



The  
**Fortune  
Cookie**  
Chronicles

Adventures in  
the World of  
Chinese Food

Jennifer 8. Lee

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*For Mom and Dad, who left their homeland so their children could follow their passions, and  
for all the other moms and dads who have done the same*

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*Do the Chinese eat rats? This has always been a mooted question. Geographies contain the assertion that they do, and an old wood-cut of a Chinaman peddling rodents, strung by the tails to a rack which he carried over his shoulders, is a standard illustration of the common school atlases of 10 years ago. A large portion of the community believe implicitly that Chinamen love rats as Western people love poultry.*

—*New York Times*,  
August 1, 1883  
“Mott Street Chinamen Angry.  
They Deny They Eat Rats.”

# PROLOGUE

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March 30, 2005

It's the same televised routine twice a week, Wednesdays and Saturdays, at 10:59 P.M. central time. And on March 30, 2005, everything was as always. The host introduced the drawing. The white balls, air-popped, rolled out one by one from the machine: 28, 39, 22, 32, 33. The final ball, red, from another machine, plopped down and slowly spun to a stop: 42. The six balls took fifty-six seconds to appear, fifty-six seconds that sent shocks through the lottery system across the country.

After the drawing, with the cameras turned off, Sue Dooley, a former preschool teacher, helped maneuver the two machines back into the vault. Sue was one of the two Powerball staff members who took turns overseeing the drawings. One of the frontline soldiers of the Powerball security, she'd been hired, in part, because working with children had made her good at bossing people around. She was the one who'd dropped the balls into the wispy churn of the machines that night, climbing up onto a milk crate because, at five foot two, she needed help to reach that high.

Lotteries live and die by their integrity. Fraud and scandal have led to crackdowns on American lotteries in two waves of moralistic prohibition—once before the Civil War and again before the turn of the twentieth century. In an infamous case, in 1823 Congress created a lottery to raise money to beautify Washington; the organizers ran away with the money. By the late nineteenth century, Congress had passed a restriction on transporting lottery tickets across state lines, which to this day hinders the creation of a national lottery.

But in the late 1980s, increasingly dependent on lotteries to avoid raising taxes, states figured out a way around the national ban. They found they could legally form coalitions of state lotteries to form megalotteries, whose larger jackpots would attract greater ticket sales, as long as the states sold only state-branded tickets within their borders. Lotteries were akin to insurance companies—taking in lots of little flows of money that would statistically cover big payouts at some profit to the institution. Megalotteries are somewhat analogous to reinsurance firms, in that the states can spread the risk of large payouts among one another. The megalotteries proved to be so popular, raising billions of dollars for education and infrastructure, that by 2005 only a handful of states abstained from either Powerball or its chief rival, Mega Millions.

With billions of dollars depending on the security of Powerball, there were numerous precautionary measures in place. At every drawing officials waited until the last minute before they decided which two of the four Powerball machines they would use. Copies of the ticket sales data were kept in multiple locations. The vault housing the machines was padlocked twice and secured with numbered plastic seals that could be used only once. Two keys were needed to open the vault, kept separately by the Powerball staff and by an auditor.

Satisfied that everything was secure, Sue put the vault key into her purse and drove the five-mile stretch of empty Des Moines highway from the studio to wait for the results. The Powerball headquarters had been located in the Des Moines area in part because it was neither the East nor the West Coast. "No one cares if it's located in Iowa. No one's feelings are hurt," one Powerball

administrator explained. Iowa is as inoffensive as it is flat.

~~That night had been a low-key, uneventful drawing, and Sue figured she could be in bed by~~ midnight. The jackpot was only \$84 million. Once, that figure would have generated some excitement but Powerball administrators had discovered the phenomenon of jackpot fatigue: players needed ever larger jackpots to entice them into buying tickets in large numbers. The threshold for an attention-grabbing megajackpot had once been \$10 million; it now stood at \$100 million. The \$84 million jackpot had generated only \$11 million in ticket sales, on the modest end of a normal lottery. Based on the ticket sales, officials expected to get three or four second-place winners—people who'd picked the first five of the six numbers correctly—and perhaps one jackpot winner.

Around 11:15 P.M., Sue pulled up to the Powerball headquarters, which was tucked into an anonymous office complex in a stretch of grass off Interstate 35. It was hard to believe that the low-slung bland strip mall contained a twelve-person office that oversaw some \$3 billion a year in annual sales—enough that if those sales belonged to a publicly traded company, it would be in the Fortune 1000. The staff had kept the office purposely nondescript, with none of the glitzy logos and neon lights that often marked state lottery headquarters. In fact, the office had originally lacked any sign whatsoever indicating that it served as Powerball headquarters, but when senior citizens in search of nearby medical suppliers had kept coming in to ask for respirators and medications, the staff had stuck four small letters on the front door: MUSL, the contrived abbreviation for “multistate lottery.”

Sue turned on her computer and waited for the results to come in from the various states. Before the prizes could be doled out the next morning, all the numbers had to be checked and rechecked.

*This can't be right*, she thought as she saw the first tallies trickle in. Statistically they had expected only 3.7 second-place winners, but the states were reporting huge numbers, so large that no one had ever seen anything like this in the history of American lotteries.

*Arizona: 11*

*Pennsylvania: 13*

*South Carolina: 14*

*Tennessee: 12*

*Indiana: 10*

Against the odds, states that normally had almost no second-place winners were coming in with more than had been predicted for the entire drawing.

*Rhode Island: 5*

*Minnesota: 4*

*Connecticut: 4*

Even Montana, with its sparse population of 900,000, had a winner. Across all the states there were 110 winners. Sue checked to see if they were concentrated in any way, but the tickets had been sold by different vendors from different computer systems across different states. None of the tickets had been computer-generated, meaning the players had independently chosen the numbers themselves.

*What was going on?* She grabbed the phone.

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Chuck Strutt, the Powerball director, was a mild-mannered man who wrote poetry in his spare time. But sometimes he lost momentum. His last book of published poetry had included a number of blank pages, in jest.

Chuck was sitting at home when his phone rang; when he heard what was happening he felt a shiver. Occasionally, Powerball would get four or five times the number of expected second-place winners, and once they'd even had seven times the predicted figure. But their accountants and statisticians had calculated the odds and found that these occurrences were flukes of chance; distributions could sometimes put you in those ranges. Nearly thirty times the number of expected winners, however, was well outside any statistical probability.

Not only that, but 104 of the 110 winners had picked the same sixth number, 40, instead of the Powerball number of 42. It would have been better had the winners all matched the final Powerball number of 42. In that case, under the lottery's fine-print rules, the jackpot would simply have been split among the 110 people. But Powerball's second prize and under were all fixed amounts, meaning their liability was theoretically unlimited: the more winners, the more Powerball had to pay out. Foreseeing this, Powerball had legally protected itself in scenarios that could generate an outlandish number of winners. For example, the most popular sequence played in Powerball was 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, followed by 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30. If the winning numbers resembled either of those, there would be thousands upon thousands of lower-place winners, as had happened in the Massachusetts Lottery once when the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 10 were drawn. There would also have been thousands of winners if 9, 1, 1 had come up in any of the pick-3 lotteries in the days after September 11. So on the back of each Powerball ticket, written in small print, are the words "In unusual circumstances, the set prize amount may be paid on a pari-mutuel basis, which will be lower than the published prize amounts." Powerball also kept a reserve fund of \$25 million, of which \$20 million would be drained by the unexpectedly high number of \$100,000 and \$500,000 winners in that night's drawing.

Chuck and Sue brainstormed about possible causes. An episode of *Lost*, the hit ABC television show, had featured a lottery number that had simultaneously brought jackpots and misfortune to its winners. Sue, a lifelong fan of *The Young and the Restless*, recalled that a recent plotline had involve a \$1 million Powerball ticket dispute between Kevin and Michael. Perhaps one of the widely syndicated lottery columnists had suggested those numbers.

That night, Chuck barely slept. *What if this is fraud?* he wondered. *Had someone managed to gain the system?*

Some seven hundred miles away, in Nashville, the next morning, Rebecca Paul came to work puzzled by the unusual spike in Powerball winners. Rebecca had run four state lotteries, including her current position as the head of Tennessee's. She was intrigued by the number of winners in Tennessee alone: not only did they have the jackpot winner, they also had twelve second-place winners.

With more than twenty years of experience under her belt, Rebecca was one of the most respected veterans and one of the first women in the insular, tight-knit community of state lottery officials. Her office wall featured a collection of different magazine issues through the years—all with her photo on the cover.

She had started down the path of state lotteries as a beauty pageant queen when as Miss Indiana

She had started down the path of state lotteries as a beauty pageant queen which, as Miss Indiana, she had placed in the top five in the Miss America pageant with a gymnastics tumbling routine. That honor had led to a job as a part-time weather girl on a local television station, which she later parlayed into a position in sales and marketing. In 1985, she got a call from the Illinois governor, James Thompson, who asked her to start the state lottery. She had no experience with lotteries, she said; he told her he wanted her anyway. She knew how to sell things, and lotteries were in essence about marketing—selling people their dreams. Even as a lottery official, she retained one prominent vestige of her beauty pageant days: her hair, which could be best described by the word “bouffant.”

Rebecca sat down at her desk with a Powerball form and colored in the winning numbers with a purple felt-tip pen to see if any patterns emerged—a cross or a diagonal or a diamond—but none did. She contacted the head of security of the Tennessee Lottery with instructions to start looking for any evidence of fraud.

But at 8:30 A.M., Tennessee already had a winner waiting for the prize office to open its doors, a great-grandfather named James Currie who worked the night shift as a system operator at Pinnacle Foods, the parent company of the Duncan Hines and Aunt Jemima brands. He had made the two-hour drive from Jackson, Tennessee, with his sister, Sherion; he dreamed of buying a Cadillac with his money.

The staff, as was customary, asked how he had selected his winning numbers.

“From a fortune cookie,” he replied. He had always used birthday and anniversary dates, but he’d realized that they weren’t getting him anywhere. So a few months earlier he’d switched to a fortune cookie number he had obtained from a Chinese takeout restaurant near his home called Dragon 2000. He’d had a good feeling about those numbers and had been playing them for three months.

In Idaho at 11:18 A.M. another winner reported using a fortune cookie number. Same with Minnesota at 12:06 P.M. and Wisconsin at 12:09 P.M. One winner had even kept the original fortune: “All the preparation you’ve done will finally be paying off.” On the bottom were the numbers that so many Americans had taken an inexplicable faith in: 22, 28, 32, 33, 39, 40.

The ritual of Chinese food in America had sent the twenty-nine-state Powerball on a collision course with fortune cookies. The fortune cookies had prevailed.



# American-Born Chinese

There are some forty thousand Chinese restaurants in the United States—more than the number of McDonald's, Burger Kings, and KFCs combined.

Tucked into exurban strip malls, urban ghettos, and tiny midwestern towns that are afterthoughts for cartographers, Chinese restaurants have spread nearly everywhere across America—from Abbeville, Louisiana, to Zion, Illinois, to Navajo reservations, where, in a distinction shared with only a handful of businesses, they're exempted from tribe-member ownership. Old restaurants, clothing stores on Main Streets, and empty storefronts have been reborn as Chinese restaurants. The Washington, D.C., boardinghouse where John Wilkes Booth and his accomplices planned Abraham Lincoln's assassination is now a Chinese restaurant called Wok n Roll.

Chinese restaurants have long been a weekly or monthly ritual for many Americans.

As far back as 1942, chop suey and chow mein were added to the U.S. Army cookbook. Jonas Salk, while developing the polio vaccine in the early 1950s, would eat his lunch at Bamboo Garden on Forbes Avenue, near the University of Pittsburgh, nearly every day. He always ordered the same thing: a bowl of wonton soup, an egg roll, rice, and chicken chow mein made with homegrown bean sprouts—all for \$1.35.

Chinese restaurants are sought out for special events, too. In 1961, before the Freedom Riders left for the first fateful bus ride through the Deep South to protest segregation, a number of that company met for dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Washington. "Someone referred to this meal as the Last Supper," said John Lewis, then a young theology student from rural Georgia, later a congressman. In October 1962, emissaries for John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev met secretly at Yenching Palace in the Cleveland Park neighborhood of Washington to work out a solution to the Cuban missile crisis. Chinese restaurants were neutral territory.

Nearly everyone has a go-to Chinese restaurant. Dwight Eisenhower ordered his chicken chop suey from Sun Chop Suey Restaurant on Columbia Road in Washington, D.C., for decades. When he became president, the FBI investigated every employee at the restaurant (just as a precaution). Likewise, Peking Gourmet Inn outside Falls Church, Virginia, had to install a bulletproof glass window near table N17. That is where the Bushes, both father and son, sit at their favorite Chinese restaurant.

It's not surprising that the Powerball officials heard the same tale repeated over and over again across the twenty-nine states, from coast to coast. The stories were different. The stories were the same. It was takeout. It was sit-down. It was an all-you-can-eat buffet. It happened years ago, months ago, earlier that day. It was dinner. It was lunch. It was where they ate every week with coworkers. It was on a family vacation to a neighboring state. The number had been in a fortune cookie they had cracked open themselves. The number had been on a fortune found while cleaning a car or waiting at a convenience-store counter. But the one thing all those stories had in common was the starting point:

meal from a Chinese restaurant that had ended with a fortune cookie.

The lottery story ran in *AM New York*, the commuter daily I picked up one morning to read on the New York City subway. The one-paragraph article said the March 30 Powerball had been pummeled with an unusually large number of winners, 110 in all, largely because of fortune cookies.

I perked up.

I am obsessed with Chinese restaurants. Like many Americans, I first discovered them in my childhood. I grew up during the 1980s on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where Broadway is sometimes called Szechuan Alley for the density of Chinese restaurants along it. My parents had first settled in the area when my father was studying for his Ph.D. at Columbia University; because my mom never learned to drive, our family never moved out of the city. As a result, I was raised not too far in time and place from many of the changes that revolutionized Chinese food in the United States.

My siblings and I are known as ABCs, American-born Chinese. We're also known as bananas (yellow on the outside but white on the inside) and Twinkies (which has more of a pop-culture but processed ring to it). There are a lot of inside jokes among immigrant families. My family even has one embedded in the children's names. My parents named me Jennifer; my sister is Frances; my brother is Kenneth. If you string together our first initials, you get JFK, which, my parents tease, is the airport they landed at when they first came to America.

My parents arrived in the United States courtesy of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, which opened the doors to educated and skilled workers like my father and dramatically shifted the balance of immigration away from Europe. Countries like Taiwan, South Korea, and India stood ready to offer the best products of their meritocratic educational systems.

My mom took care of the home and did most of the cooking, while my father worked on Wall Street. But like many families in our area, we'd order Chinese takeout when she was too busy to cook. As a girl I would run down to the neighborhood Chinese restaurant with a crisp twenty-dollar bill in my pocket. Barely tall enough to see past the counter, I'd solemnly order dishes from the big white menu, using the Chinese names that my mom had carefully taught me. (Without exception, the vocabulary words that Chinese-American kids—and immigrant kids in general—know best are almost always related to food.)

Then I'd lug home my treasure: a plastic bag of steaming, generously stuffed trapezoidal white cartons. Our family gathered around the table as we pulled out the boxes, each one bursting with the potential of anonymity. Out came chopsticks, the little clear packets of black soy sauce, and crunchy fortune cookies. Each untucking of the lid released a surge of aroma and a sight to spark the appetite. Would it be the amber-colored noodles of roast pork lo mein? The lightly sweetened crispiness of General Tso's chicken nestled in a bed of flash-cooked broccoli? Or the spicy red chili oils of mapo tofu? Virginal white rice would be doused with steaming sauces, the mingling of simmered soy sauce, piquant vinegar, slivers of ginger, and fragrant garlic. The Chinese food begged to be mixed together, sweet, sour, salty, and savory flavors layering upon one another. They tasted even better the next day when the leftovers were reheated. We'd break open the fortune cookies for the message inside, rarely eating the cookie. The cheerfully misspelled, awkwardly phrased, but wise words of the Chinese fortune cookie sages gave me comfort. My parents' bookshelves were lined with Chinese philosophical classics like Confucius's *Analects* and the *I Ching*. For a girl who could not untangle the thicket of Chinese characters in those opaque and mysterious books, the little slips of insight

represented the distillation of hundreds of years of Chinese wisdom.

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Then came a shocking revelation.

Fortune cookies weren't Chinese.

It was like learning I was adopted while being told there was no Santa Claus. How could that be? I had always believed in the crispy, curved, vanilla-flavored wafers with the slips inside.

It was through reading *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan when I was in middle school that I first became aware of the mass deception. In one tale, two Chinese women find jobs in a San Francisco fortune cookie factory, where one is utterly perplexed when she learns that the cookies and their cryptic messages are considered Chinese.

I asked my mom if she had known all along that fortune cookies weren't Chinese. She shrugged. She said when she first got to the United States from Taiwan, she'd assumed they were from Hong Kong or mainland China. China is a large and fractured place. She had never been to mainland China. Neither had I.

The Americanness of fortune cookies hit home a few years later, in a 1992 front-page story in the *New York Times* with the headline "A Fortune Will Greet You in an Endeavor Faraway." The article announced that Brooklyn-based Wonton Food was to sell fortune cookies in China. It added that in Hong Kong, the cookies were already being marketed as "genuine American fortune cookies."

The Americanness of fortune cookies should have served as a hint for what else I was to learn about Chinese food. Only now, looking back, do I find it obvious. As a child, I never considered it strange that the food we ordered from Chinese restaurants didn't quite resemble my mom's home cooking. My mom used white rice, soy sauce, garlic, scallions, and a wok. But she never deep-fried chunks of meat, succulent and soft, then drenched them with rich, flavorful sauce. She cooked with ingredients that were pickled and dried and of strange shapes and never appeared on the takeout menu. Her kitchen was filled with jars and bags of all sorts of unusual things—white fungus, red beans, pungent black mushrooms, porous lotus roots. She used preserved foods: eerily translucent thousand-year-old eggs, spicy pickled bamboo shoots, vinegared mustard greens. Her dishes involved bones and shells—sweet-and-sour ribs, boiled garlic shrimp, chicken feet.

At the open seafood storefronts of Manhattan's Chinatown, my parents would pick through the bins of live crabs, sluggish but still menacing to a wide-eyed six-year-old girl. We would haul the writhing creatures back home in thin plastic bags and deposit them in the kitchen sink. We would steam the life out of them in my mother's decade-old wok, their waving pincers gradually slowing to halt as their bodies became progressively red and orange. The Chinese holistic approach to crab was not the sanitized, edited version of Red Lobster. Our crabs burst forth with weird colors and textures. The goopy orange paste, called *gao*, was the best part, my mom told me.

My parents were always annoyed when we went to the "real Chinese restaurants" in Flushing, Queens, and I asked for my favorite dishes, beef with broccoli and lo mein. They inevitably ordered dishes that had eyeballs, like steamed whole fish with ginger and scallions. For a girl who was more familiar with the pleasantly geometric fish-fillet sandwiches of her elementary school cafeteria, the piscine servings were unnerving. Instead of eating this fish that had been merrily swimming in the tank just minutes before, I turned my chopsticks to the comforting crisp green broccoli, tender slices of beef, and soft amber noodles. My siblings and I turned up our noses at the bitter hot tea. We either added sugar or insisted on having cups of ice water. My parents were exasperated. They had thrown

their children into a pool of cultural heritage in America: Chinese Saturday school, Chinese camp, Chinese chorus, Chinese martial arts, and Chinese folk dancing. (Perhaps 90 percent of all Chinese-Americans girls have twirled a silk ribbon at some point in their lives.) Yet on the issue of food, our taste buds were firmly entrenched. They groused about our inability to appreciate “real Chinese food”

I never really understood what “real Chinese food” meant until I went to China. Years of study in Chinese Saturday school, daily classes in college, and a semester in Taiwan had opened up the world of the dense opaque characters of my mother’s books. China was a foreign country to me, but one where I happened to speak the language. Ostensibly I spent my fellowship year studying at Beijing University, but in reality I was educating myself by traveling cross-country from the deserts of Inner Mongolia to the lakes of Sichuan to the peaks of Tibet. Alongside the Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, and KFCs that have penetrated China’s core, I encountered a variety of cuisines that were more akin to my mom’s cooking than the ones of America’s Chinese restaurants: more vegetables, less meat, less oil. I began spitting bones out onto the table and drinking watery soup after a meal to wash it all down. I even drank hot tea—no fortune cookies to be found. I began to roll my eyes at the takeout Chinese food I had grown up with; it wasn’t authentic.

But as interesting as the local food was to me, I was interesting to the locals. You could see their minds processing: She looks perfectly Chinese. She speaks Chinese perfectly. But something is amiss. Perhaps it was the way I moved, the way I laughed, the way I dressed. I wasn’t, they felt, of China. Hong Kong? Taiwan? they asked.

“I’m American,” I explained.

Their reply: “No, you’re Chinese. You were just born in America.”

I was not an American to them. I was an American-born Chinese. Maybe the same thing was true of Chinese food back home: It’s Chinese. It just happened to be born in America.

Or maybe the truth was closer to this: It’s American. It just looks Chinese.

That morning, as I read about the Powerball winners on the subway, people swarmed around me as usual. I looked at them and thought about how many of them had eaten Chinese food in the last week, how many had read their fortunes and added “in bed,” how many kept a favorite fortune folded in the wallet. How many might have played the lottery with their lucky numbers? I had never played the lottery, but I was entranced by the idea that so many people took the same leap of faith and played the identical numbers from a fortune cookie. Right there on the subway, I decided to follow those fortune cookies back to their source—from the winners back to the restaurants, back to the factory and the people who write the fortunes, back to the very historic origins of fortune cookies. Following the Powerball fortune cookie trail, I believed, was something that would help me unravel the nagging mysteries of Chinese food in America. For the story of the Powerball trail was the story of Chinese food in reverse. I’d fallen into an obsession with Chinese food—in a way that my friends and parents

actually found rather worrisome, given my hyper-rational nature. Charitably, you could describe me as “passionate” about Chinese food. Passions seem lively and motivating, while obsessions sound dark and vaguely deviant. But the line between passion and obsession is a wobbly one. Obsessions pick us more than we pick them. They control us more than we control them. Why do people become obsessed with bird-watching, solving mathematical proofs, making money? Maybe they’re trying to complete themselves, to fill a void, whether it be through beauty, truth, or security.

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Within hours, I identified one of the Powerball restaurants, Lee's China, in Omaha, Nebraska. I looked up the number online and dialed. A woman picked up.

I started out by introducing myself in Mandarin Chinese.

I received the telephone equivalent of a blank stare.

I switched to basic Cantonese.

More blankness.

I tried English.

The woman cut me off. "We're Korean," she said in a thick accent. Then she hung up.

Over the next year I compiled a list of the Powerball restaurants and winners, drew up an itinerary, and began a consuming journey that crisscrossed the country. By the end, I had visited forty-two states, with nearly all of the Powerball states among them. I had driven cars until bugs had splattered across my windshield like egg whites dropped in soup. I'd taken red-eye flights, pulled all-nighters driving on interstate highways, stewed on buses for twenty-three consecutive hours, and crashed in the relative air-conditioned comfort of Amtrak trains.

I must pause to acknowledge my Garmin GPS machine, which is one of the best dollar-for-dollar investments in happiness I have ever made. If you simply have faith in it, you can let go of your worries. You may not understand why it is telling you to do whatever it is telling you to do, but you trust that it will get you to your final destination. Like religion.

If you don't own a Chinese restaurant, you can get in on the action by investing in the stock PFCB—P. F. Chang's China Bistro, a publicly traded Chinese restaurant chain. The Chinese chain Panda Express may have more restaurants nationwide, but it is privately held. P. F. Chang's, which brings in an astounding \$5 million each year per restaurant, is headquartered in the expansive desert, in an adobe-style complex tucked among the cactuses and lush golf courses of Scottsdale, Arizona.

I was brought to the original P. F. Chang's in Phoenix by an affable Chinese restaurant owner named Jim Ye, who once worked as a wok cook in P. F. Chang's. Jim was an owner of the Chinese Gourmet Buffet in Chandler, Arizona, where the Cobbs family got the fortune cookie that made them winners in the fateful March 30 Powerball. Years ago, in trying to learn about upscale Chinese restaurants, he'd taken a job at P. F. Chang's. The other employees were surprised to see him. Wow! Finally, a Chinese person! A real Chinese cook! That's because your average cook in P. F. Chang's is more likely to speak Spanish than Chinese. The entire top management team has nary a Chinese face. The executive chef is named Paul Muller; he's originally from Rosedale, Long Island.

In the early days before P. F. Chang's became known as a national chain, customers would genially ask how Mr. Chang was doing. There is no Mr. Chang. The "P. F." in P. F. Chang stands for Paul Fleming, one of the creators of the Outback Steakhouse and the founding visionary for the Chinese chain. The "Chang" derives from the surname of Phillip Chiang, the consultant for the restaurant's Chinese cuisine, who was the son of Cecilia Chiang, the famed San Francisco restaurateur who owned the upscale Mandarin restaurant in Ghiradelli Square. In naming the restaurant, the management dropped the *i* from Chiang. "We took the *i* out so the signage could be a little bigger,"

explained Richard Sullivan, one of the original partners of the chain. That conveniently left them with Chang. “Chang: it’s like Smith in America. It sounds Chinese, and we wanted something that people could pronounce,” he said. The idea for the restaurant came about when Fleming moved to the Phoenix area and was disappointed in the choices for high-quality Chinese food there. He wanted to combine a Chinese menu with upscale service. P. F. Chang’s sees itself in the same category as the Cheesecake Factory, so much so that the companies trade real estate tips with each other.

It’s an American restaurant with a Chinese menu. P. F. Chang’s exists because Chinese food has ceased to be ethnic, Sullivan explained. “People consider it ethnic when it’s new to them and they don’t understand,” he said. But this is no longer true for an American society raised on beef with broccoli.

You can recognize any P. F. Chang’s by its signature icon: gargantuan terra-cotta warriors—the severe-looking soldiers from the tombs of the Qin Shi emperor in the ancient Chinese capital of Xi’an. The emperor had been dead for some two thousand years before the tombs were discovered in 1976, by a peasant digging a well. (I saw the peasant some twenty-four years later at the tombs, sitting at the gift shop, signing autographs.) The outside of the restaurant is flanked by two gigantic terra-cotta horses wearing Christmas wreaths. “You will find in our restaurants an Asian influence, be it through the terra-cotta warriors to the horses to our mural,” Brian Stubstad, the director of design and architecture for the company, explained to me. There are no dragons or phoenixes. Red and gold are minimal. No Great Walls of China. No pandas. Were it not for the certain Chinese-ish items, the restaurant could be a nice steakhouse.

But not everyone finds the terra-cotta warriors charming. “Chinese people would never put that in a restaurant,” Jim told me, pointing at the statues. “It’s not lucky. It’s something you put in burial site! But in America, they think it’s a Chinese thing.” From a Chinese perspective, P. F. Chang’s is decorated with death.

Monty McCarrick, a Wyoming truck driver with a long black ponytail and a receding hairline, called his wife, Joyce, from Iowa, where he’d stopped during a trip across the country.

“Are you sitting down?” asked Monty, whose right arm is marked with a tattoo of an American flag and a scar from a bullet wound. (A friend’s gun accidentally went off.)

“You wrecked the truck,” Joyce said anxiously.

No, he crowed. They’d won \$100,000 in Powerball.

“You got to be shittin’ me.”

Two months earlier they had gone to their favorite Chinese restaurant, Chinatown, located in Powell, Wyoming (population 5,000+), about a half-hour drive from their home. There Monty got the lucky numbers in a fortune cookie; five weeks later he bought the fateful ticket in Council Bluffs, Iowa, on his way to Ohio to deliver a load.

I dropped by the McCarricks’ home, a modest one-bedroom apartment they shared with their cat, Coco, who sometimes accompanied Monty on his road trips. Their three rooms were splattered with Elvis Presley memorabilia. As a teenager, Joyce had been a founder and president of Elvis Presley’s international fan club. Now in her fifties, she still had framed photos of the two of them together on her living room wall: he with his sultry lips and stiff pompadour and her with a perky ponytail and bangs. She used to visit his family during her summers in Nashville. When he did his military service in Germany, she talked to him once a month. Joyce had fifteen handwritten letters from Presley. “He

had horrible spelling and horrible grammar,” she recalled. In total she estimates her collection could be worth as much as \$100,000. That was the couple’s most valuable asset until Monty won the Powerball drawing. They paid off \$20,000 in credit card debt built up in four accounts.

In Monty’s drives across the country, Chinese restaurants are reliable, accessible eating establishments. “They are pretty much in every town you go to,” he said. “It’s fairly inexpensive. You get all you want to eat, for anywhere between five and seven dollars.” What’s nice, he noted, is how predictable they are. “I know it’s going to have the stuff that I am going to like,” he said. “You get the sweet-and-sour pork and you get the noodles, the lo mein noodles, and the egg foo yong. That is pretty tasty.”

“The way they make the food, too, is pretty much the same,” he explained. “There is some exceptions, like egg rolls. Some places make them different and better than others. The wontons, the deep-fried wontons, those are pretty much the same. The chicken is pretty much the same.” For Monty, the predictability is reassuring. “I don’t like a lot of change,” he said. “I’m a simple person.”

As I drove away from their home, toward South Dakota, Joyce waved good-bye and called out: “Watch out for the moose at the top of the mountains!”

Louisiana had two of the 110 Powerball winners, but, more important, it had Cajun Chinese food. When informed of my quest, a colleague told me that I had to visit Trey Yuen Cuisine of China, a restaurant in Mandeville, outside New Orleans, to try dishes like Szechuan alligator and a soy-vinegar crawfish. Trey Yuen had been serving Szechuan alligator since the late 1970s, shortly after alligator meat became legal, and the dish has remained one of its more popular.

Trey Yuen was owned by five brothers named Wong, whose great-grandfather had taken a boat to San Francisco in the late nineteenth century, seeking work. His sons and grandson followed him and found work in Chinese restaurants. (One of them even married a Chinese woman he’d never met. A live rooster stood in for him at the wedding ceremony back in China.) Eventually the Wong brothers’ grandmother established a chop suey restaurant in Amarillo, Texas, along historic Route 66.

The sons traveled across the States, working in Chinese restaurants, until they found the opportunity to open the original Trey Yuen. Their mother used to tell them, “You guys are like my five fingers. Individually you are not very strong. Together”—she would form a fist—“you are solid. Together, the five brothers have owned their restaurants for over thirty-five years.

Trey Yuen’s Szechuan alligator dish ended up being light-colored chunks of meat mixed with ginger, garlic, and crushed pepper. The alligator looked like cooked chicken but tasted surprisingly springy and tender. “I call it bayou veal,” said Tommy Wong, the fourth of the five brothers, in a Texas twang. “Some people are squeamish about trying alligator, especially people from out of town,” he said. Of course, he eventually does tell the people who dine on “bayou veal” the truth—“After they’ve eaten it.”

Tommy showed me a plate of raw chicken side by side with raw alligator. I would not have been able to distinguish them if it weren’t for the fact that the alligator meat came in long, pale strips. “See how nice and lean it is, and clean. High in protein,” he added. “Most people leave it in big chunks—that’s where the mistake is. Because of all the connecting tissues.”

Could you get Szechuan alligator anywhere else in the world? Probably not in China, yet this dish in front of me was arguably—even recognizably—Chinese.

A driving force behind Chinese cooking is the desire to adapt and incorporate indigenous

ingredients and utilize Chinese cooking techniques, Tommy explained. Chinese cooking is not a set of dishes. It is a philosophy that serves local tastes and ingredients.

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That idea continued to reverberate with me as I encountered creations like cream cheese wontons (also called crab Rangoon) in the Midwest, Philly cheesesteak rolls (egg rolls on the outside, cheesesteak inside) in Philadelphia, and the chow mein sandwich in New England. Chinese food, perhaps, does not have to originate in China.

In Rhode Island, home to five of the Powerball winners, I stopped at Chan's Egg Roll and Jazz in Woonsocket, a restaurant with a century-long history. In its latest incarnation, the owner, Jon Chan, had turned it into a nightclub drawing prominent jazz acts from around the country.

This part of New England features the fabled chow mein sandwich, a subject of study for Professor Imogene Lim, a third-generation Canadian who speaks better Swahili than Chinese.

I dragged along my friend Lulu Zhou, a girl whose doe eyes and round cheeks make her appear like a thinly disguised anime character. Though she is Shanghainese and was raised mostly in Hong Kong, Lulu speaks flawless English with the lilting ticks of an American teenager. (For instance, "After the dragon freaked the guy shitless" was her retelling of a Chinese fable.) Her parents, both lawyers, now live in Beijing, but she had spent most of her academic career in English-language schools—mostly in Hong Kong, as well as a brief period in New York City when her father was at NYU's law school. When she was six years old, she glimpsed her parents' green cards with their photos and *RESIDENT ALIEN* stripped along the top. At the time, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was popular, so the idea of extraterrestrials was in her head. "Are my parents aliens?" she thought in shock. That suspicion was exacerbated when her parents snatched the cards away from her.

In college, Lulu developed a fascination with Jewish guys—partially from working on the school newspaper, she believed. In response, I bought her a book called *Boy Vey!*, a tongue-in-cheek guide to dating Jewish men. She read it cover to cover and began sprinkling into her conversations with Jewish guys questions about whether they were Sephardic or Ashkenazi.

When the chow mein sandwiches were set in front of us, Lulu looked at them with a combination of mock horror and genuine fascination. Trapped between two pieces of white Wonder bread was a crunchy pile of fried Chinese noodles slathered in a brown gravy flecked with bits of celery and onion. It was moist and soft and crunchy, all at the same time. Lulu giggled. We weren't sure how to approach it. The gravy had softened the bread, making it too messy to pick up with our hands. I attempted to attack mine with a knife and fork. Lulu plucked the crispy noodles out of the bread. It wasn't bad; the gravy gave the sandwich a lot of flavor, and the textural mix of crunchy noodles, sodden bread, and flavored liquid was quite intriguing. In some other life, we might even have thought it was quite good. But that day, we couldn't get our minds around the concept of a starch-on-starch sandwich.

The trail of the chow mein sandwich then led me to Fall River, Massachusetts, and the Oriental Chow Mein Company, arguably the largest supplier of chow mein mixes in the world, limited market though it is. When I stepped into the brick building, I was embraced by the warm smell of frying noodles, which guides lost customers to the store. Founded in the 1920s, the company had been passed down through the family, and is now largely managed by Barbara Wong and her sons. Barbara was born in Canton, China (before it was known as Guangdong). She came to the states when she was seventeen, following a father she had known only through letters.

At the factory, heavy dough was flattened by continuous rolling into a thin sheet, cut up into strips—~~they looked like the end products of a corporate paper shredder~~—steamed, and then fried. Piles of discarded noodles were scattered across the floor. A methodic *swish-chunk* sound streamed through the factory: boxes being sealed. There were stacks and stacks of boxes waiting to be mailed, addressed to Tulsa, Oklahoma; Locust Grove, Georgia; Lake Oswego, Oregon; Dunnellon, Florida. “Everywhere everywhere, everywhere. My customers are from all fifty states!” Barbara cheerfully explained. Many customers had grown up in the area but had been pulled away.

For many, the chow mein sandwich captured memories of growing up: Mom’s home cooking. Hanging out after school. Flirting. First dates. The sandwich evoked both family and friends. Locals even shipped the mix overseas, unleashing the force of the chow mein sandwich on foreign soil. During the first Gulf War, residents sent chow mein mixes to local men who were serving abroad. When I heard this, it reminded me of a phone conversation I’d had after the 2003 Iraq invasion. I was in Washington; a number of my friends had been swept up in the historic journey: cynical journalists, idealistic nation builders, mercenary contractors. Many of them informed me of the two improvised Chinese restaurants that had popped up next to the landing pad of a military hospital in the Baghdad Green Zone, a ten-minute stroll north of Saddam Hussein’s palace. The restaurant in the back was slightly more popular because patrons figured it would be less likely to be damaged by an insurgent attack from the street. These Chinese restaurants in Baghdad had neither Chinese nor Arabic on their menus, only English. Though the Chinese restaurateurs had never been to America, they knew how to attract large crowds with American-style Chinese food like sweet-and-sour pork and pan-fried dumplings.

Among those friends of mine deployed was Walter Miller, a foreign service officer who resembled a bookish version of James Dean. We would chat by phone (his cell phone in Baghdad had a 914 area code, as though he were only in Westchester). In one of those conversations, I wondered aloud why the Chinese restaurants were so popular with my friends in Iraq when, after all, in the Middle East diners should indulge in the authentic local cuisine of kebabs and hummus.

“It’s a taste of home,” Walter said. Even against the whirl of Medevac helicopters, Chinese food had become a beacon for American patriots. “What could be more American than beer and takeout Chinese?”

Favored cuisines become refuges in times of crisis. On September 11, my friend Daniel Hemel and his friends, after their high school classes were canceled and they had learned that their parents were safe, headed to a local Chinese restaurant in Scarsdale, New York, called Chopstix to watch the news and eat stir-fry. Chinese food was comfort food for him and his friends: something predictable and familiar when they needed an anchor in an explosion of uncertainty.

I looked back at my journeys across the numerous Powerball restaurants. American Chinese food is predictable, familiar, and readily available. It has a broad appeal to the national palate. It is something nearly everyone nowadays has grown up with—both young and old. I marveled that on a single day, Chinese food had united so many different people from different parts of the country: a schoolteacher in Tennessee, a farmer-veterinarian in Wisconsin, a research microbiologist in Kansas, a police sergeant from New Mexico, retired septuagenarian snowbirds from Iowa, a bank clerk from South Carolina, a salesman from New Hampshire.

Our benchmark for Americanness is apple pie. But ask yourself: How often do you eat apple pie? How often do you eat Chinese food?



# The Menu Wars

In November 1976, Misa Chang, a petite Chinese immigrant and mother of three, opened a Chinese restaurant on the southeast corner of Broadway and West Ninety-seventh Street in Manhattan and waited for customers. A good decade before the gentle currents of gentrification climbed along the northern edges of Central Park's western neighborhood, people were leery of being out much at night. It was cold. It was dark. It was dangerous. Often the staff of four would outnumber their customers. After two frustrating weeks of watching the largely empty tables under the naked fluorescent lights, Misa had a piercing insight that would shift the trajectory of the restaurant industry in New York City. If the customers didn't want to come to her, she would bring the food to them. She would begin a delivery service. Diners had long looked to Chinese restaurants for takeout, but free door-to-door Chinese delivery would be something intriguing. Misa may not have understood English very well, but she understood Americans. She printed up hundreds of white paper menus and walked from apartment to apartment herself, sneaking into buildings to slip the menus under residents' doors.

Two hours after her first tour through the apartment buildings, the phone rang. The order: wonton soup and an egg roll. Misa hadn't hired any Chinese delivery boys yet, so she walked the two blocks through the snow to make the drop herself. A woman answered the apartment door, amused that a five-foot-no-inch-tall Chinese woman had appeared with her order. She handed Misa a one-dollar tip.

At the time, the idea of making food deliveries to people's doors was quixotic. Misa launched her delivery service well before the popularization of ATMs and VCRs. The idea that something—entertainment, food, cash—could be available on a consumer, rather than industry, timetable was startling.

But customers intuitively grasped the idea of delivery. Orders began to trickle in, then to pour in. Misa made the next hire to her staff of four: a delivery boy. Eric Ma, a scrawny sixteen-year-old busboy from a nearby Chinese restaurant, was a student at Norman Thomas High School. For his new job, Eric bought himself a used bicycle for fifteen dollars.

Soon the orders began flooding into Empire Szechuan Garden at an unrelenting pace. The phones wouldn't stop ringing. Misa hired more delivery boys. The bags didn't fit on the tables and had to be lined up on the floor. Eric and the other delivery boys would be sent out with eight orders at a time, perilously balancing the bags on their handlebars. It was a seller's market back then. Empire Szechuan could deliver during the hours and to the geographic region it wanted. Customers were appreciative of

the steaming hot food that appeared at their door, tipping generously. When the delivery boys were wet from the rain, they offered them towels.

For a long time, the neighborhood around the original Empire Szechuan was still relatively ragged. But Misa found a new way to deal with the homeless men. With fried rice and noodles, she bribed them to stay away from her front door.

I grew up about a mile and a half north of Misa's restaurant, largely oblivious to its significance but cognizant of its evolution. It gobbled the Blimpie's and a Mexican restaurant, opened a glass-encased outdoor café that later disappeared, and settled into a neon pastel motif in the early 1990s.

By the time I met with Misa, the restaurant's floor space had expanded fivefold. The place still had the *Miami Vice*-era feeling from its last renovation, but the red pillars of the original restaurant remained intact. In person, Misa, now a sexagenarian grandmother of ten, was a chirpy combination of age and energy. She wore oversized jewelry and carried two cell phones. She was always in motion, shuttling from restaurant to restaurant—Empire Szechuan had expanded throughout Manhattan—and to the Fulton Fish Market, so she carried a toothbrush and toothpaste in her purse. “That way I can wake up from a nap in the car, brush my teeth, and be ready to go,” she said.

She had a button nose and thinning red-tinted hair, which was cut into what is best described as a double mullet. Two tails of hair trailed down either side of her neck. She said she likes the ease of short hair but the feeling of having long hair. The double mullet was her solution.

In the 1970s, there were only a limited number of ways to earn a living as an immigrant woman in the United States, Misa explained. Opening a restaurant was one of them. She and a few others scraped together \$25,000 from their savings and through loans from family and friends.

She was not the first restaurant owner to come up with the idea of hand-delivering food to people's homes. Nor was she even the first Chinese restaurant owner to do so. Before World War II, John Kan's Chinese Kitchen delivered piping hot food around San Francisco. In the late 1930s, Chinese restaurants in New York's Chinatown were using automobiles to bring chop suey to people's doors. Of course, delivery was not always the easy, spur-of-the-moment decision it is now. Even in the 1950s, some restaurants demanded twenty-four hours' notice to bring a three-course meal to your door. But for whatever reason, none of those scattered services catalyzed the delivery frenzy the way Empire Szechuan did.

With delivery powering her business, Misa's restaurant empire quickly expanded. In 1979, Empire Szechuan Gourmet received a one-star rating from the *New York Times*, which was notable given its modest decor and no-nonsense service. The menu appealed to a more sophisticated crowd as yuppies began moving into the Upper West Side. They then added Empire Szechuan Columbus, Empire Szechuan Balcony, and Empire Szechuan Bleecker. Empire Szechuan moved into the West Village, the East Side, Long Island, Miami.

Flush with cash, Misa and her partners started investing in real estate, including the older eight-story building that held the original Empire Szechuan Gourmet. Eric, that first delivery boy, was promoted to a manager. He also married Misa's daughter and became her son-in-law.

Misa herself had not had much schooling, but she'd always had a shrewd intuition for what her customers wanted before they even knew they wanted it. She began delivery at a time when two-career families were starting to become common. Misa hired women as waitresses at a time when Chinese restaurants generally hired only men. “They smile more,” she told me. She quickly expanded her menu when she felt that Chinese food was becoming stale. She introduced sushi to her restaurants so that couples wouldn't have to fight about choosing Chinese or Japanese for dinner. She added pad thai to the menu when Thai food started gaining in popularity. She began a bubble-tea café in the restaurant to take advantage of the tapioca drink craze. She added a low-carb diet selection way before

Atkins or South Beach hit the national radar. She knew when to upgrade the look of her restaurants away from red and gold to pastel neon, and again to the concrete, exposed brick, and recessed lighting of the turn of the millennium.

With Misa's vision, Empire Szechuan had a lock on the delivery market early on. Then it slowly dawned on others that there was no reason they could not make deliveries, too. The other Chinese restaurants entered the market—some of them learning from former employees of Empire Szechuan itself. Up and down Broadway, competing Chinese restaurants sprang up almost overnight in former shuttered storefronts, almost all with “Hunan” or “Szechuan” in their names: Hunan Balcony. Hunan 94. Hunan Gourmet. Szechuan West. Szechuan Broadway. The deliverymen stuffed brown paper grocery bags with stacks upon stacks of menus, using rags to hide them from the watchful eyes of doormen and neighbors. Then other ethnic restaurants joined in the fray, seemingly in reverse order of the cuisine's distance from China: Thai. Japanese. Indian. Soon it became a free-for-all, an ethnic smorgasbord.

The first signs of trouble appeared in the building entryways. Simple “No Menus” signs metamorphosed into more punctuation-adorned, aggressive postings of “No Menus! Of Any Type! Get It?” The signs were originally written in English, which did little to abate the problem, as the menu men generally weren't literate in English. (As Eric Ma explained it to me, “If they understood English would they be making deliveries?”) So the “No Menu” signs soon became bilingual, with Chinese characters. Next they turned trilingual and even quadrilingual, to combat what had become a multiethnic, multirestaurant siege. Then it wasn't just restaurants anymore. Other businesses piled in: carpet cleaners, nail salons, dry cleaners, and even grocery stores. The flyers were stuffed into mailboxes, piled on lobby furniture, thrown in heaps on lobby floors, and shoved under doors. Residents and landlords argued that the flood of paper engulfing the Upper West Side was a health and safety hazard. They feared that the accumulation of menus would alert burglars to when people were away. And what if it rained and someone slipped on a wet menu? Who would they sue? The menu guys were entering buildings by buzzing bells and cheerfully announcing that they were from UPS. They were propping security doors open with rocks or following residents in. At this point, it wasn't just Empire Szechuan Gourmet that was papering the apartment buildings, but infuriated Upper West Siders felt it was the place at which they could point their fingers. Angry doormen would arrive at Empire Szechuan and dump a month's worth of accumulated menus from their buildings, many of them from other establishments. One building complex in Harlem escorted menu men out in handcuffs, which immediately cut down on the flyer volume there.

The menu wars became violent on both sides, drawing blood in August 1994. One evening, a writer named Philip Carlo walked out of his building on West Eighty-eighth Street and spotted a lank Chinese man putting menus from a restaurant called China Barbecue in his vestibule, near where a bilingual “No Menu” sign had been placed.

Carlo told the deliveryman to stop and returned the menus to him. The deliveryman put them back down. Carlo picked them up again. The deliveryman put them down again. The back-and-forth over the menus turned into a shoving match, which turned into an exchange of punches that spilled out onto the street. Carlo suffered a bloody nose, but he was evidently the better fighter; the deliveryman had a broken jaw. Carlo was convicted of assault and sent to Rikers Island for sixty days. The charges against the deliveryman were dropped. In a separate incident, a secretary, Jane O'Connor, was

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