

## NEIGHBORHOODS

## Craving Hyphenated Chinese

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Sept. 21, 2005

8 MIN READ

NEW YORKERS always think they know the real thing when it comes to Chinese food. Forty years ago it was egg rolls, chop suey and drinks with paper umbrellas. Then it was General Tso's chicken and sesame noodles.

But over the past decade, as large communities of people from India, Peru, Korea, Trinidad and Guyana have formed here, New York has had to expand its ideas about what Chinese food can be.

"I call them second-generation Chinese restaurants," said Cheuk Kwan, who has directed a documentary film about the spread of Chinese restaurants around the world. "These restaurants always have a hyphen: Chinese-Venezuelan, Chinese-Norwegian, Chinese-Mexican.

"Chinese-Malagasy," he said, on the island of Madagascar, "was the best food, with lots of coconut milk and spices."

Dishes like chili-spiked, deep-fried chicken lollipops, which are a Chinese-Indian specialty, and lo mein topped with chunks of peppery jerk chicken, served at De Bamboo Express, a Chinese-West Indian restaurant in Brooklyn, are what Chinese food is now to thousands of New Yorkers.

The city's first hyphenated version of the cuisine -- after Chinese-American, of course -- was Chinese-Cuban, which arrived in the 1960's, when thousands of Cubans of Chinese descent came to New York after Fidel Castro's rise to power.

"My grandfather was born in Zhanjiang, but his whole life was in Havana," said Manny Liao, a musician who lives in Washington Heights. "He always ate Chinese food, but he cooked Cuban."

Seafood soups, fried rice with pork, scallions and tiny shrimp, and chicharrones de pollo -- chicken cut into small pieces and deep-fried in the Cantonese style -- were and are standbys in restaurants like Caridad la Original on the Upper West Side and La Chinita Linda in Chelsea.

Over the years, as more Americans have visited China and more Chinese have immigrated to the United States, more authentic versions of Chinese food have come to town on a gust of hot chilies, Sichuan peppercorns and bean paste. Keeping up with the openings of restaurants serving the cuisines of Taiwan, Shanghai and Fujian in the city's burgeoning Chinatowns -- Flushing in Queens and Sunset Park and Homecrest in Brooklyn -- has practically become a second job for many New Yorkers.

But for others it does not matter how real the food tastes, so long as it tastes like home.

When New York's young Korean-Americans go out for Chinese food, they often eat ja jiang mien, boiled noodles in a rich meat sauce, mixed with Korean brown bean paste and studded with Chinese fermented black beans. "Kids grow up on Chinese noodles in Korea," said Jinny Song, a customer at Hyo Dong Gak in Midtown.

In Elmhurst, La Union, a Peruvian chifa (slang for Chinese restaurant), serves platters of chancho, a Hispanic rendering of char siu, Chinese for roast pork.

The roots of these hybrid Chinese cuisines around the world are the same as those of Chinese food in America. Millions of Chinese men, most of them from the province Guangdong (formerly known in English as Canton), left China in the late 19th and early 20th century. Only men were allowed to leave the country, often by becoming indentured workers to companies in need of cheap labor in the Caribbean, Southeast Asia and South America.

Professional cooks were usually not among the emigrants, so the earliest Chinese restaurants outside China were started by men with little knowledge of cooking and a desperate need to improvise with local ingredients. The dishes they came up with, like chop suey, have long since been dismissed as "not Chinese" by scholars of the culture.

But Chinese food has never been quite what outsiders think it is.

"The term Chinese food represents an area four times larger than Western Europe and the eating habits of more than a billion people," Mr. Kwan said. "You could say that there is really no such thing as Chinese food."

Eugene Anderson, a professor of anthropology at the University of California, Riverside, and author of "The Food of China," disagrees. "Chinese food is defined by a flavor principle of soy sauce, ginger, garlic and green onions" and methods including stir-frying and steaming, he said. "Once you get too far away from those rules, it is no longer Chinese."

Whatever and wherever it is, it is in flux, said Eric Kwan, a New York native and chef and owner of Hip Hop Chow, a new East Village restaurant serving a hybrid of Southern American and southern Chinese cooking.

"Chinese food in China didn't change much in 2,000 years, but now it's changing," he said. "And Chinese food in America is something totally different."

At De Bamboo Express in Prospect-Lefferts Gardens, Brooklyn, Chinese cooks toss rice and vegetables in huge woks, then top that with peppery jerk chicken wings and handfuls of raw cabbage, which steams gently in the rice and adds a crispness to the plate. "Chinese food and Jamaican food are tight-tight," said Monica Lambert, a customer who was eating the dish. "This food is both. You know, like Naomi Campbell," she said, referring to the supermodel whose father is Chinese-Jamaican.

Questions of ethnicity, some of them awkward and others simply mysterious, inevitably come up when tracking the cuisine of the Chinese diaspora. The passionate relationship between American Jews and Chinese restaurants, for example, is well documented.

"These people love Chinese food," said Dov Kemper, a customer at Eden Wok, a strictly kosher Chinese restaurant in Midtown, gesturing at his fellow Orthodox Jews eating barbecued (veal) spare ribs and (mock) shrimp fried rice. The wontons in the chicken soup - - "just like kreplach," Mr. Kemper said -- are stuffed with ground beef, scallions and ginger.

Kevin Cohnen, the owner, claims to have invented the Chinese hot dog, a kosher beef frank encased in an eggroll wrapper and deep-fried. The result is crusty, incredibly juicy and excellent with hot mustard, either New York deli or Chinese style.

"Chinese food in India is very, very popular and always includes the same dishes: chili chicken, chicken lollipops and gobi Manchurian," said Vik Lulla, an owner of Chinese Mirch in Midtown, whose family owns two Chinese restaurants in Bangalore.

For chicken lollipops, cooks use a Chinese method to push the meat of the wing to one end of the bone, then coat these "drumettes" in a cornstarch batter, spiked with cayenne, that is traditionally used to fry vegetable pakoras. The dish is popular in India, Mr. Lulla's wife, Sienam, said, "first because, of course, fried chicken is delicious, and also because you remove the skin, which Indians never eat."

Manchurian is synonymous with Chinese food in India. It refers to a sauce made by simmering garlic, ginger, sugar, soy and cayenne or red chili paste. It is a spicy cousin of the sticky sweet and sour sauces that used to coat a lot of Chinese-American food. (It also resembles ketchup, which many culinary historians believe is descended from the intense Chinese sauce ke-tsiap.)

That sticky red sauce is still served as a dipping sauce for crisp fried wontons at the chifa La Union. (According to Professor Anderson, the word chifa most likely comes from the Mandarin chi fan, meaning eat rice.)

"My family has had a Chinese restaurant in Barranco for 75 years, and these are the same recipes we use there," La Union's owner, Antonio Mazarina Tong, said. The wonton soup at La Union is filled with noodles, chunks of taro and potato and leaves of bok choy, making it a filling lunch.

Lomo saltado, which many Peruvians consider a national dish, is a savory stir-fry of beef, onions and tomatoes, seasoned with soy sauce. It is sometimes served over French fries, but at La Union already fried potatoes are tossed in with the other ingredients; the result is rich, savory and, as a bonus, an excellent example of grass-roots fusion. A wok full of beef and French fries is not the kind of thing the upscale chefs who dabble in Asian fusion usually come up with.

Peruvian dishes that bear the description saltado are usually of Chinese origin: in Peru saltar means "to sauté" or "to jump," a good description of what food does as it is stir-fried in a wok. Tallarines saltados -- tallarines, like tagliarini, are long, thin, flat noodles -- are easily identifiable as lo mein.

"I didn't even know it was Chinese food," said Delia Ocaña, who was having a plateful for lunch at Rinconcito Peruano, a Peruvian restaurant in Midtown. Ms. Ocaña was raised in Cuzco. "In Peru now, it is hard to tell which restaurants are Chinese, which dishes, which people. It is all Peru."

Mr. Tong's most popular dish at La Union is chi gau kay, also a version of Cantonese fried chicken, dipped in a batter thickened with chuño, starch from potatoes freeze-dried using a method first developed 4,000 years ago by Andean farmers. Chinese cooks use rice starch or corn starch.

"Peruvians like this kind of Chinese food," Mr. Tong said. "The Chinese restaurants here aren't the same," he added, gesturing out the door to the rest of Elmhurst, a thriving Queens neighborhood with some of the most authentic Chinese restaurants in the city.

"There are only a few things that are always the same in Chinese food," said Guillermo Hung, a photographer who was reared in Caracas and lives in New Jersey. "I was born in a Chinese restaurant, and I end up cooking Chinese style no matter where I am or what the ingredients are. There is always stir-frying. And the most important thing is the rice. For true Chinese food, everything else is a side dish."

## Melting Woks

Chinese Mirch(Chinese-Indian), 120 Lexington Avenue (28th Street); (212)532-3663.

De Bamboo Express(Chinese-West Indian), 772 Flatbush Avenue (Lenox Avenue), Flatbush, Brooklyn; (718)469-0117.

Eden Wok(kosher Chinese), 43 East 34th Street (Madison Avenue), (212)725-8100; and 127 West 72nd Street (Broadway), (212)787-8700.

Happy Garden(Chinese-Guyanese), 179-11 Hillside Avenue (179th Street), Jamaica, Queens; (718)523-6280.

Hip Hop Chow(Chinese-Southern American), 129 Second Avenue (St. Marks Place); (212)674-2469.

Hyo Dong Gak(Chinese-Korean), 51 West 35th Street (Fifth Avenue); (212)695-7167.

Kum Ryong(Chinese-Korean), 30 West 32nd Street (Broadway); (212)629-6450.

La Union(Chinese-Peruvian), 91-18 Corona Avenue (91st Place), Elmhurst, Queens; (718)592-2786.

Rinconcito Peruano(some Chinese-Peruvian dishes), 803 Ninth Avenue (53rd Street); (212)333-5685.

Tangra Masala(Chinese-Indian) 87-09 Grand Avenue (Queens Boulevard) Elmhurst, Queens, (718)803-2298; and 39-23 Queens Boulevard (39th Street), Sunnyside, Queens, (718)786-8181.

Chicken Lollipops Adapted from Chinese Mirch Time: 2 hours, including 1 hour resting time

3 pounds chicken wing "drumettes" or whole wings, tips discarded 1 tablespoon minced garlic 1 tablespoon minced ginger 1 tablespoon red Asian chili paste 1 egg yolk 2 tablespoons cornstarch 2 tablespoons flour 1 tablespoon canola cooking oil 1/2 cup water 1 1/2 teaspoons salt 1/2 teaspoon white pepper Peanut or canola oil for frying Fresh cilantro sprigs for garnish.

1.Use a sharp knife to separate two joints if using whole wings. Cut tendons at narrower end of each "drumette" joint, hold that end with a kitchen towel, and scrape down meat as far as possible toward thicker end to make a plump lollipop shape. If using second joints, too, cut through cartilage at one end of each piece, separating the bones, scrape meat down the large bone to make a lollipop shape, and pull out and discard smaller bone. 2.In bowl large enough to hold all the wings, whisk together all other ingredients, except frying oil and cilantro. Add wings, mix gently to coat, and refrigerate 1 hour. 3.In large deep fryer or large deep kettle heat 2 inches of oil to 375 degrees. Working in batches to avoid crowding, fry wings until golden brown on both sides. 4.Transfer with a slotted spoon to paper towels. When oil returns to 375 degrees, add new batches until done. Arrange on a platter and garnish with cilantro. Serve immediately.

Yield: Makes 4 to 6 servings.