The Chow Mein Sandwich: American as Apple Pie

Imogene L. Lim

This nation of immigrants brought many foods from their countries of origin, then modified them according to local ingredients and tastes. The apple pie is a classic example. We say "as American as apple pie," yet the apple pie was born in Europe. For any dish to be "as American as apple pie," it should have immigrant roots and should have found a niche in the culinary repertoire of everyday America. To such examples as apple pie, hot dogs, and hamburgers, we can add the chow mein sandwich.

The chow mein sandwich is a northeastern regional specialty centered in Fall River, Massachusetts, served not in Chinatown restaurants but in local neighborhood restaurants offering both Chinese and American foods. Although the popularity of the chow mein sandwich peaked forty or fifty years ago, it is still a favorite dish in the Fall River and Providence, Rhode Island, areas. One restaurant in East Providence is reputed to sell over a hundred a day. The largest Chinese restaurant in Fall River has sold over two million during forty years in business.

For many Fall River natives, the chow mein sandwich is associated with growing up and the beginnings of social life. For the older generation, going to the movies or sporting events was an occasion to visit the local Chinese restaurant for a chow mein sandwich. The standard restaurant order was a chow mein sandwich, French fries, and an orange soda. The chow mein sandwich is still part of the Fall River school lunch menu.

What is a chow mein sandwich? Chow mein is easily described — a mixture of minced meat (typically pork), celery, onions, and bean sprouts in gravy over deep-fried noodles. This is placed inside a hamburger bun or between slices of white bread. If the latter, brown gravy is ladled over the works. Chicken, beef, or shrimp can replace pork. For those who do not like chow mein noodles, there is a chop suey sandwich, even a chow mein/chop suey combination for the indecisive diner.

The chow mein served in American Chinese restaurants differs from that found in East Asia. The American variety consists of a thick sauce or stew over deep-fried noodles. In Cantonese, however, chow means stir-fry or pan-fry, and mein means noodles. In Cantonese-style chow mein, as found in East Asia, the meat-vegetable mixture is less stew-like, the noodles pan-fried rather than deep-fried. As with most immigrant foods, chow mein has been modified to accommodate American ingredients and tastes.

It is, in fact, more American than Chinese. American foods, rather than being defined by flavors as in Japanese cuisine (soy-sugar-sake) or Indian cuisine (curry-cumin-mustard seed), are more likely to be characterized by texture and presentation. Described by taste, American food would be labeled "bland," certainly up until the last decade or two. In the early part of this century, blandness was considered healthful, and, prior to World War II, was also viewed as more patriotic than exotic seasonings. Other characteristics of American food are crispness, moist/softness, and portability (as in the sandwich or convenience/fast food). Given that description of what makes a comestible essentially American, the chow mein sandwich is a perfect food amalgam — identified as Chinese yet basically an American invention — crispy (deep-fried noodles), moist/soft (sauce/stew), and portable. It can even be called bland.

During its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s, the chow mein sandwich was served at both Chinese and non-Chinese restaurants.
For this reason, it survives on the menus of older Chinese restaurants as well as some newer ones. A few restauranteurs, conscious of their clients' tastes and religious customs, serve the chow mein sandwich even though it is no longer on the printed menu. The first time I ate a chow mein sandwich was on a Friday; it was meatless to accommodate a predominantly Catholic neighborhood. That was the reason it was added to the menu of Nathan's Famous: Originally it was served on Fridays only; as its appeal increased, it became an everyday item.

Although no longer as popular, the chow mein sandwich still has an avid following in southeastern New England, evoking for many older people specific memories of growing up in America. For them the chow mein sandwich is as American as apple pie.

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Imogene L. Lim is a Rockefeller Fellow at the Asian-American Center of Queens College (SUNY), where she conducts research on the Chinese-American restaurant. All photographs by Imogene L. Lim.

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The following restaurants serve the chow mein sandwich. Although I have been told that it is available in every Chinese restaurant in Fall River, I have listed only the three oldest establishments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Restaurant</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>City, State</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China Royal</td>
<td>542 Pleasant Street, Fall River, MA</td>
<td>Fall River, MA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark You Restaurant</td>
<td>1236 Pleasant Street, Fall River, MA</td>
<td>Fall River, MA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mee Sum Restaurant</td>
<td>1819 South Main Street, Fall River, MA</td>
<td>Fall River, MA</td>
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<tr>
<td>China Star Restaurant</td>
<td>140 Newport Avenue, East Providence, RI</td>
<td>East Providence, RI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Young China Restaurant</td>
<td>250 Warren Avenue, East Providence, RI</td>
<td>East Providence, RI</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peking Garden Restaurant</td>
<td>322 324 Broad Street, Providence, RI</td>
<td>Providence, RI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy May Cantonese Restaurant</td>
<td>757 Hope Street, Providence, RI</td>
<td>Providence, RI</td>
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Both the China Star and Joy May will serve a chow mein sandwich if asked, although it is not a listed menu item. Happy eating! If you discover the chow mein sandwich at your local restaurant, please let me know.

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Errata:

Line dropped, bottom right column, page 4: "eateries. Every five-and-"
"Rockefeller should be "Rockefeller"; (SUNY) should be "(CUNY)."