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In Case You Missed It: Chop Suey

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In 1961, Julia Child published *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, among the most celebrated cookbooks of the 20th century. Designed to demystify the intricacies of French cuisine and convince the ”servantless American cook” that she could conquer any of the recipes contained therein, Child’s book helped to bring French food out of upscale city restaurants and into the kitchens of families across the country.

Sixteen years earlier, Buwei Yang Chao had taken on a similar task, though she met with much less widespread success than Child would. Chao’s *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese* (1945) did not only show American readers that they could produce Chinese food in their own homes, but also demonstrated that Chinese cuisine was far more diverse and pleasurable than the fare at the innumerable chop suey joints dotting the United States would have led cooks to believe. “[In] the course of time,” Chao explains, “a tradition of American-Chinese food and ceremonies of eating has grown up which is different from eating in China” (quoted in Coe 219). Child taught her readers how to cook an already familiar cuisine; Chao schooled hers on the very question of what Chinese food actually was.

France and China might be equally proud of their vaunted culinary traditions, but for almost two centuries they were received by American diners in completely opposite ways. While serving guests French food was often meant to show off one’s sophistication and good taste, heading to a Chinese restaurant long indicated a desire to partake of a cheap, filling meal seasoned with a dash of exotic worldliness. The fact that few in China would have recognized the ”Chinese” food being served in the U.S. was beside the point.

Andrew Coe narrates the history of this American love-hate attitude toward Chinese food in *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2009). Coe begins his story in Guangzhou, as traders from the newly born United States established commerce with China in 1784, a profitable relationship that would flourish in the decades to come. Though early American businessmen were more than eager to trade with the Chinese, they hesitated about joining their partners at the dining table; foreign accounts of Chinese banquets from the 18th and 19th
centuries abound with descriptions, tinged with both fascination and horror, of the seemingly unlimited range of plants and animals consumed by the Chinese. By the mid-19th century, “If the average American knew anything about the food of China, it boiled down to the idea that the Chinese people’s preferred food was dogs” (52).

This falsehood followed Chinese migrants across the Pacific as they settled in the western United States and began to open restaurants that fed not only their own community but also the region’s laborers in search of a quick and inexpensive meal. In reality, Coe demonstrates, cuisine in China was far more diverse than what would eventually be branded “Chinese food” in the U.S., but restaurant owners tailored their menus to please the tastebuds of unadventurous American diners suspicious of foreign and unidentifiable foods. While trans-Pacific trade ensured that Chinese cooks in San Francisco could easily obtain staples from home such as dried fish, preserved ducks’ eggs, and sharks’ fins, their restaurants attracted customers by featuring sections of the menu offering Western-style dishes like “a gristly steak or plate of pork and beans” (125).

At the turn of the 20th century, Chinese restaurants in the U.S. were often still accused of serving rats, cats, and dogs to their customers, but, Coe argues, had also acquired a certain following for the aura of danger and transgression that surrounded them. In Gilded Age New York, the nouveau riche hired French chefs to signal their arrival in high society, while Bohemians headed to Chinatown to demonstrate their independence from the rigid rules of Fifth Avenue. These diners ordered bowl after bowl of “chop suey,” a hash of vegetables and meat served over rice that didn’t resemble anything served in most of China (Coe identifies it as originating from the Sze Yap, or Four Counties, a region of Guangdong province), but which quickly became the quintessential dish of American Chinese cuisine for customers seeking to assert their cosmopolitanism. “From Atlanta to New Haven to Portland, Maine, eating a bowl of chop suey at midnight among a crowd of ruffians, fallen women, and thespians meant that you had achieved a state of worldly, urban sophistication,” Coe writes (171).

American Chinese food entered a new era during the first decades of the 20th century, as it moved out of Chinatown and entered the mass market. Housewives began preparing chop suey at home, using recipes printed in ladies’ magazines and aided by canned vegetables and soy sauce produced by companies such as La Choy (the founders of which were not Chinese). For second-generation Americans growing up in communities outside of the mainstream culture, “eating Chinese food offered one way to join it, to prove one belonged” and declare freedom from the culinary traditions of immigrant parents (198). Coe argues that this mass marketization had multiple effects. By the outbreak of World War II, though Chinese food was more prevalent than ever before, in Coe’s opinion it had also “stopped evolving” (210) and lost the exotic associations that had won it followers in the first place.

A postwar influx of immigrants, however, helped to turn the tide and introduce authentic Chinese cuisine to American palates on a large scale for the first time. More adventurous American eaters began sampling Peking duck, bird’s nest soup, and tofu, and mastering the mysterious art of eating with chopsticks. In one of Chop Suey’s most memorable sections, Coe describes Richard Nixon’s landmark 1972 trip to China through the food the president ate. Not ordinarily a fan of Chinese cuisine, Nixon flew to China on an Air Force One stuffed with emergency rations of Campbell’s soup and frozen hamburger meat, but in front of his hosts consumed everything served to him.

In recent decades, the chop suey restaurants of the early 20th century have been joined by countless other purveyors of various Chinese cuisines: Americans now eat Sichuan and Hunanese dishes with gusto, and a new breed of fusion restaurants meld Chinese ingredients and flavors with those from other culinary traditions. Chains like P.F. Chang’s and Panda Express are now the purveyors of “safe” American Chinese standards like egg rolls and sweet-and-sour chicken, while diners in the mood for Xinjiang noodles or Shanghai xiao long bao can seek out restaurants serving those delicacies. More and more Americans are traveling to China and experiencing the array of dining options there, which will likely lead them to return to the U.S. and demand increasingly diverse dishes.

While Coe deftly describes the evolution of Chinese food in the U.S., he does so without providing much culinary context. He does not explain in detail, for example, how post-war America became a nation of international diners developing a taste for now-ubiquitous dishes such as sushi and tacos, a
development that certainly contributed to the increased interest in producing better Chinese food. And while Coe does nod to the prevalence of Chinese cuisine in middle America, *Chop Suey* is primarily set in San Francisco and New York, making it largely a story of Chinatowns and their influence on local dining scenes.

Despite the recent appetite for authentic Chinese cuisine in the U.S., Americans generally remain wary of finding anything too exotic on their plates, as Coe admits that we still see "an incredible resistance to Chinese food—at least as it’s served in China" (251). But we have certainly moved past the days of no options beyond gluey chop suey and sugary General Tso’s chicken. This was surely a relief to Julia Child, who developed a taste for Chinese cuisine when she was stationed in Kunming during World War II. In a 1974 *New Yorker* interview, she made a perhaps surprising confession for someone known to generations as "the French Chef." "I would be perfectly happy [with] only Chinese food,’ she wrote. ‘Either French or Chinese. Could live [with] only Chinese.’"