

A History of Chinese Restaurants In America

The first Chinese eateries in America, known as "chow chows," which sprang up in California in the mid-19th century to serve Cantonese laborers. True holes in the wall, they were marked, as per a Chinese tradition, with yellow cloth triangles. No menus have survived, if ever there were any; who knows but that they served stir-fried buffalo. Still, we may gather that the workers liked the fare, for we do have the advertisements of competitors, who suddenly began offering free potatoes with their meals. The spud strategy was ultimately for naught, though: The Chinese restaurant had been born and were here to stay.

According to the *Chinese Restaurant News*, there are now more Chinese restaurants in America than there are McDonald's franchises—nearly three times as many in fact. Obviously, Chinese cuisine has proved to be very popular here. In the 19th century, though, the Chinese were scorned as rat-eaters; nothing could have been more revolting than eating what they ate.

An 1877 magazine cartoon titled "Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner" shows various immigrants contentedly enjoying their respective national dishes—a Frenchman, for example, tucks into his frogs—while an officious African-American manservant conveys a turkey to Uncle Sam. All is harmony, right down to a Native Indian who, unable to abide a chair, squats peaceably beside his fellow guests. Only one personage draws horror from the other diners—the man from China, about to eat a rodent. [*One has to wonder, though, how much of that perspective came from prejudice against the Chinese immigrants*]

Yet, despite this apparent clash of cultures, and despite the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which categorically barred further Chinese immigration, Chinese restaurateurs strove to make a place for themselves. With trepidation: Chinese food was often embedded in the familiar. For example, one early menu lists "Grilled Dinner Steak Hollandaise" and "Roast California Chicken with Currant Jelly," with "Fine Cut Chicken Chop Suey" presented as just another option.

As if to counter stereotypes, early interiors featured stun-

menu from the 1900s

