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Nassau Edition



SCENES FROM A CHINESE RESTAURANT

BEHIND THE COUNTER OF AN ACCIDENTAL L.I. ICON

BY **SU-JIT LIN-DESIMONE** P.10

BEST OF THE BEST

THE TOP VOTE-GETTERS OF THE BEST OF L.I. 2010 COMPETITION **P.16**

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DRY MARTINO: THE FINAL INSTALLMENT **P.7**



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Scenes From A Chinese Restaurant

BEHIND THE COUNTER OF AN ACCIDENTAL L.I. ICON

BY **SU-JIT LIN-DESIMONE**
PHOTOS BY **ETHAN STOKES**

This is a typical scene in my parents' Chinese restaurant in Selden:

My mom looks up as a man pushes open the foggy plate-glass door of my family's restaurant and makes his way through the maze of small tables that crowd its entrance, rubbing his hands together from the cold.

"Hi, how are you?" she greets him, in a voice that's naturally a little sharp. The choppy Cantonese and singsong Fuzhouhua she speaks have harder tones than Americans are used to hearing, and it bleeds through her speech in contrast to native Mandarin speakers, whose language is more fluid and soft.

The man ignores her as he stands at the glossy vinyl-topped counter, and instead surveys the stock photography of popular Chinese dishes illuminated overhead. After a moment's pondering, he finally responds.

"Yeah, I want a pint of wonton, and gimme a chicken and broccoli dinner." She marks down his selection on the menus stacked right in front of him. "Can I get shrimp fried rice instead?"

"Sure; it's a dollar extra," my mother responds.

"A dollar? Just to change from pork?" the man retorts, attracting the notice of my little brother, bundled up from the chill at one of the tables, who stops coloring to watch.

"Well, shrimp costs more..." my mom weakly replies, over strains of contemporary Chinese pop, seemingly emanating from a pile of boxes my father's arthritic hands stapled together just hours ago.

"That's ridiculous. Other restaurants don't charge more to substitute. What kind



YOU FENG, LONGTIME LONG ISLANDER AND PROPRIETOR OF CHINA EAST, DEMONSTRATES THE HANDS-ON ATTITUDE OF TAKEOUT OWNERS.

of business are you running? I'm paying, like, \$8 for dinner now?"

My father comes to the aid of his wife, wiping his hands on his grease-stained apron as he leaves the scorching heat of the broiler and the line of woks over open flames. With a diplomatic smile on his face, he asks, "Hi, can I help you?"

"Yeah," snarls the man, "charge fair prices." He storms out, presumably to visit

another takeout just one shopping center over. Because Chinese takeouts...they're all pretty much the same on Long Island, right? So similar and virtually interchangeable, they've become as much a Long Island icon as pizza places and bagel shops. Entering one takeout is nearly like entering any other: through a shopping center parking lot, past the sign on the plaza directory simply labeled "CHINESE," as though the

restaurants barely warrant a name.

After all, growing up as one of many Chinese on Long Island, it's an unspoken philosophy that sameness is embraced, a deduction made just by looking at restaurant décor and design. It's safe, formulaic, and time-tested, proven to endure.

One of the last true mom-and-pops in this ever-franchising world, the Chinese of the takeout industry gather unto themselves, staying under the radar and making it no wonder that this sub-community, iconic to Long Island's culture as it is, still remains an enigma—even generations after the first Chinese became American. It's why, after many years, I still remember the names of many of our clients, but they have never known the family behind the counter of their favorite takeout.

New Lease on Life

Behind the carefully placed façade of the restaurant storefront and the seemingly carbon-copied people, are the stories of different lives and different experiences... yet at the core, these stories are often much the same.

"It's a hard life," is the simple consensus of the many takeout owners I've known and spoken to throughout my years of interaction with people in the industry.

So why is it the life chosen by so many recent Chinese immigrants?

The older generation holds the key to this question. My grandma, the no-nonsense, sprightly Fun Sin Lam, retired owner of Yangtze Kitchen in Lake Ronkonkoma, tells me that choices were limited when she immigrated in her early 20s, about 50 years ago. "Your grandpa, he cleaned toilets and mopped floors when he came over. This seemed better," she says over the dialogue of a Chinese soap on CCTV.

Hua Zheng, a seasoned chef—and a relative—at my parents' restaurant, China East in Selden (like many Chinese restaurants in America, ours is owned and operated by family members) offers his own input while casually cleaving a chicken to make fresh broth for the day.

"Back then, you could work in a restaurant or wash clothes at a laundromat... this is good pay for an immigrant—you just can't make as much in other industries," he says.

Many immigrants, given their financial straits, language barriers and other obstacles, found fair pay and less demeaning jobs difficult to secure. When my grandmother Lam and the rest of the family first came to Long Island, eking out an existence was a challenge.

“Your grandpa used to walk to the train

familiarity with the language spoken in the restaurant industry. With this commonality, immigrants at least found solace in a familiar tongue and equality among peers who saw them as people and not unwelcome intruders to a land not their own. Friends of friends and distant relatives provided would-be chefs years of

changed substantially within the past two generations. An unconscious suburban handover of the takeout industry from Cantonese ownership to newcomers from Fuzhou—an eastern province in southern China—has taken place, as American-born Chinese (or ABCs in “Chinglish” slang) leave the hazardous restaurant business to pursue

in a harsh world as it is a character trait associated with immigrant generations—although it does tend to weaken as the luxuries of American culture intermingle with the old-school “work-or-die” mentality.

It’s a double-edged sword, and why the Chinese takeout industry may be an endangered species of a dying American breed: the family-run mom-and-pop. Although eternal optimists like my father believe that there will always be more fortune-seekers looking to fill this niche of what has become part of Long Island’s heritage, scads of second-generation Chinese-Americans escape the brutality of a blue-collar industry, leaving behind the traditions of language, way of life, and family recipes that are left to crumble in the dust.

A Life Unexpected

A career often forcibly thrust on Chinese immigrants for lack of better choices, it’s commonly assumed that takeout owners and their

help do this line of work for lack of other skills. More frequently, it’s for lack of other options. It takes a certain amount of sheer gumption to leave your home country to start anew from nothing, and it’s not without intelligence and acquired business acumen that these entrepreneurs survive.

My father, You Feng Lin, arrived on New York’s shores when he was only 18, one of very few to have managed a student visa to the States from Communist China. A handsome, popular, athletic scholar with a flair for the art of Chinese calligraphy and an engaging smile, he never pictured himself 30-odd years into a vocation he now embraces, even as the long hours of standing on his blistered feet take their toll on his aging body.

“I came to America to go to college, to study,” he says at his cutting board, scarred



SOLE CHEF HUA ZHENG OF CHINA EAST PREPARES CHICKEN AND BROCCOLI IN A TRADITIONAL HEAVY WOK AND NEATLY PACKAGES THEM FOR DELIVERY.

station every day from a house we shared with other families, to work and bring us imported groceries,” she reminisces, pride and pain mingling in her voice.

However, having come from Hong Kong, a Cantonese city, my grandmother’s transition was softened by her family’s

apprenticeship and rigorous training, and candidates moved up from washing dishes in the city to ownership in Long Island—the path taken by my grandfather, my father, and countless cousins and family friends, and the one many new Chinese-Americans still travel down today.

Though *that* tradition remains the same, the Chinese-American sub-community on Long Island has actually



a life that doesn’t involve backbreaking labor and frequent disrespect.

Spurred by an ingrained belief that education is the only ticket out of a demanding vocation, where 70 to 80 hour workweeks are the norm and holidays are just another day at work, the legendary, stereotypical work ethic lives on, regardless of the language change behind the counter. This work ethic is as much a survival tool

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AFTERNOON ROUTINES CONSIST OF COOKING LUNCHES AND PREPPING FOR A HOPED-FOR DINNER RUSH.

fingers deftly slicing fresh-roasted pork. As a youth, he had aspirations of studying physics—but like many other young Chinese immigrants, ended up studying the finer points of his native cuisine instead.

Others, like my uncle, Man Cheng of Great Wall in Garden City, found it more or less an unavoidable fate. One of the children of restaurateur parents, he came to the States as a precocious child and grew up to be a sharp-witted adult looking for a different way of life. A graduate of top-tier Vanderbilt University's competitive engineering program, he left college only to realize that opportunities were few and far between for minorities in the 1980s. After several joking quips, he finally points out: "Own your own business and you at least master your own destiny."

Love Hurts in Real Life

Most takeout owners I've ever encountered regret the loss of their personal dreams, personal lives—when they have an idle moment to think about it—and ultimately, their health, as years of hard labor catch up to them, but the majority of the ones I've known also take unmistakable pride in what they do, even if it wasn't their first career choice.

"I was lucky," my dad explains, "since I already liked cooking. Not everyone does, and for them, this life is even harder."

Because of my father's passion, his

burden comes with a sense of satisfaction. "I only get the freshest ingredients," he boasts. "I focus on combining flavor and nutrition."

Like many of his friends, my father does things the old-fashioned way: butchering his own pork, chicken and beef to ensure quality; shelling and deveining each shrimp by hand; creating signature sauces from scratch; and roasting, wrapping and prepping everything in-house. He roasts pork and spare ribs with the same recipes passed down by my grandfather, Tik Shun Cheng, and marinates them with the same care; pinches shut doughy dumplings with carefully seasoned fresh-ground meat individually; and mixes sauces to order with nary a measuring cup in sight.

But for as low as \$4.99 a plate, why expend so much effort?

As my father says: "I've always fed my own kids what I feed my customers, so I feed my customers like family."

That extra mile can also be interpreted as part of a subconscious movement in defense of Chinese cuisine. Americanized Chinese food has come under fire in years past for the use of fats and MSG (a much-maligned seasoning also found in flavored potato chips and used at fast food chains). However, Chinese chefs such as my cousin and father feel that the negativity is undeserved, their native dishes usually being vegetable and lean protein laden, and never

fried in harmful shortening as franchises are wont to do. It upsets many takeout owners and cooks that the reputation for their cuisine has declined, having invested their entire lives to running their restaurants and keeping customers happy.

On a regular basis, hard-working chefs like my father, uncle and their community of friends suffer prejudice against their techniques and field ignorant and snide remarks about ingredients, which can be especially damaging to animal lovers, as insulting cat and dog comments are

made. Stress is added by complaints that in any other type of restaurant would seem ludicrous.

However, 11-hour days of manual labor and emotional cost aside, one of the biggest job-related risks actually occurs outside of the takeout.

Life on the Road

The job of a delivery driver has historically been a harsh and underappreciated one, regardless of whom they're delivering for. Today's takeouts

are all expected to deliver, but the danger isn't just about driving under treacherous conditions and tight time constraints.

Deliverers are forced to tread especially cautiously in light of escalating gun-related violence across New York State. According to the latest statistics from the NYS Division of Criminal Justice Services, robberies involving firearms reported outside of New York City are up 5 percent—from 2,688 in 2007 to 2,823 in 2008.

Besides robberies, other risks to delivery personnel include muggings,

racially provoked pranks, kidnappings and even murder—all of which seem pointless, since money is often left behind, as in the case of Fangwang Chen, a 31-year-old Chinese food deliveryman shot in the head while delivering a \$22 order in the Bronx in 2008.

"The attackers didn't even take Mr. Chen's money, which makes this an even more outrageous and senseless act," Jimmy Cheng, president of the Fujian American Association, told the *New York Daily News* at the time.

More recently, Gao Ji, a deliveryman for Dah Wah Chinese Kitchen in Wyandanch, was beaten, robbed, blindfolded, handcuffed and imprisoned by two teenagers while delivering food in November 2009.

Luckily, Ji escaped with his life.

A Life Not Squandered

Not all of the community views the Chinese-Americans in their neighborhoods as interlopers, though, and the majority of takeout clientele demonstrate kindness and courtesy to their local restaurateurs, seeing the guy behind the counter for what he really is—a fellow man. A sense of contribution and relationships with regulars, fostered throughout the years, gives takeout owners like my father a sense of connection to their adopted country, as they watch the children of their customers grow up, and vice versa.

Like any classic mom-and-pop, kids of a certain age are a common sight and just as iconic as the establishments they help out at, busily contributing to their families and learning life skills, as my sisters and I, and now, my brother, have done. The reasoning: It's preferred to keep their youngsters at their sides instead of leaving them unsupervised or as latchkey kids; the companionship also better makes up for the long hours at work and ensure that they're not absentee parents in their children's lives.

After all, it's these children—children like me, whose past includes studying literature or playing Game Boy in the corner—that are truly the heart of takeout culture, that make the owners feel that their lives were lived with purpose. The parents carry on, but the next generation is why they do what they so laboriously

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YUNG H. CHENG AND YOU FENG LIN ARE ONE OF MANY HUSBAND-WIFE TAKEOUT TEAMS ON LONG ISLAND, LIVING ICONS IN OUR ISLAND'S HERITAGE.

do every day. The first Chinese-American generation endures the hardship, the shouted racial slurs and embarrassing exchanges, long days, and lack of personal life for meager compensation—and considers it a fair price to pay if their children make the most of the Land of Opportunity.


"We work for our kids, so they can have a chance at a better life," my uncle, Man Cheng, asserts. My father adds: "We do this so that they can choose not to."

My uncle has bittersweet nostalgia for the industry that has supported our family for what is now two generations.

"It's the lifeblood that gives us a foothold, a field that's non-threatening because it doesn't take jobs away from anybody. Instead, we add value where we go, actively contributing to where we own businesses," he says.

Although life in a takeout is a challenging one, fraught with worry and built on sweat equity, like any family business in America,

it's not without its rewards.

"When I get compliments on the cooking I love to do, or when a customer is too tired to cook and I can give them fresh, healthy food for their family, it makes me feel good," my dad says. "And as I put my kids through college, so that they can choose their own future...well, that makes everything worth it." 

Su-Jit Lin-DeSimone is a prodigal daughter of Long Island, one of Oakdale's newest residents by way of New Orleans. A shameless food junkie and the former food editor for Where Y'at Magazine, her contributions can also be found in many other Louisiana publications, including St. Charles Avenue, New Orleans Bride, Louisiana Cookin', and various travel guides for the Crescent City, including the "Hungry City" series. She is a freelance writer for Examiner.com's Long Island Historical Landmarks section as well as TheVicariousFoodWhore(.com).

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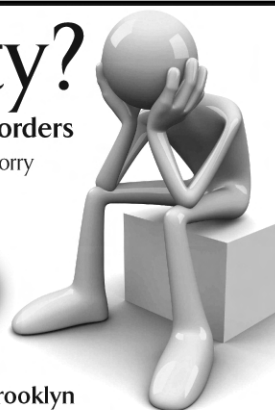
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