

EVERYTHING BUT RATS AND PUPPIES

Wong Chin Foo Introduces Americans to Chinese Food

words Scott D. Seligman



source of profound amusement to a Chinaman is the attitude of the average American in dining for the first time under Celestial auspices,” wrote Wong Chin Foo (王清福 Wang Qingfu), in an 1885 article on Chinese cuisine he penned for *The Cook*, a short-lived, New York-based culinary magazine.

“Despite every assurance to the contrary,” he chuckled, “he visibly expresses fear that he is about to be poisoned, or else is to be inveigled into eating kittens, puppies, mice or other uncivilized food.”

Wong (1847-1898) was only mildly exaggerating. In the early years of the Chinese presence in America, beginning with the first wave that arrived in the 1850s for the California Gold Rush, Chinatowns were seen as unsavory ethnic enclaves into which most Americans never ventured. Prostitution, opium and voyeurism eventually brought adventurous whites into the Chinese quarter, however, and as early as the 1860s some San Franciscans became curious about what the Chinese in their city – by far the largest concentration of Chinese in America – ate for dinner. But most remained suspicious, and showed no particular desire to try it for themselves.

Americans didn’t begin to sample Chinese cooking in significant numbers until Chinatowns started to be seen as tourist destinations in the 1880s and 1890s. By then, there were many myths to overcome about exactly what the Chinese did and didn’t eat. As early as 1877, Wong felt compelled to assert that “we eat everything but rats and puppies.” It was, of course, an exaggeration, but the belief that Chinese actually *did* eat rats was widespread. After the *New York Times* devoted an entire article to the question, Wong offered a USD 500 reward to anyone who could prove that a Chinese ate a rat. He got no takers.

Unlike most Chinese then in America, who were nearly all Cantonese, Wong was a northerner. Born in Shandong province, he came to the United States as a teenager in 1867, not to work in a mine or on the railroad, but rather to complete an English education begun while he was still in China, courtesy of a kindly American missionary. He went on to become an activist for citizenship and equal rights for Chinese Americans and was arguably the most famous Chinese in the United States in the late 19th century. Wong is credited with coining the term “Chinese American”; he founded the first political association of Chinese voters in US history and was probably the first Chinese to testify before Congress. But in the 1870s and 1880s he started out as a lecturer, an interpreter of things Chinese for American audiences. He traveled widely in the East and Midwest explaining Chinese manners and



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ME KETCHEE ON THE FLY'E

COMPLIMENTS OF THE
SANDWICH MANUFACTURING COMPANY,

SANDWICH ILLINOIS.

Miller, Wagner & Umbdenstock Chicago !!!

An undated, racist advertisement for an Illinois engine manufacturing company featuring an image of a Chinese in native dress about to consume a rat, which he has already speared with a fork.

customs in an effort to portray Chinese as decent, law-abiding people Americans did not need to fear – or exclude. As part and parcel of that effort, he resolved to familiarize them with Chinese cooking.

Wong began that effort in 1884 with a survey of Chinese cuisine for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. He introduced American readers to “chop suey” (雜碎 *zasui*) – its first recorded mention in print – calling it the “national dish” of China. He described it as a “ragout” of pork, bacon, chicken, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, onion and pepper with “accidental ingredients” such as duck, beef, perfumed turnip, salted black beans, sliced yams, peas and string beans.

Wong covered a lot more territory in a dozen articles published in *The Cook* over a four-month period. He described a Chinese kitchen and its various implements, contrasting them with the tools found in American homes. He introduced Chinese condiments and told how dumplings, rice, vegetables, fruits and even insects were cooked. And he introduced Chinese sauces in ways Americans could understand, describing soy sauce, for example, as “a liquid resembling or suggesting very dilute Worcestershire.” Many of his explanations seemed as much a critique of Western cooking as they did an introduction to Chinese cuisine.

In one of his pieces, Wong instructed Americans on how to brew tea. He specified the best kind of teapot (porcelain, but tin if it had to be made of metal); the right variety (black, not green, because China never exported her best green teas); the proper

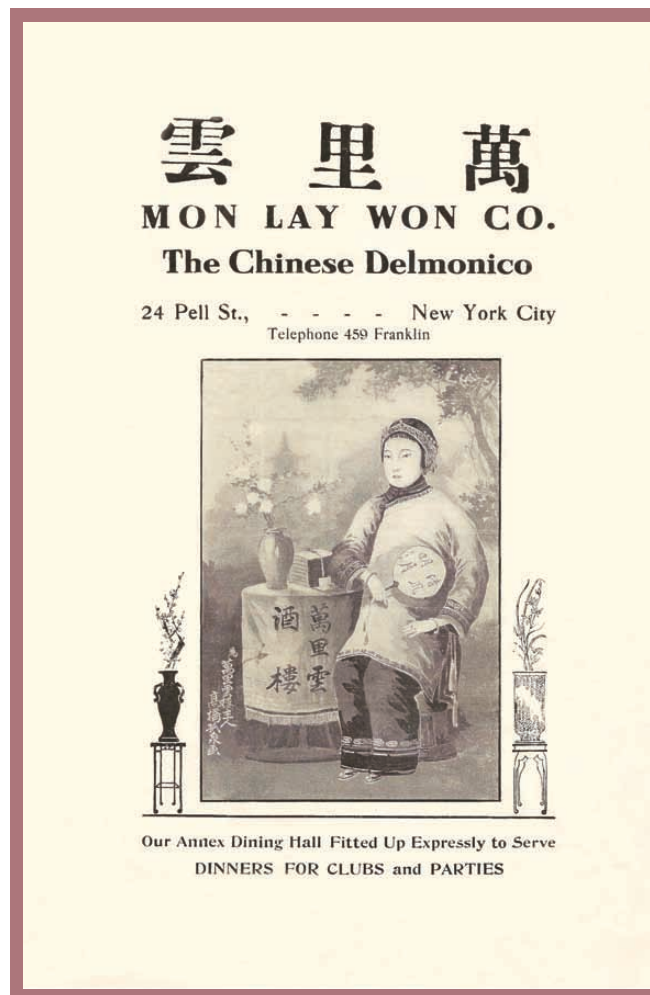
preparation method (infusion; *never* boiling) and the appropriate condiments (none). He explained that the components of milk react with the tannin in tea to create tannate of fibrin, another word for leather. “People who put milk in tea are therefore drinking boots and shoes in mild disguise,” he warned.

As Americans heard more about Chinese food, they became more curious, and the newspapers delighted in reporting on Chinese meals.

As early as 1865, the Chinese Six Companies – the *de facto* “government” of San Francisco’s Chinatown that eventually morphed into the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association – began inviting government officials to partake of Chinese cuisine in Chinatown’s better restaurants. They entertained Schuyler Colfax, Speaker of the House of Representatives (and later Vice President), among others, at the Hang Heong Restaurant on Dupont Street. And the *Daily Alta California* recounted the “numberless” dishes he was served, including “fish, flesh, fowl and vegetable substances in

a thousand forms undreamed of by French cooks and Caucasian housewives.”

“No knives, forks or spoons of our patterns were upon the tables,” the newspaper went on to note, and the efforts of the American guests to master chopsticks were highly amusing. Some guests got the hang of it early; others gave up and fell back on “spearing the morsel of food with a single stick, as an Eskimo would harpoon a walrus.”



Cover of a turn of the century menu from the Mon Lay Won Restaurant on Pell Street in New York’s Chinatown. Courtesy of Harley Spiller Collection/Cool Culinaria

Back in New York, Wong Chin Foo and his friends were doing much the same thing. The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed in 1882, had denied Chinese in the United States the right to become citizens, so it became doubly important for them to build beneficial relationships with elected officials.

“People who put milk in tea are therefore drinking boots and shoes in mild disguise”

This often began with an invitation to a proper Chinese banquet. After Excise Commissioner William S. Andrews let it be known that he wished to sample Chinese cuisine, for example, Wong, by then a pillar of New York Chinatown society and one of its informal ambassadors to the wider world, hosted him at an 1886 dinner. Wong chose Pell Street’s Mon Lay Won Restaurant, also known as the “Chinese Delmonico’s,” and pulled out all the stops with a 14-course banquet that lasted nearly three hours from start to finish. It was such a memorable feast that it was written up years later in *The Steward’s Handbook and Guide to Party Catering*, complete with an annotated list of the courses served:

- ~ Tea, served in costly china cups
- ~ Cake
- ~ Lychee (荔枝 lizhi) nuts
- ~ Sweetmeats
- ~ Roast duck
- ~ Roast chicken
- ~ Boned duck’s feet fried, with mushrooms and bamboo shoots
- ~ Chicken bones fried in lard until the bone was soft as the flesh, and dressed with Chinese sweet pickle, ginger and celery
- ~ American pike fried, with mushrooms and water lily potato
- ~ Cuttlefish, with Chinese sweet turnips and saifun (細粉 xifen) beans
- ~ Tchow mien (炒麵 chao mian) macaroni, flour stewed with chicken, celery and mushrooms
- ~ Chinese sausages, composition uncertain
- ~ Citron soup, with shrimps
- ~ Lotus seed and apricot seed soup

And everything was washed down with tea, pear wine, rice wine and apricot liqueur.

For those unable to visit posh Chinatown dining establishments, Wong was ready with a virtual tour of New York’s Chinese quarter. In an essay written for *Cosmopolitan* in 1888, he described the decor of the better Chinese restaurants, remarking on their Chinese lanterns and calligraphy scrolls, and explained how the Chinese eat: sitting on stools around a circular table, serving themselves from a common dish. He told how Chinese paid by the “spread” rather than by the dish for formal dinners, a first-class, 40-dish banquet requiring two days to eat costing USD 50 and the cheapest set meal, which included only eight courses, charged at USD 8. But individual entrees could run casual diners far less: anywhere from a nickel to a quarter per dish would suffice.

In the same piece, he offered readers an inventory of the shelves of a well-stocked Chinese grocery on Chatham Square that included:

- ~ Boned ducks’ feet dried and wrapped up with chickens’ livers
- ~ Ducks’ legs in oil
- ~ White sausages made from deviled oysters and pork, dried
- ~ Dried oysters, cuttlefish and salt fish
- ~ Extracts from beans, some resembling the Italian vermicelli
- ~ Wood fungi
- ~ Birds’ nests
- ~ Bamboo shoots preserved in cans

As time went on, American Chinese food evolved. Chinatown restaurateurs who began by catering exclusively to Chinese diners eventually began to look for ways to build business by attracting American customers, and this required addressing their preferences. What eventually emerged was a fusion of sorts, dictated as much by Chinese cooking methods as American tastes, and shaped as much by the absence of some traditional ingredients as by the availability of others unknown in the old country. But neither rats nor puppies were among them. 📣

WONG CHIN FOO ON CHINESE vs WESTERN FOOD



Wong Chin Foo, circa 1870.

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ON CHOICE INGREDIENTS

“[The] difference between the cuisines of the two civilizations is that in the main, what is regarded as choice by the one is considered common or extraordinary by the other. The European gourmet orders turkey, duck, lamb or beef and selects his favorite cut or portion; the wealthy mandarin is served with shark’s fins, bird’s nests, sea worms, devil fish, bamboo shoots and the like.”

ON SEASONINGS

“Americans (and Europeans as well) amuse me greatly. They shovel English mustard on ham, red pepper on deviled crabs and tabasco on oysters, until the resulting food is a young volcano. Then they bolt the fiery mass, and as the tears stream out, protest that the pleasure was indescribably great. While the habit is amusing, it is also pitiful. It means eventual ruin to palate and stomach alike.”

On Vegetables

“Nowhere probably is the difference between civilization in the East and West better displayed than in the cooking of vegetables. As a rule in the United States, vegetables are cooked to a liquid, paste or pulp. Of this fact boiled tomatoes, turnips and spinach are fair illustrations. In China, the cook endeavors to preserve the natural beauty of the vegetable cooked. What is more agreeable to the eye than the delicate whorls of celery, the spines and angles of spinach and dandelion and the unfolding curves of the Brussels sprout? Yet all these are destroyed in American cooking.”



ON STORING MEAT

"The keeping of raw meats is not tolerated in a first class Celestial kitchen, ice box or no ice-box. A chicken or duck is carefully kept alive in a little pen until an hour before dinner, and is then killed. Pork, beef and mutton are cooked as soon as delivered by the butcher. The reason is that in warm climates raw meats turn bad and decay in a few hours, where when cooked - especially roasted - they would keep as many days."

ON CONDIMENTS

"The condiment case is a flat box, about 3x2 feet, and usually contains the following: salt, black, white and red pepper, mustard, dried lemon and orange peel, ginger - both plain and pickled, saffron, soy, vinegar, lemon juice, garlic, onion, cassia buds, tamarind extract, sweet oil, walnut ketchup, tarragon, savory, thyme, mint, and dried celery. These make up the condiments used in ordinary cooking. On great occasions other and more expensive articles are employed."

ON COOKING RICE

"Wash your rice twice in cold water. The first washing removes dust and dirt; the second a thin outside layer of rice starch. Put it in your pan, more than covered with water, and let it boil until half done. Drain off the water and let the rice slowly steam. In thirty minutes each grain will be cooked, snow white and separate from its fellows. If the table is not ready for it, do not put it in the oven to heat. This dries it and destroys all delicacy. Put your pan of rice, still covered, in a pot on the back part of the stove, and cover. Here it will keep sweet and fresh for hours."

On Cooking With Flowers

"Americans can hardly judge of the exquisite flavors that a cook can obtain from rose-leaves, lily-leaves, cassia, bergamot, lemon-verbena, geranium, strawberry-shrub and their thousand sisters. The only approach in the Occident to the use of these is in the extracts of rose and vanilla, and the vinegar solution of mint in which little lambs are drowned."

ON PREPARING LOCUSTS

"Take a bag full of fattened locusts, almost red with age, dump them into a hot vat, cover them quickly, when they are dead, throw in a handful or more of salt. Roast them by constantly stirring - just as the Italians roast their chestnuts - until they become well-done and crisp. Generally, the insects lose their wings, legs and sometimes their heads; if not, these uneatable portions are carefully picked off. They are then served with toasted corn bread or millet rice."

ON LYCHEE NUTS

"[A] fruit that is beginning to appear in American markets is the Lai-chi. As it grows in the size and shape of a walnut, with a shell thinner than that of the finest almond. Within is a fresh and luscious pulp that may be put halfway between a strawberry and a raisin. After being gathered, it slowly dries until the pulp resembles a small date. Thus far only the dried fruit has been imported. Its success, however, indicates that the fresh fruit would in a short time be extremely popular."

