

Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America (Arts and Traditions of the Table: Perspectives on Culinary History)

By Yong Chen

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American diners began to flock to Chinese restaurants more than a century ago, making Chinese food the first mass-consumed cuisine in the United States. By 1980, it had become the country's most popular ethnic cuisine. *Chop Suey, USA* offers the first comprehensive interpretation of the rise of Chinese food, revealing the forces that made it ubiquitous in the American gastronomic landscape and turned the country into an empire of consumption.

Engineered by a politically disenfranchised, numerically small, and economically exploited group, Chinese food's tour de America is an epic story of global cultural encounter. It reflects not only changes in taste but also a growing appetite for a more leisurely lifestyle. Americans fell in love with Chinese food not because of its gastronomic excellence but because of its affordability and convenience, which is why they preferred the quick and simple dishes of China while shunning its haute cuisine. Epitomized by chop suey, American Chinese food was a forerunner of McDonald's, democratizing the once-exclusive dining-out experience for such groups as marginalized Anglos, African Americans, and Jews.

The rise of Chinese food is also a classic American story of immigrant entrepreneurship and perseverance. Barred from many occupations, Chinese Americans successfully turned Chinese food from a despised cuisine into a dominant force in the restaurant market, creating a critical lifeline for their community. Chinese American restaurant workers developed the concept of the open kitchen and popularized the practice of home delivery. They streamlined certain Chinese dishes, such as chop suey and egg foo young, turning them into nationally recognized brand names.

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Editorial Review

Review

Well organized and breathtakingly broad in its geographic scope, *Chop Suey, USA* is an utterly original and significant contribution to the field. Yong Chen has done a superb job. No one has attempted anything like this.

(Hasia Diner, New York University)

A thoroughly researched, highly readable account of the development of Chinese American food, this book fills important gaps in the literature of ethnic and food studies, while incorporating an appealing personal memoir into the narrative.

(Jeffrey Pilcher, University of Toronto)

Food is not just about sustenance and taste. It is also about culture, economics, race, and identity. This is made abundantly clear in this fascinating account of the history of Chinese food in America. Chop Suey, USA is a wonderful American story, and a tasty one at that!

(Gordon H. Chang, Stanford University)

A perceptive view of an America built on abundance and consumption... Well-researched...

(*Kirkus*)

Reading Yong Chen's new book… is an education. In some ways, it seems more like an encyclopedia or a peak into the brain of a man who has read and retained an almost overwhelming number of books… Readers can learn much from Chen's in depth analysis and framing.

(*8Asians*)

This well-researched book comes with seventy-eight pages of notes and a thirty-one page bibliography. It is seasoned with interested recipes, most of them chosen for their personal significance… An exciting intellectual endeavor.

(*H-Environment*)

Chop Suey is an engaging combination of research and food writing blended into a unified read.

(*CHOICE*)

Sophisticated... Groundbreaking... Yong Chen has published an ambitious and important work that has made a curcial contribution not only to the historical understanding of Chinese cuisine in the United States but also to the study of food in general.

(*Journal of Chinese Overseas*)

Chop Suey, USA was meticulously researched with a very extensive bibliography, the content is well organized with linking points and arguments, and the text is written with clarity and purpose.

(Alfred Yee *Journal of American History*)

A compelling and provocative contribution to the burgeoning field of American food studies.

(*Journal of American Ethnic History*)

Chen's study provides a sharp critique and rebuke to the degraded status accorded to Chinese American food and its creators.

(*American Quarterly*)

About the Author

Yong Chen, raised by his food-loving mother in China, is professor of history at the University of California, Irvine, and served as the institution's associate dean of graduate studies. Among his numerous publications are *Chinese San Francisco, 1850–1943: A Trans-Pacific Community*. He co-curated a museum exhibit on the history of Chinese restaurants in the United States, and his commentaries on food, immigration, and Sino-American relations appear frequently in the media in four languages.

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