

The Chow Mein Sandwich: American as Apple Pie

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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.

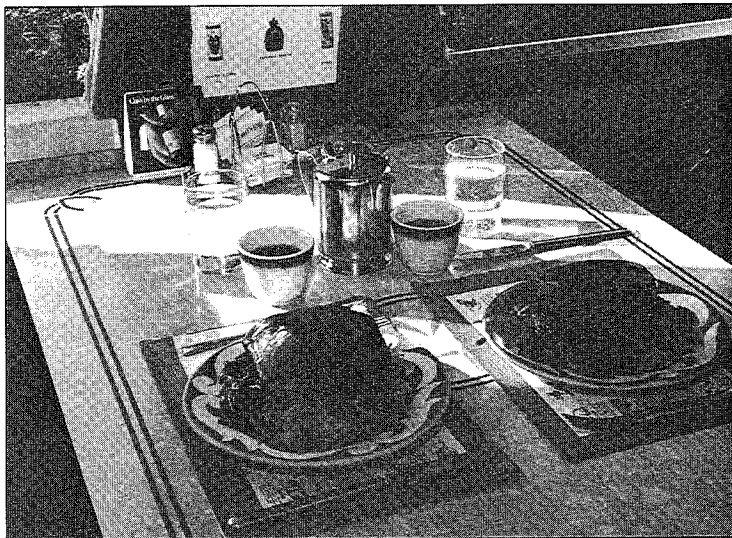
What is a chow mein sandwich? Chow mein is easily described — a mixture of minced meat (typically pork), celery, onions, and bean sprouts in gravy over deep-fried noodles. This is placed inside a hamburger bun or between slices of white bread. If the latter, brown gravy is ladled over the works. Chicken, 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.¹ Other characteristics of American food are crispness, moist/softness, and portability (as in the sandwich or convenience/fast food).² 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



dime-store lunch counter in Providence, as well as Chinese restaurants, offered the chow mein sandwich. It was found at amusement parks, notably Nathan's Famous in Coney Island, where it is still available. Woolworth's served the sandwich at its lunch counters until the early 1950s; it was especially popular in the New York City area.

The chow mein sandwich may be our earliest fast food with an ethnic flavor. Nathan's Famous began serving it in the 1920s. The Fall River/New Bedford area is the likely birthplace. Today, most of the noodles in that corner of New England are made by Fall River's Oriental Chow Mein Company, which started up in the 1920s and has since then been supplying both fresh and deep-fried noodles, as well as Hoo Mee Gravy Mix, to the public and to businesses. Former Fall River residents assert that this gravy and noodles combination produces the "genuine" chow mein sandwich.

Portability and low price were factors in the popularity of the chow mein sandwich in an era before McDonald's, Burger King, and other fast-food establishments. For many young people of that time, the local Chinese restaurant was the place to hang out. For a mere five cents (original price), one could be waited on and served in a booth. Many an older person has reported preferring to spend a dime on a chow mein sandwich and soda instead of ice cream and soda, which had to be consumed standing up. Dining out infused a feeling of being grown up. The chow mein sandwich (now costing about two to three dollars, depending on ingredients) is still an economical and filling meal.

For this reason, it survives on the menus of older Chinese restaurants as well as some newer ones. A few restaurateurs, 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. 🍏

¹ Jane and Michael Stern, *American Gourmet* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), p. 12.

² Warren J. Belasco, "Ethnic Fast Foods: The Corporate Melting Pot," *Food and Foodways* 2:1-30(1987).

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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.

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| China Royal
542 Pleasant Street
Fall River, MA | China Star Restaurant
140 Newport Avenue
East Providence, RI |
| Mark You Restaurant
1236 Pleasant Street
Fall River, MA | Young China Restaurant
250 Warren Avenue
East Providence, RI |
| Mee Sum Restaurant
1819 South Main Street
Fall River, MA | Peking Garden Restaurant
322-324 Broad Street
Providence, RI |
| Chan's Fine Oriental Dining
267 Main Street
Woonsocket, RI | Joy May Cantonese Restaurant
787 Hope Street
Providence, RI |
| Bing Sum
57 Water Street
Warren, RI | |

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.

