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IDENTITY TAKEOUT:
HOW AMERICAN JEWS MADE CHINESE FOOD THEIR ETHNIC CUISINE

ABSTRACT

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This study of the Jewish affinity for Chinese food explores when, where and why the tradition began. It employs a variety of primary and secondary sources to trace American Jewish eating habits from the Old World to the present. The paper also includes a discussion of Chinese food in America, from its roots as an exotic diversion to its current status as an economical and popular alternative to western fare. It concludes that the embrace of Chinese food allows Jews to express traditional cultural values in secular and acceptably assimilated forms.

Wonton soup, barbecued spareribs, kung pao chicken and shrimp fried rice. This is a Jewish dinner?

In the United States, yes. The cuisine of China has emerged as American Jewish comfort food, earning a seat of honor in the assembly of contemporary ethnic practices. Even secular Jews who fumble with tefillin and mezzuzot, the traditional cornerstones of Jewish material culture, may feel a nostalgic stir at the sight of a wire-handled red and white Chinese takeout box. “Eating Chinese” has become a ritualized element of the ongoing acculturation process that affirms traditional values while embracing new ones. It repackages familiar Jewish sensibilities in an exotic and appealing form. In the language of Lenny Bruce, Chinese is Jewish.[1]

I had initially hoped to determine why Jews chose Chinese food as their culinary proxy. But the historical record refused to yield my Lucy, the not-quite simian who is believed to have bridged humans and apes; there is no record of the first dissatisfied immigrant Jew plunking down his spoon in a bowl of borscht before wandering into a neighboring chow mein joint. The whys for which I searched seemed to be lost in a fog of chopstick wrappers and discarded takeout menus. So I opted to concentrate on the questions I could better slice and dice, in the manner of chop suey purveyors everywhere. I set out to discover when and where American Jews developed the habit of eating Chinese food, and how the affinity became an integral component of Jewishness.

THE JEWISH BELLY

The stereotypical Jewish mother’s exhortations to “eat, eat” are hardly an innovative addition to the Jewish cultural tradition.[2] Rather, they echo the Biblical commandment to “eat and be satisfied.”[3] For food is not merely an antidote to a bodily urge in the Judaic tradition, it is endlessly symbolic, representing the human relationship to God, providing the framework for

annual festivals, and evoking ancestral traditions. The commingling of food and spirituality – central to holidays such as Passover and Shabbat, which could not continue without the appropriate iconic foodstuffs – was annually reenacted at Eastern European yeshivas where the youngest students were encouraged to lick Hebrew letters written in honey (Marcus 18). So potent was this triangulation of food, holiness, and a good life that Talmudic scholars warned of the woes awaiting those who failed to savor the food component of the equation.[4] "We consider a meal to be a religious act," Ronald Brauner explained in his essay "Kosher Has Nothing To Do With Food." It is "an act which calls to mind our relationship with the world around us and our dependence upon the benevolence of the Source of all nourishment" (Brauner 22).

The Jewish preoccupation with food is at least partially rooted in *kashrut*, the intricate set of dietary restrictions codified in the Torah. These laws forbidding the mixing of milk and meat products demand the attentions of every hungry observant Jew, for even the slightest lapse in vigilance might result in a situation that only a blowtorch could mend.[5] Jewish homemakers must not only purge mongrel dishes from their menus, they must purchase their meats from a ritual slaughterer; equip their kitchens with two sets of dishes, cutlery, and utensils; and completely shun *treyf*, or unkosher, foods such as pork and shellfish. The reach of *kashrut* extends far into the realm of the seemingly arcane, regulating the cleansing of dentures and stipulating how much time must pass between a meat and milk meal (six hours, to prevent the milk from mingling with belched meat vapors).

So what did Ashkenazi Jews eat? For much of their history, not enough. Poverty dictated a diet of black bread, potatoes, and herring (Diner 156). The primary seasonings, added with a generous hand, were salt and garlic. The garlic plant in particular was so indelibly associated with Jews that the Nazis issued buttons with pictures of garlic plants to demonstrate the wearer's

ardent anti-Semitism. "The mere mention of garlic by a Nazi orator caused the crowd to howl with fury and hatred," wrote Mark Graubard (72). Onions were everywhere; Transylvania-born Bella Spewack, reared on a traditional Eastern European diet, recalled being shooed from her Lower East Side elementary school classroom after having eaten one too many of the offending bulbs:

> Miss Houston stretched out a white arm and motioned me away and to silence. "Stop," she said aloud so that the whole class heard. "You smell of onions!" I stopped, and out in the hall I cried softly and argued with myself. What was the matter with onions? Didn't she know onions made you feel as full as if you'd eaten meat?" (21)

Their singular culinary indulgence was saved for the end of the week: a Sabbath meal perfectly honed for the cold climes of Eastern Europe, replete with as much *cholent* and *tsimmes*, gefilte fish, chicken soup, *kugels*, and *knishes* as they could afford.[6] It was a celebratory menu derived from thousands of years of exile, incorporating delicacies from Europe's sleepy rural corners and vibrant urban centers. "The wanderings of the Children of Israel since Biblical times has made Jewish cookery international," Mary Shapiro wrote in her 1919 assessment of Jewish-American nutritional patterns, which concluded with a plea for more fresh vegetables. Shapiro traced the Jewish staples of kasha to Russia, pickles to Holland, olives to Spain, and stuffed fish to Poland ("Jewish Dietary Problems").

When Eastern European Jews immigrated to America – about two million arrived between 1880 and 1920 – they brought their affinity for the hot, fatty, salty, and pickled with them (Howe xix). No longer content to allow the rich to feast while they merely subsisted, new

American Jews strove to mimic the meals of the old country's well-to-do. They reveled in excess, producing towering banquets of food for special occasions (Gabaccia 81). They toiled over household budgets which put meat on the table nearly every night of the week. "Now all of us had meat, not only father," rejoiced the greenhorn heroine of Anzia Yezierska's largely autobiographical *Bread Givers* (Yezierska 114). Recalling his boyhood in Brooklyn, comedian Mel Brooks rhapsodized over his mother's skills with a cleaver: "As long as [my mother] was cooking, we never went to a Chinese restaurant. I mean the pot roast, the knaydlach, the stuffed gedempte, all those things with a "chuch" and a "chach" at the end – they melted in your mouth." ("Eating")

When inflation threatened to deprive immigrants of their kosher meat fix in 1902, Lower East Side homemakers led a revolt that deteriorated into a riot, with dozens of the 20 thousand picketers gathered at New Irving Hall launching slabs of beef at scabs and shopkeepers. A boycott of kosher butchers proved more successful, leading to a four cent price cut after three weeks (Maffi 166).

So entranced were first-generation American Jews by the powers of meat that in 1944, a worried mother wrote *The Jewish Daily Forward*, urgently seeking help for her son, the vegetarian. "About nine months ago, he took it into his head to stop eating meat," the woman wrote, every word throbbing with despair. "At first I thought he was tired of meat, but there is no end to it. Not only does he refuse meat, but he doesn't even eat fish or sardines. Worthy Editor, I'm afraid my son will grow up to be sickly." The editor of the leading Yiddish newspaper prescribed a trip to the doctor (Metzker 73).

The young vegetarian was likely not alone in his rejection of the meat dishes which weighed down the American Jewish table. Many children of immigrants rued the incessant

parade of boiled meats and congealed chickens. Physicians wondered whether the steady diet of fat and grease wasn't a factor in the reported Jewish propensity for indigestion. Humorist Nathan Ausubel in 1951 struck a serious note in his discussion of the phenomenon:

> It has been observed by doctors that Jews, largely those belonging to the well-fed classes, suffer disproportionately to other groups from gastrointestinal disorders. They are tireless consumers of hot water before breakfast, of seltzer water, Epsom salts, milk of magnesia, citrate of magnesia, bicarbonate of soda, Ex-Lax, Tums, Pluto Water, and whatnot. They are only too often afflicted with gallstones, peptic ulcers, and liver trouble. (356)

Second- and third- generation Jews precipitated an ethnic eating revolution by rejecting *kashrut* as impractical and anachronistic. This embrace of secularism permeated every aspect of Jewish assimilation, from language to dress. Rose Cohen, who moved to New York from Russia at the age of twelve, remembered her easy dismissal of the Jewish law forbidding business transactions on Shabbat. A week after her arrival in the early 1890s, she was horrified by the prospect of transgression:

> Father stopped at a fruit stand and told me to choose what I wanted. There was nothing strange to me in that. At home when we sold fruit, Jewish people came on Saturday to eat apples or pears for which they paid the following week…I looked up into my father's face. I felt proud of him that he had credit at so beautiful a fruit stand. As I received the melon in my fingers I saw

> father take his hand out of his pocket and hold out a coin. I felt the blood rush to my face. Then I dropped the melon on the pavement and ran. "My father has touched coin on the Sabbath!" (65)

Cohen isn't consoled by the memory of her grandmother warning her that violating the Sabbath will lead inevitably to violating *kashrut*. She writes: "Oh God," I thought, "will it really come to that? Shall I eat swine? No, I shall not eat swine, indeed I shall not!" (78) But her resolve dissipates within the year, and Cohen begins complaining that her father does not give her enough coins with which to buy penny candy treats on Saturdays (94).

Barbara Schreier argues the Jewish abandonment of traditional practices allowed immigrants to "fit in," and sped their adjustment to a foreign culture. In Yiddish playwright Kobrin's late nineteenth century comedy *The Nextdoor Neighbors*, Hindele's success as a wife hinges on her willingness to adopt American clothing. "I am Willy, do you understand?," her husband asks. "Without a beard. And I do not pray, and I eat milk and meat dishes from the same plate – and you are pious!" (96)

The transition from *kashrut* to the American way of eating was fraught with anxiety for many Jews, who instinctively shuddered at the very thought of *treyf*. Bronx-dwelling Jews of the 1930s chilled to a pervasive urban legend of a little boy who had contracted a certain deadly disease which could only be cured by ingesting bacon (Gay 169). Other Jews engaged in intricate bargaining that often struck their children as hypocrital (Fishman 136). Feminist Letty Cottin Pogebrin's mother, who maintained her home was "strictly kosher," served her children fried strips of bacon on paper plates, calling them "lamb chops on paper."

> In my family, *kashruth* was one of those realities with many layers. At home, my mother obeyed the Jewish dietary laws; she bought her meat from the kosher butcher and maintained separate sets of dishes and cookware for meat and dairy

> meals. However, in the homes of people who did not keep kosher, we ate meat with milk – Chicken a la King, for instance – and in restaurants we ate *trayf*, ritually unclean foods like pork or shellfish. (10)

By 1967, sociologist Marshall Sklare had confirmed decades of seemingly alarmist reports concerning the widespread abandonment of *kashrut*. Fewer than ten percent of third-generation Jews kept kosher. (Sklare and Greenbaum 51)

Freed from the constraints of *kashrut*, "Jewish" food became a far more flexible category. Second-generation Jews began gobbling down bagels and lox, pastrami sandwiches, egg creams, cheesecake, and coffee-based Manhattan Specials, treats with only a tenuous connection to their mothers' beloved meals. Yet these foods, which would have been unfamiliar to the devourers' Eastern European ancestors, retained the magical properties attributed to earlier favorites. Food was still believed to foster spiritual connectivity and facilitate the good life.

The easy revision of the American Jewish diet was almost unprecedented in its pace.[7] By 1997, philosopher Joshua Halberstam declared traditional Eastern-European Jewish fare of the *kasha* and *cholent* variety extinct: "Jewish foods survive only in the tired humor of tired comedians; American Jews are more familiar with sushi than gefilte fish." (101) Most ethnic groups cling to a culinary conservatism that inhibits the wholesale removal of treasured foodstuffs from its communal pantry. The inevitable cycle of acculturation rarely chips away at what Herbert Passin and John Bennet have termed the core immigrant diet; peripheral foods, such as certain cuts of meat, are more likely to fall prey to the process. Rice, for example, has remained a mainstay of many Asian-American diets. Susan Kalcik suggests foodways are particularly resistant to change because "the earliest-formed layers of culture are the last to erode." Regardless of age, she argues, ethnic foodways function as a signifier of group identity, a cohesive bond, and a communicative device (39).

Kalcik's conclusions wouldn't have been news to the thousands of adherents to "kitchen Judaism," a distinctively American riff on Jewish identity that became voguish during the mid-twentieth century. Kitchen Judaism was an informal secular practice marked by the embrace of newly "Jewish" foods, both sacramental and otherwise, as an expression of group loyalty and pride.[8] Ausubel documented its followers, including the tearful American in Paris who longed for nothing more than a corned beef sandwich on Jewish rye – "as you eat it, my God!," the American instructed Ausubel, "think of me!" – and a *mandlen* fancier in New York City: "He feels as if he were participating in the reception of the mystic Sabbath Bride as visioned by the medieval cabalists. And as for a strip of *helzel* – holy, thrice holy!" (356) Ausubel prophesized Culinary Judaism would outlast Synagogue Judaism: "a slice of hot noodle kugel should make all in Israel brothers!" (356) This trend worried those faithful to "Synagogue" Judaism, which until recently hadn't required a descriptive adjective. A 1940s rabbi lamented that if religious participation was measured by eating habits, the Jews would boast "a one hundred percent religious community" (Joselit 171)

OYESESSEN!

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most Americans ate where they worked, slept, prayed, and played – at home. The very word *restaurant* was still trudging along as a present participle until a Parisian bouillon maker and linguistic entrepreneur in 1765 advertised "Boulanger serves divine restaurants."[9] The term was soon used to describe the eating houses blossoming on either side of the Atlantic (Spang 8).

While the debate surrounding "America's first restaurant" may qualify as the young nation's first serious food fight, many historians comfortably bestow the title upon Delmonico's in New York City. Giovanni Del-Monico, a retired Italian-Swiss sea captain, and his brother

Peter in 1827 opened a café and pastry shop on South William Street. The establishment quickly outgrew its six pine tables and bonbon regimen; by 1835, the brothers and their nephew Lorenzo presided over an exclusive dining room, where wealthy uptowners feasted on course after course of salmon filets and chateaubriand (Hooker 144). Delmonico's – and a score of imitators – was responsible for the ironclad culinary theorem which guided nineteenth-century foodies: deferential service and finicky French food equals good taste.

The Delmonico's experience, however celebrated, was decidedly atypical. Most public dining in the early nineteenth century was confined to inns, taverns, and boarding houses, where heartier fare was the rule. Long tables were heaped with corn bread, fat pork, pies, and chickens to feed thousands of travelers and the legion of flies which accompanied them. Most hotels and inns operated on the American plan, meaning guests paid for the privilege of partaking, no matter how much they actually ate. The system led to aggressive elbowing and rushed eating; a doctor in the 1860s marveled at 250 diners in a Maine inn, of whom only twenty remained at the table ten minutes after the meal was served (Hooker 147). The process was ultimately standardized and simplified for westward travelers by Fred Harvey, whose railway restaurants boasted fresh produce, polished silverware, and pretty girls (Hooker 268).

Harvey wasn't the only innovator reshaping the eating-out experience in the late 1800s. Bustling urban areas were crowded with businessmen and sightseers who couldn't conveniently return home for lunch. The oyster cellar, an all-you-can-eat institution of early New York, was then reeling from the over-fishing and flagrant pollution of nearby oyster beds. Hungry city folk instead lunched at automats, cafeterias, and department stores, where women weren't greeted by an unwelcoming cloak of cigar smoke.[10] Street vendors hawked edible novelties, including pickles, potato chips, ice cream cones, and hot dogs.

The increasingly public dimension of eating was foreign to immigrant Jews, who had little opportunity to dine out in Eastern Europe. Inns were among the few commercial establishments engaged in food service, but the strictures of *kashrut* kept Jews from becoming regular patrons (Diner 200).

Perhaps generations of abstinence fueled the ferocity with which American Jews embraced the restaurant. By 1903, the *Jewish Daily Forward* coined a new Yiddishism: *oyesessen*, or eating out. *Oyesessen*, the paper reported, “is spreading every day, especially in New York.” The *Forward*’s editors nodded their heads in approval at the trend, praising participating immigrants for educating themselves about unfamiliar cuisines, integrating themselves into their new communities, and capitalizing on America’s material offerings (Diner 200).

The Jewish immigrants flocked first to neighborhood cafés, or “coffee and cake parlors.” These gathering places served much the same function as beer gardens and saloons did for German and Irish immigrants of earlier generations: they provided recreation, employment and support. For Jews, who traditionally confined their drinking to festivals within the home or synagogue, the cafés were community centers. Unlike the all-male bastions which dominated the Irish social scene, the only prerequisite to parlor entry was a political opinion. According to a publication issued in 1906 by New York’s Liberal Immigration League, there were more than three hundred such parlors (which, despite their name, trafficked primarily in tea) on the Lower East Side. “Here there is an absolute guarantee of sobriety, and a free, democratic foregathering of kindred spirits,” the league enthused.

> If one is up in the coffee and cake geography of the district, he
> knows where he may find the social and intellectual diversion most

> to his liking. It is each to his own: the Socialist has his chosen headquarters, the chess-crank his, the music-lover his, and so on right down the line…whether it is to play chess or checkers, or to discuss Karl Marx or Bakounine, or the wonderful colorature (sic) of the last night's diva at the Metropolitan – (for all of these are included in the light converse of the East Side), these topics are handled best over the glass of tea *a la Russe*, with a floating slice of lemon and a cigarette. (James 89)

It was often spiritual, not bodily, hunger which drew patrons to the Lower East Side's cafés. But owners still managed to produce menus at the moment when talk of Zionism had invigorated appetites, or the thought of plucking one's fur hat off the towering pile near the door and returning to a frosty tenement apartment instigated procrastination. "Many sold food," neighborhood chronicler Harry Roskolenko recalled. "Bean soup, borscht, cold fish, Russian dishes, Jewish dishes and something pronounced as *samitsh*." (100)

The cafés waned as the immigrants' mastery of English allowed them to venture beyond the narrow boundaries of Allen and Delancey streets. The children of the café sitters snubbed the institution as redolent of the old country, preferring to build their neighborhoods around more "Americanized" establishments. By the mid-1930s, New York City was home to more than 5,000 delicatessens (Joselit 203).

Jewish immigrants did not invent the deli. Germans and Alsatians had been selling savory delicacies, or *delicatessens*, since their arrival in America. Jews such as Arnold Reuben followed their lead, enlarging and expanding the entire way: "We had a restaurant open twenty-four hours a day," Reuben's son told Jewish food historian Joan Nathan. "By 1918, my father

started making big sandwiches. One day a famous actress came in and asked for a big sandwich. He took turkey, ham, Swiss cheese, coleslaw and Russian dressing – which later became the Reuben's special sandwich." (184-5) Whether the epiphany for the quintessential deli nosh did indeed emerge from a chance meeting between Mr. Reuben and a celebrity, or the sandwich grew from bastardized beginnings, as contemporary scholars claim, the reuben was a winning pastiche of the deli experience. The original sandwich, like its more famed descendant, incorporated the finest items plucked from a delicatessen counter: cold cuts, cheeses, and bread. These foods were "our greatest delight in all seasons," wrote Brooklynite Alfred Kazin. "Hot spiced corned beef, pastrami, rolled beef, hard salami, soft salami, bologna, frankfurter 'specials' and the thinner, wrinkled hot dogs always taken with mustard…and now, as the electric sign blazed up again, lighting up the words Jewish National Delicatessen, it was as if we had entered into our rightful heritage" (Kazin 32). But the reuben, in its flagrant defiance of *kashrut* – rabbis who have long advised their congregants to "minimize *treyf*" when unable to avoid it, were likely heartbroken by the addition of cheese to an already objectionable ham sandwich – flouted the Jews' traditional heritage. Like the deli itself, the "Jewishness" of the sandwich was more symbolic than substantive. Delis bespoke their allegiance to American Jewish culture through a set of accepted props: oversized portions, mustard in paper cones, and wise guy waiters.

The "kosher style" formula was a great success, inspiring intense loyalty among its devotees. "Without pastrami sandwiches, there could be no picture-making," Orson Welles wrote. "And I understand there is a project afoot to pipe the borscht across the continent from Lindy's." (Joselit 203) Jewish housewives also succumbed to the craze, routinely supplementing – or substituting – their meals with goodies from the deli.[11] The delis were also popular with the thousands of Jewish women who worked outside the home and had no hot meal waiting at the

end of the day. "I didn't cook," remembered garment worker Ruth Katz, who immigrated from Poland in 1913.[12] "You could get for twenty cents a good dinner in a restaurant. So about three times a week I used to go out. The rest I used to buy smoked fish, cheese, cream and lox," (Kramer and Masur 30) The garment workers who populate Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* are forever eating out, having no time to return home for lunch. "I got to eat my meals in the restaurant," Berel Bernstein moans (44).

As Katz suggests, the trajectory which began with the café led, ultimately, to the table service restaurant. American Jews owned, managed, and patronized restaurants throughout Manhattan, many of them serving kosher or kosher-style food in settings blessed by Delmonico's: diners sat at linen-topped tables wedged between soaring wooden panels crowned with Art Deco motifs. Specific trends in elegant *oyesessen* are preserved by *The Hebrew Standard*, New York City's first mass-marketed English language Jewish newspaper. The politically conservative weekly newspaper, published from 1881 to 1929, when it was absorbed by the short-lived *Jewish Tribune,* regularly carried ads for eating establishments.

Few restaurants advertising in 1909 editions of the paper deviated from the strict kosher model: L. Schwartz, Klein's Hungarian Restaurant, and Little Roumania seduced customers with the promise of old-world kosher food, a promise sometimes rendered in Hebrew script to further assure observant Jews of their seriousness. Within five years, the classified landscape had changed radically. While Engel's Strictly Kosher Dining Room was still buying space in the *Standard*, the restaurant's competition had proliferated. The number of restaurant ads had nearly doubled. And few of them touted their compliance with dietary restrictions. Readers were instead beckoned to Roma, "for thirty years the rendezvous of refined connoisseurs of French cooking"; Unter Der Linden, "catering to the best elements of all classes"; and Original Maria's, "serving

you with the best the market affords." For American Jews, restaurants were no longer extensions of the home kitchen, but distinctive sanctuaries of sophistication and value.

The Jewish embrace of the sit-down restaurant experience is captured in *All-of-a-Kind Family Uptown*, the fourth entry in Lower East Sider Sydney Taylor's wildly popular *All-of-a-Kind Family* series. The children's books, which mirror the *Little House on the Prairie* series in their sunny disposition and historic pungency, follow an immigrant Jewish family through the urban frontier. The family variously celebrates Shabbat, visits Coney Island, copes with a polio epidemic, and collects war stamps. In *All-of-a-Kind Family Uptown*, set in 1917, eldest daughter Ella is invited to a restaurant:

> "Look Ella, I've been thinking," Jules went on. "You've been working pretty hard. You deserve a change. Tonight you're going to have supper with me in a restaurant."
>
> "In a restaurant! Oh, boy!" Henny exclaimed. "I've always wanted to eat in a restaurant."
>
> "You ninny!" Ella whispered fiercely in Henny's ear. "He means *me*!…I'll just get my hat."
>
> She dashed into her room, took a final look in the mirror, and dabbed her nose furiously with some of Mama's rice powder. She was tingling with excitement. Eating in a restaurant was such a

> grown-up thing to do! She wondered what it would be like. (Taylor 61)

The subway deposits Jules and Ella on 59th and Broadway, an early restaurant row glowing with garishly colored advertisements and blinking marquees. Ella is secretly longing for a home-cooked meal when Jules settles on a place.

> Ella looked quickly around. She was overwhelmed by the grandeur she saw. Suspended from the ceiling was a huge chandelier with hundreds of sparkling crystal pendants. Endless rows of tables stretched out before her. Small shaded lamps shed a warm intimate light on the snowy-white tablecloths. She was pleasantly aware of the subdued hum of voices, the clinking of china, the silent movements of the waiters as they served the fashionably dressed, important looking people. (64)

Ella's unease isn't alleviated by the arrival of the encyclopedic menu. She orders a cream cheese sandwich, studiously avoiding the silverware dilemma she finds so vexing, then silently wrestles with whether to attack the lone green olive on her plate with fork or fingers. She finally confesses her discomfort during dessert.

> "Oh, Jules!," Ella sighed in great relief. "This is the very first time I've ever eaten in a restaurant!"

> They looked into each other's eyes and all strain seemed to melt away…in a few moments they were both gleefully digging into heavenly mounds of strawberry and vanilla frozen custard, marshmallow fudge, and whipped cream, topped with pink and white slices of nougat. Between mouthfuls, they chatted easily, as if they had been eating in restaurants all their lives. (69)

Jules and Ella (who are engaged to be married in the series' final installment) likely did continue eating in restaurants all their lives. By the 1920s, eating out had taken hold in America, and Jews were at the forefront of the fad.

The onset of the Depression rattled the restaurant industry, but never crippled it. Harvey Levenstein has proposed communal eating acquired even greater significance during the insecurity-plagued 1930s; while he points to street festivals and church suppers, his analysis may also help account for the continued popularity of public eating places (Levenstein 41). Not surprisingly, the nation's Delmonicos failed to thrive during this period of economic hardship. American tastes were becoming simpler and necessarily frugal; the French-influenced dishes synonymous with the most highbrow of restaurants were suddenly uncouth. And even if the crowds were coming, chefs hampered by Prohibition had little luck concocting virgin coq au vins (Levenstein 45). The stage was set for societal acceptance of the sit-down ethnic restaurant.

A few ethnic eating places, particularly those administered by Italians, were already targeting a wider clientele. The adoption of strict immigration laws in the early 1920s made boarding-house operations less viable and forced owners to expand their services (Levenstein 51). But the era of culinary crossovers may have reached its apex in the 1930s, when economic

upheaval made dining in an ethnic neighborhood the most affordable way to travel. And the immigrant restaurateurs' disregard for Prohibition laws thrilled thirsty diners. New Yorkers (and their out-of-town guests) were suddenly flocking to Harlem, Little Italy, and Chinatown.

CHINATOWN, U.S.A.

New York City's Chinatown, the largest in the United States, is today a sprawling tribute to the 1,000 Chinese who by 1880 had found their way to the notorious Five Points district of lower Manhattan. Those men – among them terrorized miners chased from their jobs in California and laborers smuggled into the hand laundries of New Jersey – represented the whole of Chinese settlement in the city (Kwong 58).

Most nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants settled along the Pacific coast, hoping to scale the "Gold Mountain" known as California. These men laid the tracks to the heart of the gold rush, rolled cigars, and toiled in the textile industry, planning to return to China with their saved paychecks. But their willingness to work for starvation salaries irritated wage-earning whites, who felt their own livelihoods were threatened by Chinese competition. Immigrants were in danger of succumbing to the raging fists of nativists and the cool deal-making of elected officials, who in 1882 ratified the Chinese Exclusion Act. The federal law prohibited further immigration by Chinese laborers and barred Chinese already in the country from becoming citizens (Takaki 15).

Many Chinese still managed to make the trip to the United States, slipping past immigration officials or producing forged paperwork. Domestic migration and immigration had pushed the population of New York's Chinatown to 7,000 Chinese by 1900, of whom only 150 were women (Kwong 58).

The actual facts and figures of Chinatown somehow managed to elude their neighbors, who were riveted by stories of opium dens, slave girls, and mob violence. In the late nineteenth century, when the number of non-Asian Americans who would ever catch a glimpse of the Far East could easily squeeze into a single room, a peek at Chinatown was terribly exotic. The Chinese spoke a language incomprehensible to most New Yorkers, prayed to a mysterious deity and proudly sang off-key scales. Local newspapers fed the benign hysteria with a steady stream of stories breathlessly recounting the imagined evil exploits of Chinese dope fiends and rapists (usually of white women).

By the 1890s, guided tours of Chinatown had become a chic pastime for the upper crust. Luc Sante relates the tale of one tour-leading huckster who insisted participant Salvation Army General William Booth don a fake moustache before entering Chinatown, apparently attempting to heighten the intrigue of the experience. The prank nearly ended badly when a policeman tried to arrest Booth for masquerading in the streets. Most cops, however, were sympathetic to the gawking tourists. Policeman Cornelius Willemse wrote:

> Visitors are more or less a nuisance in Chinatown and a good many times they're disappointed. For they've built up such fantastic ideas of what goes on down there that if they don't see a few Chinamen disappearing down traps in the pavement pursued by somebody with a hatchet or a long curved knife, they haven't had any fun and go home disappointed. As a matter of fact, Chinatown is a peaceful neighborhood most of the time and there isn't much for the casual visitor to see. So to make it interesting for out-of-

> town visitors, sometimes we used to copy the sight-seeing guides and arrange a set-up so as not to disappoint them. (Sante 295)

A similarly cooperative policeman in 1924 led *New York Times* reporter Steuart M. Emery on a midnight tour of the neighborhood which peered into all the coves unseen by the nightly parade of tourists. Emery's dispatch from the edges of the Bowery revealed the area to be still a treacherous place: he began by asking the detective whether there was still much opium smoking in the district:

> "Plenty," was the answer. "There isn't anything that will stop a Chink from taking a shot at the pipe…"
>
> Down the street came trotting two or three children – yellow-skinned, but with distinctly white facial characteristics.
>
> "Pipies," said the detective. "That's what they're called. Chinese father and white mother. When a girl gets hitting the pipe down here she's done for." (Emery)

The detective rounded out his tour with a series of required elements, including a bricked-up entrance to a secret mob tunnel, a gambling den, and a Chinese restaurant.

In 1898, Louis Beck surmised that the wealth of restaurants in Chinatown was an outgrowth of the "bachelor society," in which dozens of men lived together in tenement apartments or storefront spaces. Their living arrangements weren't conducive to cooking, so they routinely ate at restaurants or boarding-house kitchens (46). Beck was taken with the most

elegant of the eating houses, reserving a full chapter of his neighborhood guide book for discussion of them:

> The most gorgeously decorated and illuminated buildings in Chinatown are those occupied by the restaurants. The more pretentious of them usually occupy upper floors in three or four story buildings, having balconies across their fronts, the buildings themselves being gaudily painted in deep green with red and gilt trimmings. Chinese lanterns are suspended in reckless profusion from every available point. The eating rooms are kept with scrupulous cleanliness, and no unusual dirt will be found in the kitchens. A recess or alcove off the dining room, furnished with a cot, is generally provided for those who may wish to indulge in a short nap after dinner. Tables are provided for parties of two, four or more, as required…Cutlery forms no part of the table furniture, the national chopsticks being supplied instead. The eatables are brought in a common receptacle – a deep dish or bowl – from which each guest at the table helps himself at pleasure, dipping in his chopsticks and conveying what is taken directly to his mouth. (47)

Beck further facilitates the neophyte's visit to Chinatown by listing a few choice recipes and reprinting an entire bill of fare, with prices, from his favorite restaurant. The menu includes dried oyster soup, fried noodles with chicken, roast pork dumplings, and deviled duck. Beck maintains

the restaurant in question caters almost exclusively to Chinese, who throng the dining room each Sunday; the conspicuous absence of chop suey from his sample menu bolsters his claim. (48)

Chop suey is, politely put, Chinese-esque. It has no direct forebears in China, but utilizes the fine chopping techniques revered by Chinese cooks. The true origins of the dish are obscured by legend, but most historians agree the meat-and-vegetable melange was invented in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Its birthplace has been variously listed as California, where a railroad cook may have created the jumble from leftovers in a fit of inspiration; New York, where in 1896 the visiting viceroy and foreign minister of China, Li Hung-chang, may have ordered his own cook to prepare the dish in the kitchen of the Waldorf-Astoria; and Washington, D.C., where an entrepreneurial Chinatown restaurant owner may have capitalized on the hoopla surrounding Li's visit and created the dish in his honor (Hooker 286). The circumstances were irrelevant to the thousands of New Yorkers who developed an insatiable craving for the food.[13] In 1928, the *New York Times* concluded an article debunking the Chinese roots of chop suey by jokingly proposing China erect a monument to the dish, as so many of its countrymen had built their fortunes on it ("Chop Suey, Popular Here"). Lucien Adkins, invited by Beck to write an epilogue to his guidebook, waxed enthusiastic on the topic of chop suey:

> I have introduced many to the delights of chop suey, a standard dish that stands the test of time much as does the roast beef of old England. It can be eaten once every day, and it is a wonder how the desire for it manifests itself in the man who lives principally on French cookery.

> Take a friend to Chinatown for the first time and watch his face when the savory chop suey arrives. He looks suspiciously at the mixture. He is certain it has rats in it, for the popular superstition that the Chinese eats rats is in-bred. He remembers his schoolboy history, with the picture of a Chinaman carrying around a cage of rats for sale. He quickly puts aside the chopsticks, which are evidently possessed of the devil, and goes at the stuff with a fork. The novice gets a mouthful or two, all the time declaring it is "great."
>
> Soon there are times when the gnawing hunger for chop suey, and for nothing else, draws him to dingy Chinatown, alone and solitary. He half believes there must be dope in the stuff. He is now certain that there are no rats in it. He is a confirmed chop suey eater. (quoted in Beck 296)

Chop suey restaurants ranged far beyond the narrow strip of Manhattan designated as Chinatown; a 1918 raid of chop suey joints allegedly serving liquor to soldiers and sailors led police as far north as 44th Street. "What right have young men who ought to be in the trenches to be playing pool or sitting around Chinese restaurants with women of the streets at 4 o'clock in the morning?" assistant district attorney James E. Smith demanded ("Police Capture 178")

But a right to eat Chinese was rapidly emerging as another right on the long list of those given by God to the good people of America. Chinese food was consumed by members of every

class, racial, and religious group (assuming they had two quarters in their pockets). Beck noted black Americans were among the earliest fans of eating Chinese: "their average daily receipts are estimated at $500, of which comes $25 from Negroes, who seem to delight in frequenting the lower class places." (54) Early menus offered a number of dishes which would have been familiar to the traditional black palate, including collard greens, pig's feet and barbecued pork. While the waitstaff may have whispered slurs in their native language, there is no record of any overt ethnic tension in New York's first Chinese restaurants.[14] Indeed, intrepid reporter Steuart Emery found himself seated next to a trio of Italians during his vice-oriented tour of Chinatown.

> Next to us there sat a group, unmistakably Italian in character – two men and a flashily-dressed girl.
>
> "Sure," said our guide in answer to a question. "Lots of Italians come in here to eat. Tired of spaghetti, I guess. The Italian quarter – Guinealand, we call it – is right around the next block or so. The Italians run in here pretty often."

Everybody, it seemed, was eating Chinese.

MAINSTREAMING CHINESE FOOD

By the mid-1920s, Chinatown had largely shaken off its reputation as a den of evil. Yesterday's voyeurs had been muscled out by chop suey hounds, who had little use for the gory tales that riveted earlier generations.

> At the lunch hour, there is an eager exodus toward Chinatown of the women workers employed in Franklin, Duane and Worth

> streets. To them the district is not an interesting bit of transplanted Orient. It is simply a good place to eat. They see it as a coldly commercial center, with its thin thoroughfares choked by mammoth motor trucks loaded with bamboo shoots, soy beans and dried mushrooms for shipment to wherever in the five boroughs, Long Island, New Jersey and Connecticut chop suey is chopped…chop suey seems destined to become a necessity of New York life. ("Chop Suey's New Role")

Those New Yorkers whose salaries and situations allowed them to be less than pragmatic reveled in the bohemian dimensions of Chinatown. They rejoiced in their own cosmopolitanism, reveling in the exotic rhythms of the once-forbidden district. All things Oriental were suddenly stylish, and there was no better place to enjoy the fad than Mott Street. The chop suey craze was accompanied by a mah-jongg mania, which seized the country so violently that Chicago stockyards were rumored to be shipping cattle bones to China so manufacturers could produce enough of the needed tiles (Strausser and Evans 8).

But eating Chinese survived the roller-coaster ride of becoming faddish, enduring to enter the mainstream. It was propelled there by World War II, which initiated a revolution in the nation's dining habits.

There certainly were soldiers stationed in the Pacific theater who returned home with a taste for Chinese food. But even those servicemen who never left stateside were treated to Chinese-style dishes, courtesy of Uncle Sam. Chop suey and chow mein were staples of the mess hall, joining spaghetti and tamales as the only "ethnic" dishes listed in the 1942 edition of the U.S. Army cookbook (Levenstein 122). The economics of chop suey – which Americans

prepared with ketchup and Worcestershire sauce – were as appealing to soldiers' wives as to their superiors. In many households, the recipe card for the dish was well-stained by the end of the war.

Cooks unsure of their ability to replicate the fare from their local Golden Dragon or Phoenix House were aided by a number of mid-century innovations, ranging from the takeout box to the frozen egg roll.

Folded paper food containers had long been used as oyster pails by East Coast fishmongers. The cartons were adopted in the 1940s and 1950s by area Chinese restaurant owners, who realized they were the perfect size and shape for their saucy, amorphous dishes. Manufacturer Riegel Paper Corporation soon after issued a line of boxes bearing pseudo-Chinese motifs, sparking a brisk takeout business for Chinese restaurants across the country.[15]

Advances in freezing and canning also led to more people eating more Chinese more often.[16] In 1955, sales of processed Chinese foods were estimated at $20 million, a 70 percent increase over World War II period figures (Nagle). The industry's visionary was Jeno F. Paulucci, a Minnesota-bred son of Italian immigrants who peddled fruit to support his family during the Depression. He never strayed far from the food business: after a short stint at junior college, he sold groceries to stores across Minnesota. While traveling, he noticed there was nary a hamlet without its own Chinese restaurant. “I felt there must be a tremendous, untapped market for ready prepared Chinese foods for home use,” he said later. “The food industry was missing the boat, allowing the restaurants to handle all the take-home business.” Paulucci began canning chicken chow mein in a cramped quonset hut in Duluth; eight years later, his chicken almond chop suey, rice and egg rolls helped Chun King win over eighty percent of the frozen Chinese food market. “The egg rolls are crisp and pleasingly flavored,” raved *New York Times* food

writer June Owen. "The chop suey is judiciously seasoned. The rice is fluffy. In fact, the dinner might be described as an outstanding example of what is possible with frozen foods."

While Owen's fellow food critic Craig Claiborne seemingly couldn't pen a review without launching into a lament for the demise of the fork, which he predicted would be forgotten by chopstick-clenching diners, the upsurge in eating Chinese was further legitimized by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The *New York Times* in 1953 learned that the Eisenhowers were regulars at the Sun Chop Suey Restaurant in northwest Washington D.C. "Several times since the inauguration the White House has telephoned an order or sent a Secret Service agent to the restaurant with an order. The last order read: '5 chicken chop suey; 6 fried rice; 4 egg foo yung. A few almond cookies,' the newspaper reported. According to restaurant co-owner Jack Wong, the first family had been placing the same order since 1930, asking only that the chop suey be "good and hot." ("Eisenhowers")

Eating Chinese had become a ritualized experience for many Americans by the 1950s. Early television comics built entire sketches around the habit, assured their audience would have the necessary familiarity with the culinary genre.

In 1955, *Sid Caesar's Comedy Hour* presented a skit set at the Golden Pagoda. Two businessmen are hustling their reluctant friend Bob through the door. "I only have thirty minutes, we could have had a sandwich," he protests. His protests dissolve into glee as a plate of steaming Chinese food is carried past him. "Chinese food! Oh boy! Ping Pong Goo! Ding Dong Skoo!" The men are seated and their food delivered, but Bob is distracted by one old friend and then another. Unable to get a chopstick in edgewise, he salivates as his lunch partners polish off the entire meal. While the sketch depends on the actors' comedic timing, the joke only works because viewers can relate to Bob's suffering.

A similar degree of knowingness was assumed by the writers of *The Steve Allen Show*, who sent the character of Mr. Neville Nosher, leading gourmet, to critique a Chinese restaurant. "Is it very exclusive?," Allen asks. "Oh yes," Nosher responds. "Tonight they threw out a couple for ordering the family dinner. They weren't married." Nosher then instructs the audience in the preparation of "special Chinese sauce," a concoction of soy sauce, plum sauce, and hot mustard, that he renders inedible by his liberal use of the mustard. The ensuing roars of the audience suggest many of them had made the same mistake.

By the 1950s, eating Chinese was no longer exotic. The experience was standardized and predictable, as evidenced by a survey of Chinese restaurant menus dating from 1920 to 1980, in which the only perceptible change is the price.[17] The Chinese restaurant represented neither a culinary adventure nor a contested space. It was culturally neutral, a perception exploited by the writers of *Brooklyn Bridge*, an early 1990s feel-good sitcom chronicling a 1950s middle-class Jewish family.

In an episode of the series entitled "War of the Worlds," fourteen-year old Alan Silver has begun dating classmate Katie Monaghan. The relationship troubles Alan's immigrant grandparents and Katie's father, an Irish-American policeman. The teenagers, believing communication can overcome prejudice, persuade their families to meet. After Alan's younger brother is whisked away by Nick, an Italian-American neighbor ("We're having gefilte fish for dinner," Nick announces. "My mother said if we don't like it we could put spaghetti sauce on it."), the Silvers head for the chosen meeting place: Flower Garden Restaurant. Mr. Monaghan first places the order for his family: "squid appetizer, oxtail soup, pork kebabs, shrimp in lobster sauce and flaming octopus rings," earning the scorn of Alan's grandmother. "We're not ready to order, Danny," she tells the waiter. "It takes us longer because we care about what we eat." The

Silvers finally settle on five orders of chicken chow mein. The evening repeatedly threatens to unravel as the Silvers are unable to summon a Hebrew prayer to match the Monaghan's blessing and the families fail to find a single acquaintance in common ("You mean you don't know Sol Moscovitz?" Mr. Silver says in amazement). Tensions finally ease after Alan's grandfather tastes the Monaghans' oxtail soup; soon the families are exchanging priest and rabbi jokes. Chinese food is apparently the common denominator which links the two ethnicities. But while both families seem at home in the Chinese restaurant, it is only the Silvers who are greeted by name, encounter a distant cousin, and merit a discount at the end of the meal. Perhaps everyone was eating Chinese food in the 1950s, but the Jewish relationship to it was unique.

"JEWISH PEOPLE ADORE CHINESE FOOD…"

Humorist Molly Katz, frustrated by her gentile husband's inability to grasp the intricacies of American Jewish culture, in 1991 created a guidebook for newcomers to the land of Yiddishkeit. Various chapters detail the natives' attitudes toward dress, conversation, and Chinese food:

> For no reason that has ever been clear to anyone, Jewish people adore Chinese food … so if you have anything against it, you'll have to pretend otherwise.

> As foreign as caffeine and cream are to our bodies, soy sauce is our cure. Never mind chicken soup; when Jews need comfort, solace or medicinal nourishment, we dive for Moo Shu Pork.

> Chinese treats may be enjoyed anytime, but there are two nights on which Jews flock to Chinese restaurants: Thursday (because it's the housekeeper's night off) and Sunday (because we just do). (67)

Katz proceeds to outline the elaborate rites enacted before every Chinese meal, ranging from the practiced debate over "hot" versus "medium hot," to the juggling of menu items to produce a perfect meal.

> You're asked what you'd like … beef with snow peas, you say. There's a thunderclap of silence. Everyone looks over or around you. Chairs squeak.
>
> Finally someone points out that there's a beef dish already, two if you count Land and Sea.
>
> You don't know what to do. Sweating, you suggest peanut chicken. No. Anita has diverticulitis. No nuts.
>
> Eventually you will realize that this game is ancient. These people were ordering Chinese food together when you still thought sesame was something on a Big Mac bun. They always order the same dishes. And they always end up getting another large spare ribs. (68)

But as a slightly more serious Katz would concede, tales of lost tribes of Israel turning up in China notwithstanding, eating Chinese is not an ancient tradition. In the scheme of things Jewish, its evolution barely qualifies as a historic development, having occurred a mere century ago.

While few immigrant memoirs include references to eating Chinese, the English language *American Hebrew* in 1899 subtly criticized the newest Jewish Americans' fondness for the food. The Yiddish press in 1928, at the height of chop suey madness, leveled its own complaints, fretting that Jewish fans of Chinese food were destined to forget their own culinary traditions. Perhaps this was fodder for a new movement, the *Der Tog* reporter lightheartedly suggested; might not communal-minded American Jews everywhere raise the protest sign "Down with chop suey! Long live gefilte fish!"? (Joselit 215)

Not everyone fell under chop suey's spell; Lower East Sider Sophie Ruskay was shaken by a childhood friend's whispered warning that "Chinamen eat mice, you know," (Ruskay 53) But the great majority of immigrant Jews were smitten by the 1920s, supporting nearly twenty chop suey shops within walking distance of Ratner's, the mainstay kosher dairy on Delancey and Essex streets (Joselit 214). Pitkin Avenue, the Champs-Elyseés of a stalwartly Jewish section of Brooklyn in 1928, was aglow with Chinese restaurants.

The children of immigrants who patronized these Jazz Age joints apparently institutionalized the practice of eating Chinese. Jews of the baby boomer generation recall that "my mother and father went out alone Saturday night and took the children to the local Chinese restaurant every Sunday night." (Nathan 156) Allan Ginsberg, who had a famously contentious relationship with his observant father Louis, in 1954 penned a letter home that stuck to the safe subject of Chinese food. "I've seen a lot of Chinatown," Ginsberg wrote during an early trip to San Francisco. "The food is more varied, tasty and original than NYC Chinatown. It's easier to

get and it's about half as cheap as NYC. They have a brand of Won Ton soup new to me and better than original New York style."

The habit had become so entrenched by the 1950s that Borscht Belt comedians could reliably get laughs with lines like: "Jews always look for Chinese restaurants, but how often have you heard of a Chinese looking for gefilte fish?" (Nathan 156). This disparaging view of traditional Jewish cuisine supplied the premise for a favorite joke of the 1960s, in which a struggling Jewish restaurant switches to an all-Chinese menu:

> A few evenings later, a customer ordered egg foo yong.
>
> "Tonight you're out of luck," said the waiter. "We used up the last egg an hour ago, and we don't have any yong left either."
>
> "In that case," said the customer, "just bring me a bowl of the foo." (Spaulding 73)

Buddy Hackett lit up the Concord, one of the larger summer resorts, with his impersonation of a Chinese waiter. He developed the bit in 1949 after a night out with two Army buddies. He reviewed its genesis for interviewer and fellow Jewish comedian Alan King:

> Hackett: One night we went for Chinese. There was a waiter named George there. I got up and started yelling fake Chinese at him down the dumbwaiter. On stage, it got screams. In the beginning I used to put rubber bands around to make Chinese eyes, but a few years later I decided that was offensive. And I didn't need it.

> King: No, everyone knew, we all went to Chinese restaurants then, one from column A, one from column B. (“Buddy Hackett”)

Jokes told on the Catskills circuit filtered down to restaurant owners like Jimmy Eng, who delighted customers at the King Yum with an ingratiatingly accented version of his favorite: “The Jewish people are 5000 years old. And the Chinese people are 3000 years old. So what did the Jews eat for 2000 years?”

Eng immigrated to the United States from Taysan, China in 1936. He worked in a relative’s laundry in Chinatown, per his father’s orders. “I was really disappointed he never sent me to school,” Eng said. “I talked to my father’s partner, I said, I don’t understand why he don’t send me to school. He smiled, said “He wants you to go back, be king of China.” Instead, Eng became King of the Yum.

King Yum was a small Chinese restaurant gasping for its last breaths in the wilderness of Queens when Eng was offered the opportunity to buy it. The neighborhood was then thick with trees; the manicured edges of a St. Johns University golf course were the only visible hint of human existence. “I tell you the truth, there’s no business here,” Eng remembers the exhausted founder warning him in 1953. But Eng had noticed that the Jews who patronized the laundries and restaurants where he had worked were embarking on an exodus from the city’s core to its peripheries. He guessed Union Turnpike would one day lead to a vibrant Jewish community and decided he would be the man to feed it.

“The Jewish people always like Chinese food,” Eng said.[18]

Eng bought the King Yum for $8000. “They say to me ‘Jimmy, you should have changed the name. I should have changed the name, but I didn’t have no money left,” he said. Eng’s

friends ribbed him about the purchase, which even he began to doubt after a few early tangles with the mob and nights spent sleeping in the kitchen. But the Jews finally arrived, just as Eng had planned, and he had little trouble cultivating a loyal clientele. He transformed the tiny storefront into a massive red-walled banquet hall, with Chinese lanterns swinging from the ceiling.[19]

"This place has not changed a bit," enthused former resident Arthur Wartell, who returned to the neighborhood after a forty-year absence. "Once a week, my family would come here, and I tell you it hasn't changed a bit. You can't buy a fried wonton like you get here!" Wartell, who lives in Santa Barbara, recently suffered a stroke. "I couldn't walk, I couldn't talk. But I ate won ton soup everyday. I believe what cured me was that soup." (Wartell)

Such intense Jewish allegiance to Chinese food was cemented in the popular imagination by the aforementioned comic routines, film, and television, where Jews were often portrayed as enjoying a Chinese meal.[20] In a 1972 episode of *Sanford and Son*, "Happy Birthday, Pop!", Lamont Sanford takes his curmudgeonly father Fred to a Chinese restaurant for his birthday. "I can't eat in here," the elder Sanford says. "I can't eat this chink food. You never know what they're going to have in it. These people do their cooking and their laundry in the same pot." Sanford then strikes up a conversation with a diner at a neighboring table, who not only defends Chinese food, but mentions his affection for *Fiddler on the Roof.*

By the 1990s, sitcom writers had dispensed with the *Fiddler on the Roof* references, relying on Chinese food alone to signify a character's ethnic heritage, as in an early episode of *Seinfeld* ("The Chinese Restaurant") in which the protagonists attempt to dine at Hunan on Fifth (their seating is delayed by the incessant arrivals of regulars like "Mr. Cohen!," who the maître'd "hasn't seen in a few weeks!").

Christopher Guest hauled out the device for his 1996 film *Waiting for Guffman*, a mockumentary chronicling a small town's attempt to storm Broadway with the homegrown musical production "Red, White and Blaine." The show's five-member cast includes Alan Pearl, the token Jew and lone dentist in the tiny town of Blaine, Missouri. Pearl believes he's destined for showbiz; his grandfather, Chaim Pearlgutt, premiered the Yiddish standard "My Bubbe Made a Kishke." But his fellow performers – among them an aging high-school football star and a big-haired travel agent who have never left Blaine – are skeptical of Pearl's talents. To persuade them he has the chops for community theater, he invites the couple to dinner at Chop Suey Chinese Kitchen. While the restaurant is heralded by a glowing red neon sign, Ron and Sheila insist they've never seen it:

> Ron: How did you find this place?
>
> Alan: Oh, we've been coming here for many, many years.
>
> Mrs. Pearl: Oh yeah, we've been coming here every Thursday.
>
> Alan: We had friends, Barbara and Bruce, remember, who went to China and they went to Peking, where they make the ducks, and they say you can't get a sauce as thick and sweet over there. They don't make it like that. The food over there is like steamed or something. It's not as good as the food here.

Pearl's bubbe may have made a kishke, but he and his wife eat dumplings. That's all the audience needs to know. For in popular culture, Chinese food has become a coded shorthand for Jewishness.

UNRAVELING THE JEWISH AFFINITY

It is clear that the first Jewish immigrants did not immediately stampede the restaurants of Chinatown. The American Jewish affection took hold only after the turn of the century, when economic circumstances made eating out possible and mainstream culture had blessed Chinese cuisine. The practice became fashionable in the 1920s, when a rage for the exotic swept New York and Chinatown became a genuinely safe destination. American Jews, most of whom by then spurned their religious dietary restrictions, actively participated in the trend. By the 1950s, many American Jewish families were making weekly pilgrimages to their local Chinese restaurant.[21]

But the real question lurking behind the Jewish affinity for Chinese food is an insistent 'why?' Why did immigrant Jews not trade their native foods for spaghetti, paella, or teriyaki chicken? Why didn't Irish or Puerto Rican immigrants embrace Chinese food with such overwhelming fervor? Is there a single reason chop suey became the chosen food of the chosen people?

Unfortunately for the historian with hopes of keeping the past tidy, probably not. There are a number of possible reasons Jews adopted Chinese food, none of them provable.

Gaye Tuchman and Harry Levine in 1993 attempted the first real analysis of the phenomenon, conducting ethnographic interviews of friends and family members to produce "New York Jews and Chinese Food: The Social Construction of an Ethnic Pattern." Their article, which takes as its starting point "Chinese food is the second Jewish cuisine," suggests price, quality, and taste contribute to the appeal of eating Chinese. But the authors conclude the primacy of Chinese food in the American Jewish tradition stems from the food's function as "safe *treyf*," (388) Tuchman and Levine readily concede most food consumed in Chinese restaurants was not kosher. It was rife with pork and shellfish. But the offending ingredients

were usually sufficiently disguised by chopping, dicing, and sautéing, freeing diners from the guilt associated with eating *treyf*. For even those Jews who did not strictly observe the laws of *kashrut* – whether guided by a sense of religious obligation or a palate honed in childhood to reject *treyf* – often avoided pork or shellfish.[22]

Most Chinese food did adhere to the prohibition of mixing milk and meat, as dairy was almost non-existent in the Chinese kitchen. And the dishes were familiar to Jews not only in what they lacked but in what they offered: were wontons not just a foreign form of kreplach? Immigrant Jews recognized the chicken broth, garlic, onions and salt from their mothers' own pantries.[23]

Other immigrant Jews located the allure of Chinese food in its exoticism. They were well aware that spareribs weren't kosher, but thrilled in the rebellion of ordering them. Eating Chinese was cosmopolitan, sophisticated, and secular. Tuchman and Levine quote an older Jewish man as remembering: "I felt about Chinese restaurants the same way I did about the Metropolitan Museum of Art – they were strange and fascinating, and I loved them both." (Tuchman and Levine 402) The Jewish obsession with learning repeatedly resurfaced in America, perhaps never so stridently as in 1891, when 50,000 Lower East Side residents petitioned the Met to open its doors on Sundays (Ewan 214). Chinese food marked its devotees as true Americans with highbrow habits, a perception encouraged by restaurant owners like Eng who showily refused to offer delivery service. "People say, 'Jimmy, why don't you deliver?' Delivery, I don't want that. I don't want customers like that. I want high class people come in here," Eng explained (Eng). The immigrant preoccupation with success and its trappings reached its full exposition in the post-World War II Chinese restaurant.

Paradoxically, eating Chinese may also have appealed to the American Jewish tendency to "identify down." As described by Michael Alexander, downward, or outsider, identification among American Jews is a vestigial impulse forged by years of oppression and an overriding "theology of exile." Alexander argues this identification was strengthened in the 1920s, when great numbers of Jews attained real material success. The decade was the backdrop for a Jewish romance with gangsters, gamblers, jazz, and blackface, culminating in the release of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 (Alexander 3). Perhaps Chinese food too deserves a spot on this laundry list.

American Jews also likely responded to the price of Chinese food, which was low enough to qualify as immigrant-friendly. They may too have enjoyed the family-style service, which implicitly celebrated the centrality of domestic life. "Sometimes the family was about all that was left of Jewishness," Irving Howe said (Braunstein and Joselit).

Yet the three most important factors in the link between Jews and Chinese food may be location, location, location. Chinatown bordered the Jewish enclave of the Lower East Side, approaching ever closer as it grew. The two groups were poised to interact.

There were undeniable commonalities between the two groups. Both spoke in tongues mocked for their stereotypical sounds. Both were non-churchgoing in an overwhelmingly Christian nation. Both were victims of sometimes violent racism. Perhaps recognizing these similarities, the Chinese Empire Reform Association of New York City in 1905 presented a performance of "King David," as a benefit for the Jews of Russia. So many people pressed against the doors of the Bowery Street theater before showtime that additional policemen were called to prevent a fatal stampede. "In this crisis, there is no division of nationality or religion," proclaimed realtor Louis Gordon, leaping to the stage in a fit of excitement after the second act ("Chinese Play 'King David'").

The bond, remarkably free of the tension which sometimes marred even intra-ethnic relations, was symbolized by the 1925 story of three-year old Norton Rubin and his friend John, a waiter in a Chinese restaurant patronized by Rubin's parents. "The yellow curls of the little visitor were to John a pleasing diversion from his monotonous occupation of ordering chow mein and chop suey," the *New York Times* reported.

> Sometimes John would buy an ice cream cone or lollipop for his little friend and find his devotion well repaid. The little boy came to know the Chinese of the section as well as he did his own people, and his speech became a polygot of Chinese and Jewish and English words. ("Child")

The pair made the papers after little Norton disappeared; the two were found together at the Thalia Theater, enjoying a comedy.

The Chinese, unlike their Italian and Irish neighbors schooled in the anti-Semitism of the Catholic Church, did not scorn the Jews. Rather, they embraced them with a tolerance still proudly practiced by Eng: "Did you see that Chinese woman with the brown man come in?" he asked. "I don't care about that." Jewish Americans were not only uncomfortable in certain nightclubs and restaurants, they were unwelcome. Rudy Vallee in 1928 noted managers of the ritzy Heigh-Ho Club barred Jews from the premises, believing them too pushy for polite company (Erenberg 243). Jewish entertainers flocked to Chinese restaurants and theaters, where Eddie Cantor and Isadore Baline – the future Irving Berlin – made their debuts (Maffi 108). It is also possible that Jews feasting in Chinese restaurants were not recognized by the staff as Jews:

they were merely white, like so many other Americans. Eating Chinese offered the opportunity to temporarily shake off one's Jewish identity.[24]

If the location of Chinese restaurants was convenient, so were the hours. Chinese, like Jews, did not observe the Christian Sabbath. Their establishments were open on Saturday nights and Sundays (Nathan 156). The last vestiges of New York's blue laws meant nothing to them. Jewish women who had labored over two large Sabbath meals by the time the sun set Saturday night were likely eager to let someone else do the cooking, and chop suey shops were ready to help. When most New Yorkers were home eating Sunday dinner, Jews could eat Chinese. Jews today still flock to Chinese restaurants on Sundays and Christmas.[25] A quintessentially American solution to the constant negotiation of the holy and the secular has emerged in the form of the Chinese break-the-fast following Yom Kippur.[26]

The transition from New York Jewish tradition to American Jewish tradition was a smooth one, as almost no other immigrant group is as intimately tied to one neighborhood as the Jews. Of the two million Jews who entered the United States after 1880, more than three-quarters of them passed through the Lower East Side (Howe 162). The Jews were perfectly positioned to absorb and diffuse the habits developed there. Robert Warshow noted this trend in 1947: "Not all Jews actually participate in [New York] culture – perhaps most do not – but almost all are ultimately connected with it. The New York pattern is the master pattern … the life of New York can be said to embody the common experience of New York Jews." (Moore 3) So while New Yorkers of other ethnicities may have eaten chop suey, the behavior never assumed the cultural dimensions it did for the Jews.[27]

Eating Chinese has become a meaningful symbol of American Judaism, with all its quirks and ceremonial selectivity. For in eating Chinese, the Jews found a modern means of expressing

their traditional cultural values. The savoring of Chinese food is now a ritualized celebration of immigration, education, family, community, and continuity.

Glossary

Cholent A stew of meat and vegetables

Helzel The skin from the neck of a goose or other fowl

Kasha Buckwheat groats

Knish A piece of dough stuffed with potato, meat, or cheese and baked or fried

Kugel A baked pudding of noodles or potatoes, eggs, and seasonings, traditionally eaten by Jews on the Sabbath.

Mandlen Soup nuts

Mezzuzot A small piece of parchment inscribed with the biblical passages Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21 and marked with the word *Shaddai,* a name of the Almighty, that is rolled up in a container and affixed by many Jewish households to their door frames in conformity with Jewish law and as a sign of their faith.

Tefillin Two small leather boxes, each containing strips of parchment inscribed with quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures, one of which is strapped to the forehead and the other to the left arm; traditionally worn by Jewish men during morning worship, except on the Sabbath and holidays

Tsimmes A stew of vegetables or fruits cooked slowly over very low heat

Definitions adapted from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000.

Notes

[1] Lenny Bruce famously divided the world into Jewish and goyish, with all things soulful falling in the former camp and the sickly sweet belonging to the latter: religious affiliation was irrelevant. “Ray Charles is Jewish. Eddie Cantor’s goyish. B’nai Brith is goyish; Hadassah, Jewish. Black cherry soda’s very Jewish. Lime soda is very goyish.” Quoted in *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*, eds. William Novak and Moshe Waldoks (New York: Harper Perrenial, 1981) 74.
[2] Harry Golden, who grew up on the Lower East Side in the early 20th century, wrote “The first words a Jewish child heard were *Ess, Ess mein Kindst*. A fifteen year old boy already weighing one-hundred and forty-five pounds was an object of concern to his mother if he dawdled over supper…when you went off on a week’s vacation, the first question everybody asked you when you returned was ‘how much weight did you gain?’” Harry Golden, “Preface and Notes,” in Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of New York* (New York: Shocken, 1965) quoted in Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001) 216.
[3] Isaiah 55:1-3
[4] “In the Jerusalem Talmud, Tracate *Kiddushin*, human beings were warned that in the final judgment to take place in the world to come, they would be punished if they had failed to partake of the good foods which their eyes had seen. The section of the Talmud dealing with divorce allowed a man to institute divorce proceedings against his wife if she burnt his soup, thereby hampering him in his enjoyment of food.” Diner 151.
[5] Ovens, pots and pans used for either milk or meat are permanently classified as “milchig” or “fleischig.” But it is common practice today to reverse such designations by blowtorching the surface or appliance in question. Zev Greenwald, *The Kosher Kitchen* (New York: Feldheim, 1997) 14.
[6] The association between Shabbat and meat dates back to at least the seventeenth century, when German rabbi Yair Chaim Bachrach proclaimed: “the taste of fowl does not awaken the joy of festival as does the taste of beef.” John Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied: A Social History of Jewish Food*. (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1993) 26.
[7] It is important to note that Jews did not have the allegiance to their homeland that their neighbors did, if only because they considered Eastern Europe just another stop on their communal journey back to Jerusalem. Fishman, 184.
[8] In 1995, researchers found 80 percent of Jewish Americans surveyed connected their best feelings about Jewish holidays to their associated foods. *The Americanization of the Jews*, eds. Robert Seltzer and Norman Cohen. (New York: New York UP, 1995) 247.
[9] The French equivalent of the word *restaurant* was used to describe the process of fortifying oneself with food. Rebecca Spang. *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2001) 8.
[10] The first cafeteria opened in Chicago in 1893, and soon after reached New York. The first automat in New York opened in 1912. Hooker 325.
[11] Many housewives did not pursue this time-saving strategy without first quelling a great deal of anxiety. “The first principle of any Bronx housewife – namely, No Delicatessen,” wrote Ruth Glazer, alluding to Jewish women’s fears that salty salami wasn’t a nutritious meal. “West Bronx: Food, Shelter, Clothing,” *Commentary* June 1949, quoted in Joselit 203.
[12] Donna Gabaccia theorizes immigrant Jewish women’s traditional reluctance to teach their daughters their culinary secrets – a behavior perhaps rooted in the belief America had more in store for their children than a hot stove – accounts for the disproportionate number of heritage reclaiming cookbooks issued by sisterhoods and synagogues in the 1960s and 70s. Gabaccia 182.
[13] While this paper’s scope is primarily limited to New York City, Chinese established restaurants throughout the country. The restaurant and laundry industries were among the top employers of Chinese in the early twentieth century. Jack Chen. *The Chinese of America*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) 58.
[14] Ben Fong-Torres, later an editor of *Rolling Stone*, in 1972 recalled working at a Chinese takeout restaurant in Emeryville, Calif.: “The manager’s mother always called Negroes see-yow gwai, which means ‘soy sauce devils’…the fact is, somewhere along the line, here in America, land of the golden mountains, the Chinese were fed – and lapped up – fearful stereotypes about blacks and other slummers.” “Chink!” *A Documentary History of Anti-Chinese Prejudice in America*. (New York: World, 1972) x.
[15] This information is drawn from the corporate history of GSD Packaging, which purchased Fold-Pak Corp. – formerly Riegel Paper Company – in 1999. Aug. 2002, http://www.gsdpackaging.com/profile.htm.

[16] Freezing technology had been pioneered in the 1920s, but the predicted frozen food boom was hindered by the Depression and World War II rationing. The market was reinvigorated by the runaway success of frozen orange juice in the late 1940s. Levenstein, 107.
[17] The advent of cooking styles besides Cantonese, beginning in the 1970s, expanded the scope of the Chinese restaurant, but the traditional favorites remained easy to find. Menus from Far East Café(1920), Zamboanga (1930s), Forbidden Palace (1940s) The Celestial (1950s), Lee's (1960s), Asia Little Restaurant (1978) Collection of the Los Angeles Public Library.
[18] While Eng's prediction may have been visionary in the early 1950s, it was accepted restaurant wisdom two decades later, when *New York Times* columnist Mimi Sheraton noted the proliferation of kosher Chinese restaurants. "One of the better known facts of restaurant life is that Chinese restaurants are more likely to do well where they are in easy reach of a Jewish clientele, most especially if the food they serve is Cantonese." Mimi Sheraton. "Restaurants: Japanese-French and Chinese-Jewish," *New York Times* 11 Mar. 1977
[19] Eng's chosen décor was tame by 1950s standards: David Y.H. Wu, in his exploration of the representation of Chineseness in American restaurants, describes the construction of "Chinese utopias, with pagoda, fish ponds and landscape….the image confomed to the Western paintings of a stereotyped Chinese mansion found on the blue and white Chinese porcelain (or French wallpaper) exported to Europe in the seventeenth century." "Improvising Chinese Cuisine Overseas," *The Globalization of Chinese Food*, eds. David Y.H. Wu and Sidney C.H. Cheung (Richmond, Surrey, U.K.: Curzon, 2002) 61.
[20] The Stan Freeberg Agency apparently exploited the association in its national ad campaign for Chun King Chow Mein featuring actors enjoying the frozen product in identifiable New York settings, but no recordings of the ads survive. (New York: Stan Freeberg Ltd., 1960-66)
[21] While an early Chinese cookbook was found in the walls of an apartment at 97 Orchard Street, a building which has been lovingly restored by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, Chinese cookery rarely penetrated the private Jewish kitchen. Personal interview with Steve Long, 9 Nov. 2002.
[22] Folklorist Leslie Prosterman, in her study of Jewish caterers, discovered even *kashrut*-flouting Jews are loathe to order stews and casseroles for special events. The distrust of the dishes, with their mysterious ingredients, is undoubtably rooted in traditional dietary restrictions. Leslie Prosterman, "Food and Celebration," *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*, eds. Linda Brown and Kay Mussell (Knoxville: The U of Tennessee P, 1984).
[23] In 1918, dietician Mary Shapiro bemoaned her Jewish clients unwillingness to eat vegetables with anything but "a sweet and sour sauce." Shapiro 53.
[24] According to Karen Brodkin, American Jews were not seen by themselves or others as 'white' prior to World War II. Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 1998)
[25] The Jewish tradition of eating Chinese food on Christmas was apparently in place by 1935, when Chinese restaurant owner Eng Shee Chuck prepared eighty Christams Day chow mein dinners for the orphans at Jewish Children's Home in Newark. "Yule Stirs Chinese to Aid Jewish Home: Eng Shee Chuck Gives Chow Mein Dinners and Tells Fairy Stories to Children," *New York Times*, 26 Dec. 1935.
[26] Arlene Avakian recalls her family annually marking the end of Yom Kippur at Yum Luck, a local Chinese restaurant. Arlene Avakian. "Changing Relations to Ethnic Food," *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking*, ed. Arlene Avakian (Boston: Beacon, 1997) 102.
[27] Jews also retained their taste for mah-jong long after most Americans had tossed their tiles. The Source for Everything Jewish, a leading Judaica retailer specializing in sacramental items and cultural kitsch, devotes a page of its mail order catalog to the game: offerings include an umbrella, refrigerator magnets, eyeglass holders and a "Mah Jong Maven" coffee mug. *The Source for Everything Jewish*, Fall 2002.

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