American food are: the textures crisp and moist/soft, and portability (Belasco, 1987). Just think about the popularity of fast food establishments and the standard menu offering of hamburger and french fries: moist/soft, crisp, portable. This essentially American combination of textures is found in the Chow Mein sandwich as well. It is a perfect amalgam that can be identified as Chinese, yet is thoroughly American. It is crispy (deep fried noodles), moist/soft (meat/vegetable mixture/sauce/stew) and portable (between hamburger bun or sliced bread). The flavor can even be said to be bland.

The Chow Mein sandwich might not seem to be particularly portable but it is. A recent summer trip I took to Willows Park in Salem, Massachusetts illustrates this point: the sandwich was sold primarily as a take-out item in a cup-shaped wax paper wrapping, served with a fork. Another example comes from a personal reminiscence told to me by a colleague (around 1960):

We never ate there, but always took these wonderful sandwiches home. This was a real treat, because back then, we never had restaurant food. Once a week, usually on meatless Fridays (back then you weren't supposed to have meat on Friday) I would walk over and buy our supper. They were 25 cents each!

Other informants have commented on bringing their own containers to the local restaurant for take-out orders of Chow Mein sandwiches. I also have had an order "to go." The sandwich was packed in biodegradable products: brown paper bag, wax paper and a rectangle of corrugated cardboard to provide stability to the wrapped sandwich. It was not particularly messy; the noodles had absorbed the gravy.

The Chow Mein sandwich appears to be a regional specialty dish of southeastern New England, centering on the Fall River and New Bedford, Massachusetts areas. Several Fall Riverites have commented that the sandwich is the city's claim to fame; the locals of Salem, Massachusetts also claim the sandwich as *theirs*. It is considered traditional, as well as unique, to Willows Park. In Salem, it is known as a chicken Chop Suey sandwich (no variations, except it can be ordered with or without noodles).

As previously related, the dish called Chop Suey does not have a single point of origin; perhaps this is true too of the Chow Mein sandwich. (I have recently discovered another variant of take-out Chow Mein found

at the resort town of Rockaway, Long Island in New York; there, Chow Mein is served in an edible deep fried cup-shaped wrapper.) The sandwich will not be found in a Chinatown restaurant; purveyors of the Chow Mein sandwich are commonly the neighborhood restaurants where both Chinese and American foods are served, as well as certain amusement parks on the East Coast.

Although the popularity of the Chow Mein sandwich peaked some 40 to 50 years ago, it is still a favorite in Chinese restaurants in Fall River, as well as in Providence, Rhode Island and vicinity. One restaurant in East Providence is said to sell between nine and ten dozen a day, and the largest Chinese restaurant in Fall River has sold over two million during its forty-year existence. To many Fall River natives, the Chow Mein sandwich is a food associated with growing up and socializing. Chow Mein and Chow Mein sandwiches are so much a part of the local scene that they are identified with Fall River. Even today, the Chow Mein Sandwich can still be found as part of its school lunch menus. They have also been offered at fund-raisers. For the older generation, going to the movies or after-school sporting events was an occasion to stop by the local Chinese restaurant and eat the sandwich. The standard order was a Chow Mein sandwich, French fries and orange soda.

The Chow Mein sandwich was a real treat in the early 1930s. The Chinese restaurants were a real God Send [sic] to us who were on the poor level. We were able to be served a whole Chinese dinner (Chow Mein or Chop Suey) for 25 cents.

We went quite often for Chop Suey Sandwiches, and as I recall, they were made on what was much like a hamburger bun. Well, it was so loaded with filling that when we took them home, my mother made two sandwiches from one. I recall the price at the time [late 1930s and early 1940s] was 25 cents each. I might add here that they were delicious and were considered quite a treat. I also recall going there about once a week for an old aged couple who operated a small variety store in the neighborhood. This would have been their dinner that night.

My mother gave me 15 cents per day for my cafeteria lunch. I would fudge my lunch money, go without the bottle of milk, and after school, on my way to the library, join the clique at a restaurant run by a Chinese family.

The acceptance of the Chow Mein sandwich into everyday American cuisine is notable in the types of eating establishments in which it was served. During its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s, the sandwich was served both at non-Chinese and Chinese eateries. Every lunch counter in Providence, whether drugstore or five-and-dime, as well as all the Chinese restaurants, offered a Chow Mein sandwich. Charles' Lunch, a.k.a. Nickel Charlie's, of New Haven, Connecticut served sandwiches in the 1930s, as well. Beside the counters like Woolworth's and Kresge's, one could order a Chow Mein sandwich at amusement parks: Rocky Point (Warwick, Rhode Island), Willows Park, and, most notably, at Nathan's Famous of Coney Island (New York) which began serving it in the 1920s. Woolworth served the sandwiches at its lunch counters and snack bars until the early 1950s; it was reputed to be especially popular in the New York City area. And Nathan's continues to offer the sandwich at its Coney Island location.

The Chow Mein sandwich may have been the first popularized ethnic fast food. One individual recalled having a Chow Mein sandwich in 1927 at a Kresge's lunch counter in Providence. With little time to eat and the streets filled with people rushing to see Colonel Charles Lindbergh at the State House, they grabbed Chow Mein sandwiches "to go."

There is no question that the sandwich had become popular by the 1920s; whether it was available earlier is open to discussion. Its origin is debatable, although the Fall River/New Bedford, Massachusetts, areas appear to be likely birthplaces. Today, the noodles for the sandwich in southeastern New England, are made by the Oriental Chow Mein Company of Fall River. The company began operations in the 1920s and was originally known as the Republic Noodle Shop. It has been supplying both fresh and deep fried noodles, as well as a gravy mix, Hoo-Mee Gravy Mix, to the public and to businesses ever since. Current and former Fall residents will attest to the fact that the mix and the noodles will produce the "genuine" Chow Mein used in a proper Chow Mein sandwich. The package advertises: "The ingredients contained in this package will make a delicious meal of Chow Mein, of the type generally served in the better Chinese restaurants of southeastern Massachusetts."

Portability and low cost certainly were factors in its popularity. It developed before MacDonald's, Burger King, and other kind of fast food establishments. And, for a mere five cents (the original cost), one could be waited on and served a Chow Mein sandwich in a booth! One Fall Riverite commented:

For the grand sum of fifteen cents, one could eat a Chow Mein sandwich and have an orange soda sitting in a booth. We sure felt like big shots. Orange soda was a must and the grown-ups always drank tea. . . . For take-out, the sandwich was wrapped in wax paper and always ended up soggy when we got home. . . . A really sloppy mess but oh so delicious and filling.

Back then, and even today, the Chow Mein sandwich provides an economical and filling meal. For this reason, the sandwich can be found on the menus of newer Chinese restaurants, although it is more typically found on those of older establishments (at least 20 years old). And in some of the restaurants that have eliminated the sandwich from their menus, it can still be provided if one asks. Several restaurateurs state that they still serve it on request, for their older patrons. And, customers appear to appreciate the effort; one remarked that a particular restaurant was "the only place I can find a REAL [Chow Mein sandwich] now" (DF, 1992). These establishments are conscious of client tastes and religious concerns. The first time that I had a Chow Mein sandwich was on a Friday; it was meatless, to accommodate the predominantly Catholic neighborhood. It was, in fact, for this very reason that the sandwich was added to the Nathan's Famous menu of Coney Island. Originally, it was served only on Fridays; as its popularity increased, it became a regular item.

Although the Chow Mein sandwich is no longer as popular as it once was, it still has an avid following in southeastern New England. Just the mention of the sandwich elicits memories (and, surprisingly, very positive ones) of a place and life in America. In the Chow Mein sandwich, Chinese cuisine meets the American palate.

To sum up the relationship between Chinese cuisine and the American palate, here is an excerpt from the song "Chow Mein Sandwich (China Royal Special)" sung by Alike and the Happy Samoans (mid-1970s):

Chow Mein, Chow Mein sandwich  
 Say, Nora baby, may I have a couple of Chow  
 Mein sandwiches to go  
 Chow Mein, Chow Mein sandwich  
 How about an order of french fries on the side, honey  
 Chow Mein, Chow Mein sandwich  
 Don't get smart Molly, you know I can't use a chopstick  
 Chow Mein, Chow Mein sandwich  
 Well, you like Chow Mein sandwich, I like Chow Mein sandwich  
 Everyone likes Chow Mein, too.

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