THE Chinese Restaurant ROAD TRIP

A personal exploration of culinary heritage.

BY BILLY YANG

My brother Alan and I were cruising south on I-15 near Filmore, Utah, when we saw a billboard advertising a Chinese buffet at the next exit. The restaurant was called something like "Hong Kong Chinese Restaurant." Alan and I both laughed.

"Do you think it's actually run by Chinese people?" Alan said. "Do Chinese live in places like Fillmore?"

Also, what would Chinese food in the American desert be like?

We thought we knew. My brother and I had eaten enough chop suey, chow mein and neon orange sweet and sour sauce to know that the food at this Utah cafe would likely be like any other American Chinese joint. Still, I was intrigued for complicated reasons. The idea of American Chinese restaurants and the people who operate them in small Utah towns soon became an obsession of mine.


Enjoy

My relationship with American Chinese food has been tumultuous. In my teens, I shunned it. I didn't come to fully appreciate that style of cuisine and the history behind it until my early 20s. Now I love it. Jennifer Lee's book *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles* opens with an incredible statistic: There are more Chinese restaurants in the United States than McDonald's, Burger King and KFC combined. According to the Chinese American Restaurant Association, there are over 45,000 Chinese restaurants peppered across the U.S. These restaurants can be found everywhere from the downtowns of densely populated cities to strip malls in suburbia to main streets of small towns well off the interstates.

Chinese immigrant railroad laborers brought their style of cooking to Utah in the

It's no wonder why American Chinese food is so ubiquitous. There's a bit of genius to it, especially in the battered and fried dishes slathered in sweet and tangy sauces, e.g., sweet and sour pork, orange chicken and General Tso's chicken. Take any of the aforementioned crispy, deep-fried dishes, pair them with fried rice and top it all off with a splash of dark soy sauce and you have a pretty irresistible plate of food, with sweet, sour, savory, spicy and tangy all working in unison. And who doesn't love battered and fried cuts of chicken and pork? Those early Chinese American chefs were on to something.

"Authenticity" is part of the credo of the contemporary gastronome who avoids culinary hybrids like nachos and chop suey. But those people miss the point. A mouthful of chop suey is a bite of years of cultural blending, a taste of not Chinese food, not American food, but something entirely different and original—authentic American Chinese food, a cuisine of its own.

Culture Collision

American Chinese cuisine has been around since the mid-1800s, when Chinese immigrants began arriving in the U.S. These immigrants were mostly laborers who came here to work in mines, railroads and farms. Most of them arrived in San Francisco, but the Central Pacific rail line from Sacramento to Promontory brought Chinese laborers to Utah, and more than 12,000 worked on the Central Pacific line. Chinese cooks built outdoor ovens in the dirt banks beside the tracks and mixed brown rice, Chinese noodles, bamboo sprouts, seaweed and other seasonings with American chicken in big iron kettles for a taste of home.

There were some 300,000 Chinese immigrants in this country by 1882 when the Chinese Exclusion Act was signed into law. This law, which wasn't repealed until 1943, restricted the immigration and naturalization of all ethnic Chinese people. In the 1890s, there were about 500 Chinese in Utah, most of them in Ogden, Salt Lake City and Park City. Plum Alley divided the block between Main and State Streets in downtown Salt Lake and became the center of a little Chinatown with groceries, laundries and restaurants. (Park City also had a Chinatown; white residents built China Bridge so they wouldn't have to walk through Chinatown to reach Main Street.) During the Depression the Utah Chinese population dwindled, and by the 1970s, when it finally began to increase again, almost half worked in the food service business.

> "I learned early on that there's a difference between American-Chinese food and Chinese food that Chinese people eat."

The vast majority of early Chinese immigrants came from the Guangzhou (or Canton) region. There are four major regional styles of cooking in China, and most of what we consider Chinese food in the U.S. is Cantonese cuisine or a variation of it.

My family came to the U.S. in the late '70s. I'm a second-generation American, and growing up with Chinese immigrant parents, we ate a different style of Chinese cuisine at home than what most Americans

Confucius say...

Fortune cookies are a Chinese American invention. Chinese immigrants adapted a Japanese cracker recipe, but who exactly did the adapting is up for debate. A lot of people claim to have invented the fortune cookie and even more claim to have popularized it. What we know for sure is that Shuck Yee of Oakland, California, invented the fortune cookie–making machine, and that Yankee-esque ingenuity allowed fortune cookies to become cheap enough for restaurants to give away for free—3 billion each year. In 1992, a company tried to introduce fortune cookies into China, but had to give up. They were considered "too American."

typically have at Chinese restaurants. Even when we ate out at those places, the dishes that arrived at our table didn't always look the same as what some of the other diners were enjoying.

When my family went out for dinner, we ordered whole fish steamed with scallions, ginger and soy, clams stir-fried with black bean sauce, roasted pork belly with crisp, crackling skin and rice porridge swimming with scallops and abalone. That's the Chinese food I know. I learned early on that there is a difference between American Chinese food and Chinese food that Chinese people eat. Now, savvy, adventurous American diners have taken notice and want to order something beyond orange chicken at Chinese restaurants. They want to eat what Chinese people in China eat. But as I planned out my road trips, I knew that I wanted to try the American Chinese classics.

China Star in Roosevelt

Initially I thought getting interviews for this story would be a simple process like all the other articles I've worked on as a journalist. I'd just pick up the phone, ask to speak to the owner, tell them about what I'm doing and set up a time for a sit-down.

I was wrong. I went to Google Maps, zoomed out until I could see the entire state of Utah and typed in "Chinese restaurants." Then I looked for the red dots that popped up in the more remote locations and started calling. The first few restaurants I reached out to simply said no thanks and hung up on me.

I was a bit more persistent with Jane Pan, owner of China Star, in Roosevelt. I called her several times over a two-week period and while she would talk to me, she was hesitant to agree to an interview. I suspected this was due to a language barrier, so I asked her if she spoke Cantonese. When she answered yes, I switched from English to the language I spoke at home growing up. Pan finally agreed to an interview. I used the same tactic for the other restaurant owners I contacted and all of the interviews I conducted for this story were done in Cantonese.

China Star was busy the day I visited—surprisingly busy for 3 p.m. on a Saturday in a town with a population of about 6,000. There were a couple of large parties, including a table with six burly men who looked like they probably worked in nearby oil fields. I ordered the sweet and sour pork lunch special with egg drop soup. The pieces of battered pork were so big that it came with a serrated knife to cut the chunks into more manageable bites. Pan sat with me as I ate. Our conversation was interrupted several times by customers coming or leaving and wanting to greet her. "We have a lot of regulars that come in once a week," Pan said. "It's not unusual to see the same people twice in one day even."

Pan immigrated to the U.S. from Taishan, China, in the early '90s. She and her husband worked in various restaurants in Salt Lake City before saving enough money to open China Star in Roosevelt 12 years ago. The restaurant now employs over a dozen part-timers, mostly high-school students looking for

PHOTOS BILLY YANG

Clockwise from Top: China Star owner Jane Pan; Main Street, Roosevelt; sweet and sour pork from China Star; a Chinese outpost in small-town Utah.

Clockwise from Top: Luo's Cafe owner Sing Luo; local favorite beef and broccoli with lo mein and the ubiquitous egg roll; bustling Kanab; Luo's Cafe in "Little Hollywood."

after-school and summer jobs. Pan's menu has a burger section and a Mexican section. It's this variety that made this Eastern Utah eatery a must-stop for me, and probably for many others.

She rarely sees other Chinese or Asians in this part of the state. Occasionally a bus full of Chinese tourists on their way to Dinosaur National Monument stops at her restaurant, but that's about it. "You're probably the first American-born Chinese we've had eat here," she told me.

Luo's Cafe in Kanab

And not many Asian-American visitors stop at Kanab's only Chinese restaurant, Luo's Cafe, according to its owner Sing Luo. Located between Zion National Park and Bryce Canyon National Park, Kanab sees a lot of tourists—lots of European and Asian tourists. The town is also known as "Utah's Little Hollywood" due to its history as the location for many Westerns. The sidewalks are lined with plaques honoring movie stars. (These days, Kanab is better known as the home to Best Friends Animal Society, the city's largest employer. During my weekend stay, I noticed an inordinate number of animal lovers walking dogs.) It had rained heavily the day I went to Luo's Cafe. I arrived at the restaurant in midafternoon and was one of five patrons. I ordered the beef and broccoli lunch special, which came with fried rice, lo mein and an egg roll. Luo sat and talked with me while I ate.

"Locals don't really eat here. I would say 80 percent of the people who eat here are tourists," he said. "So my business sees a lot of ups and downs depending on the season." Luo moved from the Chinese city of Guangdong to San Francisco in 1983. In those days, business for American Chinese restaurants was great, he said. In 1993, Luo brought his family to Salt Lake City where he worked as a cook at several Chinese places. He eventually made his way to St. George where he opened four restaurants of his own. But business went sour. He closed his restaurants and moved his family to Kanab five years ago for a fresh start.

"Back when I started, I could've opened a Chinese restaurant anywhere and the business would be booming," Luo said. "Now Chinese restaurants aren't doing that well." We talked about other possible career options for him, but since he's in his late 40s, it would be too hard for him to change industries, he said. I ask if he's considered changing the style of food at his restaurant, maybe move away from Chinese cuisine, which he doesn't think is viable anymore.

"I'm Chinese. I'm going to make Chinese food. What else am I going to cook? Mexican food?" Luo asked. "Who'd come to eat that?" I told him about China Star in Roosevelt and their eclectic menu. Maybe it gave him food for thought.

"I really like the feel of small towns. Everyone who comes here to eat knows me." —Annie Lin

Chop Suey

- 1 cup chicken broth
- 3 Tbsp. soy sauce
- 2 Tbsp. molasses, preferably blackstrap
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground pepper
- 5 tsp. cornstarch
- 2 Tbsp. canola oil, divided
- 1 pound pork tenderloin, trimmed, halved lengthwise and cut into ¼-inch-thick pieces
- 1 medium onion, slivered
- 1 medium red bell pepper, thinly sliced
- 3 cups mung bean sprouts
- 1 Tbsp. minced fresh ginger

Combine broth, soy sauce, molasses and pepper in a medium bowl. Set aside 2 tablespoons of the mixture in a small bowl; stir in cornstarch until combined. Add pork pieces to the remainder. Set aside.

Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a wok or large nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add pork and cook, stirring frequently, until most of the pink is gone, 2 to 3 minutes. Transfer to a plate.

Increase heat to medium-high. Add the remaining 1 tablespoon oil, onion, bell pepper, sprouts and ginger and cook for 3 minutes. Pour in the broth mixture and bring to a boil. Cook, stirring, for 3 minutes. Reduce heat to medium; add the reserved cornstarch mixture and pork (and any accumulated juice) and cook, stirring, until slightly thickened, about 1 minute. Serve over cooked rice.

Snow Dragon in Ephraim

My final destination was Snow Dragon Chinese Restaurant in Ephraim. This central Utah town of 6,000 is anchored by Snow College. "We see quite a few Snow College students dine here," said Annie Lin, the owner of Snow Dragon. "I've seen students from Japan, China, Hong Kong and even Macau." When I first spoke to Lin on the phone about interviewing her for my piece, she was tepid at best. I finally just told her I was going to make the 100-plus mile drive to dine at her restaurant and if her restaurant wasn't busy, I would appreciate a moment of her time. I showed up late in the afternoon on a Monday and ate orange chicken, fried rice and hot and sour soup as Lin told me that she lived in Queens, New York, when she first arrived from China 25 years ago.

She hated the bustle of New York, so she tried a Montana town of 2,000 people. "I really like the feel of small towns. When I told a friend in Salt Lake this, she told me Utah had a lot. That's how I found Ephraim," Lin said. "It's one of those places that when you go out shopping, most people will stop and say hi because they know you. Everyone who comes in here to eat knows me."

While she was very kind, Lin didn't give me her first name until I was about to leave. She was also the only restaurateur who refused to let me take her photo. She kept telling me she didn't want the attention. When I told her she was the only one who had refused to let me shoot a portrait, she said, "Well, that will make me unique, right?"

I paid my bill, a scant $7.46 with tax, and went on my way.

I drove hundreds of miles for this project, giving me ample time to reflect on all the restaurants I visited. While everyone I talked to had a different story, they all had a common theme. They came here to get a slice of the American pie by cooking Chinese food. No one said they wanted their kids to take over their restaurants. They all hoped their kids would go to college and find their own paths in life. The people I met were all from my parents' generation and this project helped me appreciate my own family's story much more. I also came to respect American Chinese cuisine more, which I used to dismiss because I considered it inauthentic Chinese food. But it is authentic. It just happened to be born in the U.S. over 160 years ago.

It's authentically Chinese-American. SL

Clockwise from Top: Knickknacks crowd Snow Dragon's entrance; Main Street, Ephraim; orange chicken and fried rice; another Utah-

Visit SLmag.com for Billy Yang's Chow Mein recipe.

PHOTOS BILLY YANG