Eating the Exotic:
The Growing Acceptability of Chinese Cuisine
in San Francisco, 1848-1915

By Lisa L. Hsia

For most Americans today, the phrase "Chinese food" conjures up an immediate image. This image is likely not a humble bowl of rice and vegetables, or any of the dishes served at an extravagant banquet in China, but some taking favorites: chop
mein, egg rolls, or fried wonton; dishes as American as they are Chinese. This
widespread fondness for and familiarity with Chinese cuisine, "exotic" or not,
would have been unthinkable a hundred years ago, when Chinese restaurants
were not yet an American institution. The transition from suspect Chinese
to cultural icon was slow, and Americans would not really begin to embrace eating
out at Chinese restaurants until after World War I. But in the period before that,
from about 1848 to 1915, interaction between while Americans and Chinese
restaurants laid the foundations for what was yet to come.

Before Chinese food was available to most Americans, San Franciscans could
sample it at restaurants run by Chinese immigrants. The history of Chinese
food in America thus begins before the earliest days of San Francisco, during the
Gold Rush, in the restaurants of Chinatown. Within San Francisco, the history of
eating Chinese seems to divide neatly into three periods. In the highly international
setting of the Gold Rush era, starting in 1848 or 1849, Chinese food was well
liked, not so much because it was Chinese, but mostly because it tasted good and
was still incredibly cheap. Although around the late 1850s and very early 1860s
the city's social composition changed and it's changed population looked for different
qualities in restaurants, Chinese restaurants benefited from the growing tourist
industry and the stereotypes it played up. The restaurants whites visited then
were expected not to be necessarily enjoyable, but definitely exotic. This exoticism
might have continued well into the twentieth century if not for the 1906 earthquake
and fire, which destroyed Chinatown and gave its residents a chance to rebuild
along their own terms. The construction of a new "modern" Chinatown removed
old stereotypes and helped the Chinese community become more integrated with
the San Francisco population as a whole. Likewise, the increasing popularization
of chop suey—an Americanized "Chinese" dish that appeared to whites—begins
at this time to bring Chinese food and restaurants out of the "exotic" niche and
into the mainstream. The growing acceptability of Chinese cuisine in this period culminated with the featuring of "Chinese" chop suey at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition held in San Francisco in 1915.

Some Historical Background and Other Scholarship in the Field

The movement of Chinese cuisine toward acceptability was never a straightforward process, in large part because of the conflicting ways in which Americans viewed the Chinese. Even as hatred and fear toward the Chinese reached its height in California, thousands of tourists traveled to San Francisco's Chinatown in 1860 to view Chinatown unlike the one sewers. Francisco Board of Supervisors reported in 1860 that Chinatown still lived in wretched and dirty conditions, so that "the food ools... they exhale with such odors as to prevent people from eating and cooking methods. The San Francisco Chronicle editor John Cashner wrote that the Chinese "are still a foreign race," and that "even the most liberal critics of Chinese customs... consider them inferior." This sentiment was widespread, evidenced by the fact that Chinese restaurants were often located in areas that were considered "undesirable," such as Chinatown's "Fear Soup and Salad Parlors." Even the Chinese themselves accepted this reality, with many Chinese restaurant owners choosing to live in other parts of the city to keep a separation between their businesses and their personal lives.

Chinese Immigration in the Early Days of Gold Rush (Gold Mountain)

Before the discovery of gold brought the entire world pouring into the state, the bay port in northern California was a small, but growing, town named Yerba Buena. Residents numbered only 812 persons in 1848, but two hotels and two "Chinese" houses were already under construction. Within a year, this little town would be drastically transformed. As news of gold spread quickly across the globe, a diverse mix of people rushed into California in hopes of striking it rich. Travelers "from all nations and of all classes," George Bixler observed in his journal, "in fact you might say the whole world was here represented." Among these "people of all nations" were the Chinese.

In early encounters, Americans reacted to the Chinese the way they might have to any other foreigners. While they found the Chinese quaint, disgusting, or suspicious, the two groups had not yet interacted enough to create any kind of serious love or animosity. In fact, to many whites, one Chinese seemed interchangeable from another, clustered (or clustered) in Chinatown as they were, all equally mysterious. One visitor from North Carolina wrote in 1850: "The Chinese salute the Chinese all indiscriminately by the easy and euphemistic appellation of "John," to which they reply as readily as if they were addressed by their true names; and they... apply the same term to us, equally indiscriminately. A great number of them think "John" is the only name white people have; and they have occasion to speak to an American or European woman, they call her "John," too! But their own vernacular expression... said certainly very odd to accidental ears. The following may be taken as fair specimen: "Kam Chau, Cham P, Yeh Yeh, Si Ta, Him Fung, Dick Mung, Gee Foo."

In truth, most Chinese immigrants did share a common background. While those who came earliest to America were upper-class merchants, by the time of the Gold Rush, most new arrivals were laborers or peasants, often referred to (pardonably) by whites as "coolies." (Although many young girls were brought from China to work as prostitutes in Chinatown, few went left California until later in the twentieth century, and for decades the Chinese American population remained largely male. Ivan Light, in his study of the tourist industry in Chinatown, testifies that "as late as 1900, married Chinese women never dared to venture on foot in the streets of San Francisco's Chinatown." Though Light gives no assumed that because of the unflattering way in which Chinese and Chinatown were viewed at this time, white Americans would not have eaten Chinese food at all (or if those who did were some sort of aberration). This is a logical conclusion, but no taxonomic, and oversimplified one. It is true that Chinese remained the main patrons of Chinese restaurants. But in spite of the growing anti-Chinese movement, many non-Chinese remained willing to try Chinese food. The history of eating Chinese food in America cannot be viewed as a simple parallel to the history of sin- or anti-Chinese feeling in the US. To just ignore or gloss over the experiences of these individuals is to pretend that the complex twists and turns that characterizes relations between two groups do not exist, when they did, and indeed still do.
reason for this, it may have been that the scarcity of remunerable Chinese women and profusion of prostitutes in the district meant that many Chinese women walking in the streets risked being mistaken for a prostitute. Also, until the mid-twentieth century, nearly all the Chinese in America had come from one province in southeast China, so that they were all of somewhat similar ethnic, social and linguistic background.

Unlike the bulk of San Francisco's early white emigrants, the Chinese mostly did not come for gold—at least, not the kind to be found in the mines. Conditions in China were tough, and poverty was everywhere. From about 1846 onward, the southern parts of the province from which most immigrants came had been beset by battles, uprisings, bandits, and bad harvests.99 "From one generation to another," commented Tom Yuen, "everybody tries to send a man overseas. That's the only way you can make things better." Though many immigrants could not speak English, they could still make a little money from what they had learned in the fields of their home villages as farmers, anything they could do in America would still bring more money than they could have earned at home.100 They could stay in Chinatown, live frugally and work for other Chinese, and thus scrape up enough money to send back home to keep their families alive.

Many scholars of early Chinese Americans have therefore characterized these men as "supermen," not emigrants, because most of them hoped to return to China as soon as they had made their fortunes. This road was a gradual one, for it could take a decade or two to make enough money to return to China. As a result, they often lived comfortably for the rest of their lives. For most men this dream never materialized. "Too poor to stay in China and not rich enough to leave America," their wages were never the windfall that they had hoped, and so they continued for the rest of their lives to provide for their families from an ocean's distance away.

One Cuisine Among Many

For poor Chinese immigrants newly arrived in the city, a Chinese restaurant was not necessarily the best place to begin earning money. Most Chinese gravitated toward work in the factories, which required no capital investment and paid better than domestic work.101 And despite American conceptions of Chinese men as lazy, Chao argues, they worked harder in America than in China. As an American restaurant owner who also had a small business in China, he described the advantage of allowing the immigrant to stay among his own people and spend some time adjusting to this new life, without having to learn much English or endure the impersonal atmosphere of a factory. Also, restaurants were a thriving business in the city by the bay. San Francisco was at this time what has been called a "nachbah city", its population made up of single men looking to make their fortune in the mines or in the city. These men, not only did not know how to deal with housekeeping or cooking, they were focused only on making money, and hotels gave these shelter, laundry, and in some cases, clothing and restaurants provided their nourishment.102 Lodgings were often overcrowded, smelly, and sometimes not even adequate to completely keep out the rain, but the food was almost universally good.103 The numerous restaurants not only served tasty food, but served it relatively cheaply, and with great variety and selection. There were eating-houses to suit the tastes and pockets of people of all varieties of means, and of every nation.104

In this milieu of excellent restaurants, those kept by the Chinese quickly developed a reputation for being the best of the bunch. Sometimes called "chow-chows" (the food was also sometimes referred to as 'chow-chow'), they were frequented by Chinese and whites alike, and were much beloved for two basic reasons: they served good, filling food, and they were cheap. Kirk Munson wrote that Americans 'liking for Chinese restaurants' was based upon the fact that, by the payment of a dollar cash, their patrons were allowed to eat as much as they chose, and that the dishes were... well cooked and... generally relatable.105 At the start of the Gold Rush, when agricultural development there was in the area simply not adequate to deal with the massive influx of miners to feed. Food supplies had to be shipped in from the east Coast, making them not only extremely expensive but also unappetizingly "old" by the time they arrived in San Francisco. Fresh vegetables were rare enough to demand a dollar a pound.106 Eggs sold for fifty cents a dozen, uncooked, and were rarely three months old upon arrival. Whiskey that cost a nickel in St. Louis was fifty cents in San Francisco. Even restaurant prices reflected the prohibitive supply costs. But Chinese restaurants managed to escape these, because they had different sources for their food supplies. One visitor learned from a San Francisco police sergeant that the Chinese "buy and use almost nothing made or grown here... Their grocers come from China... Besides, they bring meats and fresh vegetables by steamer from China, and so cheap are they at home, that... they reach here cheaper than they can be grown and sold here." Besides edible, they also imported the traditional utensils and cooking implements to which they were accustomed.107 Others reduced costs by growing their own vegetables, catching their own seafood, and raising their own livestock. Consequently, the Chinese may have preserved these cheap prices about which later writers raved. The best-loved early Chinese restaurants charged patrons only one dollar a plate, on an all-you-can-eat basis. In contrast to this, at the Plaza Delmonico's of that day, a dinner cost from five to fifty dollars, and two and a half dollars was the price of a cheap breakfast.108 Board prices for Chinese restaurants also compared favorably: the charges there were ten to fifteen dollars per week, while other restaurants charged anywhere from twenty to thirty dollars for a weekly board.109 By the mid-1850s the food supply situation had moderated so that other restaurants could also offer inexpensive food, but by then, cheap Chinese food had already become famous.

Even with early Chinese restaurants' price being what they were, in a city of so many eating houses, it is unlikely that even the cheapest establishments could have stayed in business without equally appealing gastronomic offerings. In the case of many of these restaurants, the draw was not that the food was Chinese, but simply that it tasted good. Even so, Chinese-style cooking was a new, often exotic experience for most customers. In most cases, the language barrier between the white patrons and the Chinese waiter or chef meant that regardless of what he ordered, he simply got whatever the cook felt like making. Some feared that asking the true ingredients of a dish might reveal an unpleasant surprise. "Hash" was indeed a venture in the dark, James O'Meara remembers. "To ask questions might have been to repeat the well-known experiences of Caleb Coogan (U.S. Consul at Chinkinow)－'What's this? Wow, wow!' It is possible that this particular anecdote was a joke, but either way, few men were hurt and the waiting
refrained from asking questions. But Chinese cooks soon drew commendation for other styles of cooking besides their native Cantonese, offering their non-Chinese patrons dishes with which they were more comfortable. When Bayard Taylor visited San Francisco in the summer of 1849, he could already say that "the grave Celibates" served "many genuine English dishes" besides just "their choice dishes and curries." 46 By 1851, according to Englishman William Kelly's widely read account, Chinese chefs had already absorbed so much about western cooking that their menu featured "dishes peculiar to each nation," in addition to "their own peculiar soups, curries, and ragouts, which cannot be even imitated elsewhere." 47 Taylor felt that these restaurants' most outstanding offering was not the Chinese "show- down and curry", but their tea and coffee. This sentiment is echoed by Munro, who wrote that "the tea and coffee were the best to be had in the city, and would alone have served to make these restaurants popular with their English-speaking patrons." 48 Munro's comment is telling, for it shows that while many customers appreciated the opportunity to taste Chinese food, most would have continued to eat at these restaurants even if the cooks stopped making their traditional cuisine.

A Changing City

These first Chinatown restaurants would differ greatly from those to come later, for San Francisco in its early days had not yet become a sophisticated, modern metropolis. The Gold Rush brought to the city not only hordes of people, but also the danger and chaos of a population focused only on riches and how to get them: quickly, easily, and illegally, if necessary. Byron writes:

"(San Francisco) had become a byword for all that was shameless and brutal and ruffianly. In open day men were murdered on the streets and at night property was at the mercy of the most reckless bullies on the face of the earth ... the only check they seemed to recognize was the revolver and bowie knife." 49

After a few years of this messy situation, the city finally took action. In 1858, a Committee of Vigilance was formed to mold the chaos into some semblable order. The committee was efficient and uncompromising. "They discharged their duty," George Byron recounts, "with almost inflicting severity." 50 Men were lynched for the slightest offense. Before the decade was over, San Francisco had earned a reputation sufficiently civilized to equal large cities in other parts of the nation, and thus began to attract more middle-class travelers and families.

Changes in San Francisco's social composition also affected Chinatown and its restaurants. The early miners, who were not afraid or ashamed to venture into Chinatown for good cheap eats, began to be replaced by more "respectable" folk, who did not consider Chinese restaurants such viable options for eating out. There may have been multiple reasons for this. They may have been suspicious of Chinatown's rumors and stereotypes, and therefore chose not to take any risks to their health or reputation by eating at its establishments, when there were so many other "nice" restaurants all over the city. The prevalence of Chinese cooks or other domestic help in white households also meant that a curious family could, if they wished, ask their trusted servant to prepare them a dish, and thus avoid having to venture into the mysterious Chinatown. 51

Still, this is not to say whites no longer went to Chinese restaurants. Labours did, for the same reasons the miners before them had gone. The food was still cheap, the portions still generous. And many surely grew fond of the cuisine. For the middle- and upper-classes, while making Chinese food an integral part of their diet may have been unthINKable, there were other motivations for going to Chinese restaurants. Chinese food was an attraction, a curiosity. One tourist raved, "such sweetmeats!—with their delicious charm of forbidden fruit, for were they not made of one knew not what? coloured, as like as not, with barbarian blood?" 52 Not everyone took such relish in eating unknown dishes, but many did enjoy the trialization of sampling a foreign cuisine. This feeling of exoticism was one reason for the development of tourism in the Chinese quarter. As Chinatown became increasingly segregated from the rest of the city, its separatehood became a lure. It may be premature to call this a real tourist industry. 53 But as Chinatown moved unwittingly toward its 1906 destruction, more and more people flocked to the district in all its real or imagined glory.

The Evil, the Exotic

By and large, the Americans we know visited Chinatown were not locals, for much the same reason that locals today avoid tourist traps. The tourists were out-of-towners, mostly middle-to-upper-class white Americans, men and women alike. 54 Many of them enlisted the services of a licensed guide to escort them on their trips to Chinatown. Some of these guides had been or were at the time policemen or detectives who were familiar with the area (which as no doubt comforted the anxious), and several even boasted fluency in Cantonese. 55 The tourists came to Chinatown with certain expectations in mind, based on popular accounts about the area. The most popular of these characterizations of Chinatown fall into two seemingly quite different categories: Chinatown as epiteme of filth and degradation, and Chinatown as a picturesque "little China".

Chinatown for many years maintained a reputation as a vire district, a mysterious and potentially deadly maze of opium dens, gambling houses, and places of prostitution, navigable only by the low and cunning residents of that quarter. While this "vire district" reputation offended some and frightened others, still others came in droves to experience it for themselves. Guidebooks made the most of Chinatown's shady reputation, urging the reader to come "investigate this wriggling mass of humanity, and see them in their underground opium and gambling dens." 56 One group of men, who engaged a policeman to accompany and protect them on their tour, felt so strongly about seeing these vile establishments, that when the gambling houses all refused to admit a group that included a policeman, they dismissed him and went off on their own. 57 Another tourist, a woman from Pennsylvania, felt timid about venturing into "the inner courts of this strange, wicked spot," for "the horrors of the place have been so often ... described that you scarce know what to expect, and are ready for murder, arson, gambling, opium smoking, and robbery ... with beating heart you wait it." 58 Yet even her fear of the place was not enough to deter her from going, and at night. "Shunning parties" started in Chinatown and concluded in the notorious Barbary Coast district. 59 In reality, the "horrors" were anything but, though they must have looked real enough to maintain Chinatown's vice-ridden reputation. Tourists were frequently shown faked scenes in opium or gambling dens, and Chinatown residents were sometimes
hired to stage fights or just lurk menacingly near the tour group. A common "fight" involved two opium-craved Chinese threatening each other with knives over preserved women who'd vowed the "vice district" conditions appalling or frightening. This was the idea of Chinatown as a safe, quaint, picturesque place, a smaller version of China, where one might go as a journey or an escape, or just to "study" or to escape the fact of life among an exotic people. One advertisement recommended that "visitors to San Francisco . . . visit Chinatown and spend an instructive evening studying Oriental life during their stay."10 The educational field trip—though the text did not neglect to mention that the tour also "includes views of opium smoking."11 Other guides also played up the "little China" aspect of the quarter. A 1904 sponsored guidebook promised readers that "to the visitor Chinatown is no doubt the most interesting part of the city" because "the stores, the restaurants and their fascinating occupants, were all Chinese fashion, which must be seen to be appreciated."12 Another guidebook dubbed Chinatown "the Mecca of the tourist, with its twenty thousand . . . inhabitants living as they do in their home land."13 Visitors' accounts show that their experiences conformed with this stereotype—had it not been that the buildings were decidedly American," one woman wrote, "we could easily have imagined ourselves in another land."14 To maximize the exotic aspect of their visit, guides and tourists alike agreed that "night is the time to see Chinatown in all its glory, which means with all its interior lighted. The streets are very brightly lit and . . . there are very few lights . . . give to them a fantastic gale appearance."15 Perhaps because many of the night tours lasted as long as five or six hours, they nearly all included one or more stops at Chinatown restaurants, though restaurants were rarely seen as a destination in themselves.16 Even when tour groups visited restaurants, it was not to get nourishment in the form of a meal, but just to partake of some refreshment in the form of tea and snacks. And though the bulk of the restaurants' clientele was Chinese, it was rare indeed for white tourists to eat at Chinese restaurants side-by-side with Chinese residents.17 They would probably have none wanted to intimate an experience of "little China."18 The restaurants that enjoyed the greatest white patronage were quite different from their predecessors. While the restaurants in the Gold Rush period paid more attention to providing cheap, filling food than to attractive decor (some of the restaurants were no more than teats over crudite furniture), the restaurants were much more elaborate in their construction.19 The most famous and most often described restaurants of this period were designed ingeniously to accommodate their clients without forcing them into contact.10 These restaurants were housed in three- or four-story buildings. On the street or basement level was usually some kind of small shop selling something—like cigars or newspapers, or the cheapest kind of "eating-place" with "sawdust in the floor and no linen on the table" serving "Chinese bachelor workers" or white co black laborers.21 Up one or two flights of stairs, the decor, the cuisine, and the pricing changed, and the clientele became men of moderate means—small shopkeepers and the like.22 On the top floor was the highest-end dining room, the one reserved by the local Chinese elite for banquets and formal gatherings, and the one that served American tourists when they came. This elegant room was a

far cry from the sawdust of the ground floor, decorated as it was with intricate carvings, traditional Chinese motifs in eye-catching golds and reds, and calligraphic scrolls hanging on the walls. Spoons were defined and divided by polished ebony and mahogany partitions and filled with teakwood furniture inlaid with marble, with sparkling chandeliers and Chinese lanterns dangling from the ceiling.23 Customers could listen to musicians playing traditional Chinese instruments.24 Some restaurants that ran the entire depth of the building had ornate balconies at both ends.25 In addition to the dramatic differences in food presentation, the fact that each floor of the building had separate kitchens helped all customers feel that they were not eating in the same restaurant as people who were not in their class (or, perhaps, of the same race). (See Figures 1 and 2 at the end.) 

While the men on the ground floor sat down to full meals, the ladies and gentlemen on the top floor had their introduction to Chinese cuisine by sipping tea and nibbling at snacks and sweet: dried almonds, pickled watermelon rinds, candied quinces, Chinese nuts, little cakes, fruit, and preserved ginger.26 A cup of tea could be had for a quarter or to a half dollar, and the snacks came free with the tea.27 Tourists almost universally enjoyed the tea, and many also praised the "sweetmeats." But few would return to try more adventurous foods, this little introduction having sufficed for them.28 Our desire . . . was more to see the true national cuisine than to indulge in a feast," wrote Mrs. Frank Leslie, wife of the editor of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Magazine.29 Some visitors were curious of Chinese cooking methods. Clarence E. Edwards cautioned that "the average Chinaman" has an "impossible" disregard for dirt and the usual niceties of food preparation.30 Even C.F. (Constance Frederica) Cumming, who found Chinese delicacies "capital," warned that a Chinese baker or pastry cook worked by using his "long thin lips" to "draw" up a mouthful of water, which he then spits forth in a cloud of the finest spray. Having thus dunked the surface evenly and quite to his own satisfaction, he proceeds to roll his pastry.31 Others complained of unfamiliar flavors or ingredients. "They cook chickens and ducks nicely, though queerly, the bird being first split clean in two," reads a magazine article on San Francisco restaurants, "but almost everything has the same taste of nut oil (sesame oil) tickled over all, and few western palates can endure even the most delicate of their dishes."32 Another writer suspected that the "dirty cook in the corner" of the kitchen he visited was "cutting up the identical pieces of pork-fat which form such a stumbling-block to the European debauch in Chinese chow-chow."33 Many who could handle the Chinese snaks served on tours would have found it harder to stomach the truly "exotic" ingredients such as sharks' fins, birds' nests, turtles, eels, snails, or "thousand-year-old" eggs, which would have been served at meals or banquets.34 Chinatown photographer Louis Stilman demonstrated an impressively selective mission of the Chinese cuisine, and tourist fare, and urged his readers to try Chinese restaurants, but his guide (with letters of endorsement by prominent Chinatown leaders) was never published.35 It is quite clear that although white tourists were willing to sample Chinese foods, the Chinese restaurant experience simply did not have enough appeal to westerners to be able to draw in a large body of middle-class non-Chinese patrons, as restaurants had to continue to rely on Chinese patronage for their survival.36
A New Chinatown

In the early morning of 10 April 1906, the city of San Francisco shook in a devastating earthquake that swept through the entire West Coast from Oregon to Los Angeles, and lasted for about 40 seconds. Thousands were killed; property damage was estimated in the hundreds of millions. In the post-quake fires, Chinatown was completely destroyed, burned to the ground. Residents gathered what belongings they could and fled. When the chaos was over, people began to talk of rebuilding, but old prejudices resurfaced. Anti-Chinese groups had been calling for the destruction of Chinatown for years, and many now insisted that Chinatown not be rebuilt. But Chinese merchants and property owners protested. Instead of accepting the city's plan of reconstructing Chinatown in a new location, they demanded that it be rebuilt in the same location or not at all, arguing that the city could not afford to lose the trade brought by in Chinatown. When city officials stalled, Chinese leaders and whites who owned property in Chinatown put more pressure on them. The Chinese brought up their part in the development of San Francisco as an important city, but also held up the threat of moving the community to the nearby city of Oakland, or as far as Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, claiming that all three cities had already offered to take them in. Eventually, the district was rebuilt on nearly the same location.

The publicity generated around "New Chinatown" prompted changes in attitude among both Chinese and whites. Since the Chinese community had been so involved in the reconstruction, many Chinese residents who had previously thought only of China as their home began to feel a stronger connection to Chinatown. Among whites, many began to feel that Chinatown was a real part of their city, not just an unwelcome addition. Some still viewed it as foreign, but it was an acceptable form of foreigners, no longer to be feared or suspected. Many guidebooks praised the clean and up-to-date new Chinatown, though others mourned the departed exoticism. Author Clarance Edwards, in a 1914 guide to San Francisco's restaurants, lamented that while "the rebuilding the district took on a more Chinese aspect," much of the picturesque quality of the old Chinatown has disappeared.

With the cleaning-up of Chinatown and the increased assimilation of the Chinese into the city, moreover, many tourists lost interest. Chinese tourism leaders began to campaign "legitimate tourist" beginning in 1909, but guidebooks no longer pushed visits to Chinatown as aggressively as they had in the years immediately preceding the earthquake, sensing that the drama and mystery took something away from people's curiosity about the area. As late as 1913, one guidebook offered the pithy telling comment that "perhaps the most interesting place in [the new Chinatown] was not the new quarter itself, but the old one— in the form of an "exhibit of [Chinatown] fire relics of the San Francisco disaster," kept by the white wife of a Chinese man."

The feeling of Chinatown was a part of the city helped facilitate greater local interest in shopping or eating there. In addition, several restaurants opened with the specific intention of catering to whites—which meant, more or less, the strategic placement of signs in English advertising "chop suey" and "Chinese noodles."

The noodles may or may not have been authentic, but chop suey would certainly have been a less traditional Chinese restaurant. The origin of the dish is unknown, though stories abound. Some claim that it was invented in the United States, others say that it is just the simplest of Chinese home cooking.

a stir-fry of odds and ends. Whatever its heritage, it was immensely popular from the start. To the chagrin of advocates of authentic Chinese fare, the advent of chop suey corresponded reasonably to the increased success of Chinese restaurants.

But as chop suey became more and more popular, the divide between what white people ate and what Chinese people ate widened. By the time of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915, enough while San Franciscans were eating chop suey that Chinese restaurant food had lost much of its flavor of the exotic, and had started to become just one ethnic cuisine among many.

Once Again, One Cuisine Among Many

The Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) was held in San Francisco from February to December of 1915. Although its ostensible purpose was to celebrate the completion of the tremendous feat of engineering that was the Panama Canal, it really also represented a major triumph of recovery for the city that had been shaken by the 1906 earthquake. The PPIE drew huge numbers of tourists to San Francisco and generated literally staggering amounts of advertising and souvenir material; the official PPIE company released a new "souvenir guide" each month during the exposition's eleven-month run, and equal amounts of similar guides were produced by companies with booths at the exposition: railway companies, local publishers, and others. These guides often featured not only walk-throughs of exposition points of interest but also lists of things to do and places to see in the city of San Francisco—in which Chinatown of course was a part. Chinese food was also available at multiple sites within the exhibition grounds.

Guidebooks and accounts from the PPIE do not mention Chinese food as an individual attraction, but they do entice the wonders of having so many international cuisines all in the same place. The Exposition made food very accessible to visitors. The Palace of Food Products, a division of the Palace of Agriculture, was an important feature at the exposition. In his definitive chronicle of the exposition, Frank Morton Todd explains the Palace's popularity:

Because from the time of the first pudding the proof of that commodity has been the eating of it, and because food can hardly be exhibited in any other way, the Palace of Food Products was a very popular place. Cooking and eating were going on all about, from the time the doors opened until they closed, and odors filled the air that seemed to rob people of reason. Demonstrators were continually handing out samples... and people were continually ingesting them... It made the Palace of Food Products a very nutritious place and one of the most attractive resorts in the grounds.

The constant popularity of this five-and-a-quarter-acre Palace meant the exposure of huge numbers of people to international foods, often for the first time. The Sperry Flour company of California built a mill within the building and employed chefs from eight different nations to work on it, in full public view, baking goods of their native lands using Sperry Flour. According to Todd, this exhibit way "without doubt the most striking" in the Palace. Those who advertised the exhibit were less interested in the actual cuisines, however, than in the attractive concept of foods from many lands, and their descriptions play on established stereotypes. One guide explained that the exhibit would include chefs from Mexico, Japan, and China.
Rusks, Palestine, and India, as well as "an expansive black mammy" to make southern American food, and "a Celestial chef" to produce "the dainty confusions of China." Interested visitors could watch the entire cooking or baking process from start to finish, and printed recipes were available to anyone who wanted them. Popular author Laura Ingalls Wilder attended the Sperry exhibit with her daughter, based her experience in an article for her hometown newspaper, the Missouri Ruralist. In the article, she also gave recipes for Chinese almond cookies and other "international" foods, which she apparently picked up at this exhibit. (See Recipes Appendix #1.) Many Americans thus had their first introduction to ethnic foods through this exhibit, tainting Chinese food as just one of several new cuisines.

Some visitors to the PPIE received a more traditional first taste of China—traditional American, that is. The Food Products Pavilion housed an "attractive" Chinese restaurant, which sold tea and, according to PPIE chronicler Frank Morton Todd, "whatever else you wanted from the Chinese cuisine"—which might have meant nothing more than Chinese soup or noodles. Plain chicken soup was twenty-five cents, soup with pork forty cents, and mushroom soup fifty cents. One could also buy Chinese cakes, sweetmeats, or questionably authentic plain ham sandwiches for ten cents, as well as Chinese-style squid for only sixty cents, tea at various prices depending on quality, and "Mandarin dinners" for a dollar fifty cents apiece. Outside of the Food Palace, the country of China, along with many other countries around the world, also had a section at the exposition, an arrangement of pavilions in traditional Chinese architectural style. Two teahouses flanked the main entrance to the Chinese compound, where visitors could partake of tea and sweetmeats much as Chinatown tourists had been doing for decades. But unlike the foods of Chinatown in past decades, the main entrée offered at these houses were nothing so authentic as to shock western palates. However "Chinese" the rest of the Chinese exhibit may have been, its ten pavilions served Chinese soup for twenty-five to seventy-five cents a plate.

One other area at the exhibition attempted to revive the attractions of old Chinatown. A large area devoted solely to amusement, commonly referred to as "The Zone," featured a "Chinese Village," in which a section known as "the Underground Chinatown" displayed opium smokers along the lines of "vice street" takes decades ago. When the Chinese Commissioner-General objected to the same, it was changed to "Underground Shooting," but the exhibit did not help the change. The Chinese Pagoda also contained a restaurant where both Chinese and American foods were served. But the Zone section as a whole seems to have been one of the less successful areas of the PPIE. Todd remarks dourly, "In say that great fortunes were made and lost on the Zone would be true if any had been made."*8

Conclusion

During this period, Chinese restaurants would never quite become the highly popular, fully integrated, commercially successful institutions they are now. Our modern Chinese restaurants needed the developments of this time period to become what they are today. Without the need for cheap, filling food for Gold Rush miners, perhaps the earliest Chinatown restaurants would have gone unnoticed by the white population. If post-Gold Rush Chinatown had not had a reputation for exoticism, the middle and upper classes may never have ventured within its borders to taste its food. And the period after the 1906 earthquake began introducing Chinese restaurants toward their present situation. They were not yet beloved, but were slowly becoming acceptable.

Mainstream white attitudes toward Chinese food, like mainstream feelings toward the Chinese people, have always been divided by exceptions and contradictions; complexity is an inseparable component of reality. Attitudes toward Chinese food were fairly open during the social chaos of the Gold Rush, reflective of two threads of stereotyped attitudes (exoticism and depravity) during and after the height of anti-Chinese sentiment, and increasingly tolerant after the earthquake brought the Chinese quarter more solidly and permanently into the cultural landscape of San Francisco. It seems difficult to say that the acceptance of Chinese restaurants reflected simultaneous feelings toward the Chinese as a population, or that there was definite movement toward acceptability but this is no simple, straightforward story. Therefore, it is even more difficult to assess whether interest in Chinese food might have helped in bringing about acceptance of the Chinese. Those of us with a deep and passionate reverence for food tend to think that food touches us on such a basic, universal level, that a fundance for the tastes of the foreign cuisine also could survive us to look more favorably upon the people of that region. But this may be too optimistic a hope.

While our ancient connection to food can make us more expansive and tolerant, this attitude reverses easily, and concerns about food can touch on equal and greater fears and anxieties. We in the twenty-first century live in a different world from the anti-Chinese agitators of the 1870s, but some old ways of thinking die hard. The recent outbreak in China of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the subsequent panic has caused some degree of reverberation in attitudes toward Chinese restaurants. Not long after the outbreak, public paranoia about catching the mysterious disease resulted in decreased business for Chinese restaurants in Canada and the United States. And a lengthy New York Times article on the epidemic spotlighted the food markets near Guangzhou, China, for their lack of attention to sanitation and their role of curing food animals such as "snakes, chickens, rats, turtles, badgers, frogs..." and sometimes "...too." It is difficult to read such words and not think back to the attitudes of the last century: the distaste, the hysteria, the fear. But by now, the situation truly is different from what it was one hundred or one hundred fifty years ago—at least where Chinese restaurants are concerned. Despite SARS, the once "exotic" Chinese restaurant appears to be here to stay.
Recipes Appendix

41. Chinese Almond Cookies, from Love & Ingalls's Wilder's article for the Museum Bureau.


Chinese Almond Cookies

4 eggs flat, 1 cup flax, 1 tsp sugar, 1 egg, 1 teaspoon baking powder.

Mix all ingredients thoroughly. Take off pans of dough into an English molder, roll in a smooth round ball, make a depression in the top and place in a 1 inch baking dish. Place 2 eggs, 1 cup sugar, and take a golden brown.

42. Fried Bread Sticks Chinese

This "turn of the century" recipe allegedly comes from the famous Hang For Law Restaurant. It can only guess that this dish has been a very interesting looking dish. Fried bread sticks to that authority. Also, Chinese, are "Fried N. American bird which migrates southward and returns to shell mix, after which it becomes a "fried dough". They are called fried bread sticks with white and darkened as red bread sticks or mini buns.


Bread Sticks 4 to 8 Chinese

Purchased 4 to 8 pieces of Chinese bread sticks from a shop in the Great Avenue (Formerly Depot Street) district. Take the bread sticks to your convenience. In a large, greased pan, heat the bread sticks. Then, add a small amount of sugar, white and darkened as red bread sticks or mini buns.

Bang, 188.

Bread Valley Chino Bus

1 pound pork tenderloin, cut into strips

2 tsp sugar

2 tsp sugar

1 teaspoon garlic pepper

1 teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon of flour

3, 1 teaspoon of salt

4 tablespoons of sugar, to cook's taste, for garnish.

Make the pork in a combination of the sugar, honey, soy sauce, garlic powder, mustard, salt, and chilli sauce for at least 15 minutes. In a pan, grill the pork until it's brown on all sides. Place the pork on a plate and refrigerate. Turn the meat upon the grill to cook the meat until it's brown. Place the pork on a plate and refrigerate. Place the pork on a plate and refrigerate. Place the pork on a plate and refrigerate. Place the pork on a plate and refrigerate. Place the pork on a plate and refrigerate. Place the pork on a plate and refrigerate.

Hang for Law Restaurant, 713 Du Pont Street, San Francisco, ca. 1885.

From the Pacific Spirit: San Francisco Chinatown and its People by Thomas M. Chin.

The Hang for Law Restaurant on 713 Du Pont Street was for years a San Francisco Chinatown institution. It was described as one of the "oldest Chinese restaurants in the city," and was "the finest of the Chinese restaurants in San Francisco." Founded prior to 1852, the Hang for Law was rebuilt after the 1906 earthquake and continued operating until the 1950s, when new owners took over.

The exterior of the Hang for Law clearly shows the "Cranberry" adapted to larger Chinese restaurants, which may be seen in the restaurant's main entrance. The street view of the restaurant in the 1880s shows the restaurant's windows and doors, which appear to be the same as those in the present, with the exception of the windows along the sidewalk.

Grand Dining Room of a Chinese restaurant on Du Pont Street, San Francisco, ca. 1880s.

20

Lisa L. Hiea

Works Cited

Primary Sources


Batte, J. H. "On a Trip in Mexico and California." New York: Bart, 1897.


The City of San Francisco. Prepared for the State Board of Trade. San Francisco: Myself-Reliance, 1903.


Kathy Williams. An Enamorée as California over the Pacific, Rocky Mountain, and Great Salt Lake Ns. London.


Articles


Unpublished Materials


Secondary Sources: Books


Endnotes

1 Report of the Special Committee of the Board of Supervisors of San Francisco on the Condition of the Chinese Quarter and the Chinese in San Francisco, July, 1889 (San Francisco: Chinese Exclusion League, 1890).


4 Ibid., 22.

5 In August 1850, John White Geary, mayor of San Francisco, and other community leaders gathered to publicly recognize and welcome the Chinese, and encourage further immigration from China. Newspapers praised Chinese comportment as "a pattern of sobriety, order and obedience to law." Chinese San Franciscans were also invited to take part in California statehood ceremonies later that same year. Helen Throp Purdy, "Portsmouth Square," Quarterly of the California Historical Society 3.1 (1924): 42-43.

6 Some of these are: the 1852 Foreign Miners' Tax, which was viewed directly at controlling the increasing numbers of Chinese in the gold mines (and which in fact generated at least half of all California state revenues from 1850 to 1870); an 1854 decision in the California Supreme Court which forbade Chinese testimony against whites; and an 1859 act withholding state funds from schools with Chinese students. Him Mark Lai and Philip Choy, Outlines: History of the Chinese in America (1972), 50 quoted in John Kuo Wei Tchen, Gentlemen's Photographs of San Francisco's Old Chinatown (New York: Dover, 1984), 5.

7 Mass meetings and fiesty oratory fueled this anger, but it did have roots in fact. In general, Chinese laborers had a reputation of being more trustworthy and hardworking than other groups, and they were willing to work for wages far lower than what would be acceptable to white American. In one factory in 1874, "young Chinamen" were paid ninety cents per day, ten cents lower than the lowest rate for any class of white worker: "white child laborers" received a dollar a day. In 1875, Chinese were not only not hired under regular conditions but were often shipped in to serve as strikebreakers. Victor G. and Brett de Brey Nee, Longtime Californians (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972), 45.


9 Bryan R. Johnson's short article on the history of Chinese restaurants in the United States and Renju Yu's article on chop suey also acknowledge that some white Americans ate Chinese food in the middle period I have called the "extricating" period, but do not offer a reason for why they might have done so. Bryan R. Johnson, "Let's Eat Chinese Tonight," American Heritage 38.8 (1987): Renju Yu, "Chop Suey: From Chinese Food to Chinese American Food?" Chinese American: History and Perspectives (1987).

10 Early Chinese immigrants called San Francisco "gold mountain" (jin shan) in Mandarin, but gun shan in Cantonese, the language of the earlier immigrants) because of its associations both with the mineral gold and with success and prosperity in general. Today, Mandarin speakers still refer to the city as jiun shan, "jin old gold mountain," with the "old" added because of later gold mines found in Australia.


14 Actual cooLs, according to most definitions of the term, were the most degraded of laborers, working their lives away for others under slave-like conditions. William Heinz's introduction to Gladys C. Haseman, The Chinese in California: A Brief Bibliographic History (Portland, OR: Richard Abel & Co., 1970), 5.


16 White women, however, could (and did) walk through Chinatown without harassment. Many personal accounts document white women's visits to Chinatowns during this time period, and the complete safety of such visits. For example, Theodore Burton describes frequent walks through Chinatown on her way to other parts of town, during which she was never in the least harassed. Max Abram, Theodora Burton, Dorothy Clarke, Dorothy Forde, Edward Freesonaw and Hazel Hubbard, interview by Robert Vanderlip, 17 January and 16 May 1986, tape recording, Bancroft Library, Berkeley, CA.

17 This province includes the port of Canton, so both the people and their dialect are often referred to as Cantonese.

18 Especially where the southeastern regions are concerned, good fortune seems simply to have abandoned China during the mid-nineteenth century. From 1846
to 1850, a series of floods and droughts swept through China, devastating food supplies and encouraging banditry and popular discontent. In 1850, the Taiping rebels took over most of southeast China. From 1854 to about 1864, a group known as the Red Turbans instigated uprisings in Guangdong Province. From 1856 to about 1868, two ethnic groups (the Cantonese and the Hakka) fought each other for territorial supremacy. These desperate conditions, combined with heavy foreign advertising and seductive rumors, prompted many suffering Chinese to immigrate in search of a better life. China, History of the Chinese in CA, 11-12.

86See, Longtime Californian', 17.
87Ibid.
88Lao, "Chinese Restaurant Industry in the United States.'
89As is now well known, laundries were often kept by Chinese, and thus provided another avenue through which early Chinese emigrants were exposed to Chinese people and culture. Many scholars have written on this subject; for more information, see, the Chinese American Museum in Los Angeles (http:// www.calam.org/resource/biblic.htm) recommends Paul Ong, "An Ethnic Trade: The Chinese Laundries in Early California," Journal of Ethnic Studies 4: 8 (1988).
90William Shaw describes a lodging house reeking of cigarette smoke and too many unwashed guests, the ceiling leaking rain, everyone sleeping on the floor side by side. "But though the sleeping accommodation—if such a term may be used—was wretched . . . there was no lack of places of refreshment." William Shaw, Golden Dreams and Waking Realities, Being the Adventures of a Gold-Seeker in California and the Pacific Islands (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1851), 35-39, in California as I Saw It: First-Person Narratives of California's Early Years, 1849-1900, http://memory.loc.gov/amssm/chbbht/chbbm.html.
91Ibid., 39.
100China, History of the Chinese in CA, 62.
101Ibid., 478.
104Munroe, Golden Days of '49, 71.
105Byrner (personal diary), 34.
106Ibid.
107However, so far I have no records of any white employer/s who have made such a request. Byrner says "In almost every family and restaurant may be found a Chinese servant..." Byrner (personal diary), 39.
109It would not be until 1909, after the great earthquake and rebuilding of Chinatown, that the Chinese began to take a more active role in fostering tourism. Light, "From Vice District to Tourist Attraction," 38.
110I have found some accounts of children visiting Chinatown, but these come from locals. I do not know if tourists brought their children.
111Captain William Glennon and his assistant William Lynch advertised a "long experience and thorough knowledge of Chinatown speaking the language of the quarter fluently and further they have an intimate acquaintance with all the leading Chinese of the city." Seeing San Francisco aboard the Sight-Seeing Car. Unpaginated.
112Vest Pocket Memoranda and Directory of San Francisco containing important Information (San Francisco: E.C. Hughes, 1895).
116Light, "From Vice District to Tourist Attraction," 390.
117Seeing San Francisco aboard the Sight-Seeing Car. Unpaginated.
118The City of San Francisco, prepared for the State Board of Trade (San Francisco: Myssell-Rollins, 1900), 27.
119Seeing San Francisco aboard the Sight-Seeing Car. Unpaginated.
"Chinese food was mentioned as a curiosity but not yet recommended for consumption by tourists." B.B. (Bojumma E.) Lloyd, Lights and Shades in San Francisco (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft, 1878), in @sushi, We Are What We Eat, 103.

10 It is not clearly exactly why this was, but very few tourist accounts mention that there were families eating at the restaurants while the tourists were there. One visitor does mention that his tour group saw a Chinese banquet in session, but notes that they could only watch from the balcony and were not taken to eat in the same room. Edward S. Perkins, Wonderland; or, Twelve weeks in and out of the United States (Trenton: MacCraill and Quigley, 1894), 147, in California as I Saw It: First-Person Narratives of California's Early Years, 1849-1900, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/chome.html. I suspect that tourist guides and the Chinese community were mutually careful about not going to restaurants at times when they knew the other would be there.

11 For the test "restaurant," see Haine, Belgium in the Gold Rush, 320. I describe here only the restaurants that were patronized by white tourists, because I have yet to realize evidence about the restaurants that served only Chinese or only laborers of any race.


13 Gertrude Atherton, My San Francisco (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1946), 53.


15 "A Chinese Reception," 446.

16 Norris, Biz, 66.

17 Ibid., 69-70; Edwards, Bohemian San Francisco, 54; J.H. Bates, Notes of a Tour in Mexico and California, 120.


19 Leslie, Calif, 107.

20 Edwards, Bohemian San Francisco, 56.


22 "Restaurant Life in San Francisco," 472.


26 "Chinese patronage" from Theresa A. Sparks, China Gold (Fresno; Academy Library Guild, 1954), 54. The following mention of chopsticks in "The Chinese in San Francisco," 192, is provocative: "The principal drawbacks to the enjoyment of a Chinese dinner are the inability of the Americans to use chopsticks, and the fact that many of the dishes taste of oil or rank oil butter." At the present I do not know how many, if any, Chinese restaurants provided Western utensils.


29 The debunking of an old myth, that the most repulsive of Chinatown's vices were carried out in a vast rabbitlike underground network of dens and tunnels, greatly contributed to the new tolerance for Chinatown. When the earthquake and fire destroyed the buildings of the quarter, exposing their foundations to public view, it became apparent that this nefarious "underground" bed never in fact existed. Stellman, Chinatown, in Strong, ed., Chinatown Photographer, 31.


31 Light, "From Vice District to Tourist Attraction," 38.


33 Edwards, Bohemian San Francisco, 55.

34 Supposedly the name itself means "different pieces"—"a little of this and that." The Mandarin pronunciation is zui wu. Y., "Chop Suey," 89.


36 Ibid., 294-95.


42 This was actually a historically significant exhibit, as it was the "first official revelation of modern China to the modern world," following the 1911 revolution which overthrew the last Qing emperor. (The Qing was the last of China's
(6) Ibid., vol. 3, 386.
(7) Ibid., vol. 3, 386.