

Asian Food goes West

“Authentic” Chinese and Japanese food and the Chinese and Japanese food served in the Western world tend to be different, often barely resembling each other. When a cuisine travels to another country, it is shaped by that country’s cuisine and the desires of its residents. Chinese food in the United States has much more salt, sugar, and fried items than food in mainland China, and some sushi items, like the California roll, were invented thousands of miles away from Japan. This essay will explore how and why France and the United States shape Asian fare in their own particular ways.

Asian food got to France the same way it got to the United States, through immigration. Immigrants from Asia, particularly southeastern Asia (Thailand, China, Vietnam) were pushed into menial service jobs once they arrived at their destination, whether it be in the U.S. or France. Labor, laundry and food service were the major industries of Chinese and other Southeastern Asian immigrants, and they formed their own communities of labor and food service. When people form communities, food always seems to follow. Their prevalence in the food service industry led to the ubiquity of Chinese restaurants, giving other Chinese a taste of familiar food in an unfamiliar and often hostile country. Before long, white people started coming in and shaping the food to their taste.

“According to Gold Rush folklore, a group of drunken American miners entered a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco late one night, just as the shop was about to close. The owner... quickly threw together a handful of table scraps to create the dish we now know as

chop suey.”(Liu 4) Chop suey is the most well-known example of American tastes shaping Chinese food. The cheap, but popular, dish opened the door to small independent businesses, “Its humble origins allowed numerous Chinese immigrants to start modest restaurant businesses without formal culinary training. Meanwhile, as the Chinese were seen as an inferior race, it was almost impossible to introduce a real authentic Chinese delicacy to the American public.”(Liu 18), in the highly racialized environment they ended up in upon immigrating to the United States. Chop suey and other Americanized Chinese foods became incredibly popular, even though they barely resembled the food the cooks and restaurant owners ate in daily life, or back in China. “Chop suey houses seldom offered Chinese delicacies such as sea slug, bird’s nest, or shark fins to American clients. While expensive because of their rarity and nutritious qualities, Chinese delicacies had plain tastes. They would not sell well in American markets.” (Liu 14) The trend of adding salt, sugar and more fried foods in order to satisfy the American palate had begun. Chop suey was an interesting phenomenon because it was peddled as Chinese, even though it was mostly eaten by white clients, and made to please Americans. “Popular as it was, chop suey essentially represented cheap exoticism in the eyes of American clients. It survived and succeeded mostly as a bargain food. As the most famous Chinese dish in America, it met not only American tastes but also their social expectations of Chinese cuisine.”(Liu 18). It was cheap, because of its price, and because of the cheap exotic thrill of eating ethnic food. It was not representative of Chinese culture, but it gave Chinese immigrants a foot in the economic door and access to a profitable business model.

“Rather it implied an attempt to include them in the American culture by selectively capitalizing on their traditions for the American eating culture.”(Menus as cultural agents 971)

Japanese food arrived much later, after Chinese food was well-entrenched in American society. “Although Japanese food was introduced to America before WWII through businesspeople and immigrants, the first sushi restaurant in the US did not open until 1960.”(Edwards 213). Soon afterwards, American tastes began to change sushi: “...Ichiro Mashita and Teruo Imaizumi, were credited with inventing the California roll; tuna was more difficult to obtain, so avocado was substituted as it has a similar texture and consistency.”(Edwards 213). Now, there are all kinds of sushi that have been conceived by American consumers- sweet potato sushi, sushi with tofu and mayonnaise, and tempura (fried vegetable) sushi are just a few of the variations. “American-style sushi has been integrated into US society and is an adaptation of Japanese-style sushi that fits to the Americans’ taste palette as well as the American consumers’ value of creativity and innovation.” (Edwards 216). Just like with Chinese food, once sushi arrived in the United States, it began evolving in a different, untraditional direction in order to meet consumer demand. It also shows how people who have not been brought up in a certain culinary tradition can contribute to its evolution, producing some tasty food in the process.

Chinese restaurants often serve Filipino, Thai, and other southeastern Asian foods, along with the occasional sushi roll and the Americanized versions of Chinese food, all under the umbrella of “Chinese food”. Japanese food, however, rarely serves food that has not originated in Japan or in Japanese restaurants. Sweet and sour chicken may share space with sushi at a Chinese buffet, but one will never see it on a menu for a Japanese restaurant. The reason for this is the perception that Chinese food is lower-class than Japanese; it was the food of laborers and the “yellow peril”. Japanese food is more distinct because it arrived later, and wasn’t as associated with the lower class and immigrants. The Japanese, due to the lightness of their skin and their tendency to not work in menial labor but in skilled labor or business, were always perceived as of a higher class than other Asians. Chinese can mean so many different things because no one bothers to pin down the specifics of China and the other nearby countries, with the exception of Japan. Also, Chinese restaurants have simply been around longer, and gotten more and more integrated into the Western palate. It’s not Chinese anymore; it’s “Pan-Asian”. Japanese restaurants came around a few decades later, in the 1960s (Edwards), and they had more control over their image and cuisine. This translates back to Japanese food; because of these racial and class boundaries, it is in a category of its own, above other Asian foods.

France has several distinct food practices that separate it from American food culture. Food usually comes in at least three courses, “Especially in smaller restaurants, it is common to order what is referred to as a menu or *formule*. A selection of dishes is offered for each of two or

three courses at a fixed price for the full meal; the sum is usually less than an à la carte total.”(Abramson 128). The courses are the entrée, a small appetizer, soup or salad; it is followed by the plat, or main course, which usually has some sort of meat or fish, or is a substantial vegetable dish; last is dessert, which is usually served with coffee or tea. “It is considered courteous to order a similar sequence as one’s dinner companions (i.e., items from within the three-course menu choices), so that the meal progresses according to a similar rhythm for everybody at the table.” (Abramson 128). Meals have a “rhythm”, and are enjoyed by “everybody at the table”. They are communal and come in stages, and ethnic restaurants have noted these characteristics and altered themselves accordingly: “Similarly, restaurants serving a foreign cuisine (Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai, Moroccan, and so on) adapt their menus to follow French custom. Whether or not the practice coincides with eating custom in the country of origin of the food itself, menus will group dishes into entrées, plats, and desserts and vary the portions accordingly.”(Abramson 106). Ethnic restaurants adapt their meals to the French three-course format so as not to alienate their customer base. Their adherence to said format contributed to their popularity- their meals are served in the French style, but they aren’t French. It’s a refreshing change to have a different kind of food from time to time.

This doesn’t bode well with some French people: “During the 1990s, a group of prominent chefs published a manifesto protesting “alien” and “exotic” combinations of flavors and foods. These chefs called for a return to *terroir* and presumably to some sort of ideal state of absolute Frenchness.”(Abramson 126). *Terroir* is the French land that food and wine grapes are grown on. The movement back to it emphasized French-grown ingredients and French recipes,

not imported foods or ethnic restaurants. The U.S., being a very mixed culture to begin with, doesn't really worry about foods being "American" or not. The stereotypical "American" foods like apple pie and hot dogs originated in Europe, and found their way to the U.S., just like ethnic food. There was never much of an American cuisine to begin with, so ethnic food was just another addition to the already mixed American food culture. France, however, has a very long and stories food tradition that goes back to the middle ages, and ethnic food, food that is not French, can be seen as a threat. The outrage of a small group of foodies has not stopped the growth of ethnic food in France. There is a Chinese or Japanese place on every corner, almost at a 1:1 ratio with the little cafes and bistros France is so well known for.

The Chinese/Vietnamese restaurant I visited in France was nearly indistinguishable from the ones in Decatur and in my hometown of Lexington, Kentucky. It had a white interior with fading pictures of China and Vietnam posted around the dining room. It even smelled the same, of fried food and steamed rice. The menu just happened to be in French. The menu had options for everyone; several kinds of fried rice, noodle bowls, spring rolls, sweet and sour meats, steamed vegetables; it was familiar to all of us. The girl next to me wanted shrimp fried rice, but through her awkward French, ended up getting shrimp with noodles, which was very upsetting to her. It was apparently not the Chinese food she was used to in the United States. I got the special, a noodle bowl with chicken and vegetables in a sweet broth. The Chinese restaurants I've been to in the U.S. don't have daily specials. Their menu items are fixed, and only the prices change because of the switch from lunch to dinner. We did not get fortune cookies, which really is

specific to the United States. Instead, we had sesame seed candies for dessert, which were equally harmless and palate-cleansing.

In Toulouse, I wandered into a Thai restaurant and ordered a *formule*. My entrée was a chicken and bean sprout salad with carrots and a sweet dressing, my main course was caramelized beef with carrot, onions and jasmine rice, and my dessert was three chocolate egg rolls served with strawberries, whipped cream, and, concealed under the whipped cream, a scoop of mango ice cream. It was sweet just like the Thai food I enjoy in the U.S. Something that surprised me was that an older gentleman entered the restaurant a little after me, and he ordered a noodle dish with a carafe of red wine. I never thought about having red wine with Thai food. It was a bit jarring to think about the flavor combinations. However, it was France, and the man was being French and enjoying a nice red with his food, even if the food was never intended to be paired with wine. He was engaging in French culinary tradition (Wine at meals) in an Asian culinary environment. Avoiding overlapping with the main food culture is impossible for ethnic restaurants, so they adapt and serve red wine with noodles.

I found the Thai and Chinese food in France to be more carefully arranged than their American counterparts. At the Chinese restaurant, the spring rolls were neatly arranged with a decorated bowl of dipping sauce; the people who did not have noodle bowls had very intentionally arranged food with garnishes. The Thai restaurant clearly put a lot of stock in presentation- figure 2 is a photo of my caramelized beef. The carrots are sliced into star shapes, and a carrot slice accents the neat dome of rice. Compare with figure 1, which has photos of some basic American Chinese food. It's food on a plate. It's there and it looks edible. Most of

the Chinese food American consumers eat is take out, and any efforts towards presentation goes away thanks to the plastic and paper containers that the food comes in. However, in France it is clear that food is meant to be enjoyed with multiple senses, with sight as well as smell and taste. My dessert at the Thai restaurant also had a sense of fun, because of the mango ice cream hidden under the pile of whipped cream. Food is an experience that is meant to be savored, not eaten out of the box while watching cartoons, which is something I and many people I know are guilty of.



Fig. 1 Menu from Golden House



Fig. 2 Caramelized Beef

My experience in a Japanese restaurant in France started off similar to my experiences in the various Japanese restaurants I've frequented in the U.S. Those who chose a *formule* got miso soup or salad to begin, just like at Sushi Avenue, down the road from my college. The miso was tasty, and looked exactly like the miso I've seen a dozen times in the U.S. The pot stickers were where it got interesting. Those who ordered the pot stickers got several different kinds: beef, chicken meatball, beef meatball, and, most interestingly, a strip of steak wrapped around melted cheese. Cheese does not exist in traditional Japanese cuisine. This intrigued me to no end. The cheese was much like white American cheese; definitely cheesy, but nothing special. "Today, the appreciation of cheese is so highly developed that cheese is eaten as a course all its own in a full meal. It is the last savory course, before the fruit or dessert." (Abramson 56). In France, to have food without cheese would be even more bizarre than having cheese next to sushi.



Fig. 3 From the top left, going left to right: Coque de Coco, an ice cream made from coconut milk; Orange or Lemon Givré, sorbet in a citrus fruit; Sake Soufflé; Suspens, an upside-down cake; Green Tea Ice Cream; Coffee Parfait; Chocolate Croustillant

The desserts at the Japanese restaurant showed a mix of Japanese and French influences.

There were chocolate and coffee cakes (Typical French fare) alongside green tea and citrus fruits, flavors one is more likely to find in Asia. The sake soufflé is the best example of the two

cuisines coming together; it's a traditional French dish, but with a traditional Japanese main ingredient. One can find soufflés in France, and sake in Japan, but sake soufflés can only happen in a Japanese restaurant in France. Eastern cuisines in Western countries always leads to more (or less, depending on who you're talking to) innovation and experimentation. Immigration and the food industry's direct financial dependence on consumers lead to unusual and surprisingly delicious fusion food.

Despite the cultural differences between American and French cuisine- Americans favor fast food while the French enjoy a three course event; The U.S. absorbs different cuisines into its mixed culture while some French resist ethnic foods in favor of their heavily entrenched tradition, etc. - the Asian food experiences are remarkably similar. The Chinese restaurant could have been out of my hometown, and the Japanese restaurant would have blended right in with Sushi Avenue down the street, if it wasn't for the cheese and the varied dessert menu. Both American and French Asian restaurants trade in on trendiness and exoticism, giving the Westerners something exciting but harmless to eat to break up their weekly routine. The food has been altered for them out of economic necessity, because the Westerners make up the majority of their consumer base. They profit from tweaking the menu and serving style to that of the majority customer. Asian, and other ethnic restaurants, is ways for minorities to get a foothold in the economy and start their own businesses. One can forgive them for introducing inauthentic fare to the West- it's a proven path to financial security.

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