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Life got in the way then
the next umpteen years
were devoted to learning
and follies and fears
My first Chinese fare
was the Mandarin Café
I loved their fried rice
my first taste of Cathay



The Mandarin Cafe; photo courtesy of Jean Eng

Chapter 6 - Chop Suey and Chow Mein

As a child growing up in Tulsa, Oklahoma in the early 60's, I had no access to "real" Chinese food. My Mom's version of Chinese food was opening up a can of "Chun King Chicken Chow Mein" or "La Choy Chop Suey" and heating up the mixture in a pot on the stove. She would put crispy "chow mein noodles" on our plates and slop the chop suey on top of the noodles. "Chinese vegetables" were a mixture of celery, carrots, snow peas, bamboo shoots, water chestnuts, and bean sprouts in a can. We always had a bottle of soy sauce on the table to sprinkle liberally on the top.



I was probably 12 years old when I went to my first Chinese restaurant. It was called “The Mandarin Café” and was located at 118 E 3rd Street in Tulsa. A friend introduced me to an exotic dish called Shrimp Fried Rice and I was hooked. After that first encounter, I made shrimp fried rice at the Mandarin a part of my regular Saturday public bus excursions to the Central YMCA.



In the early 1960's, the Mandarin Café relocated to 51st and Peoria and was renamed the Pagoda. It quickly became my family's "go-to" Chinese restaurant and had fancier dishes than those served at the Mandarin Café. Pressed Duck, egg rolls, and sweet and sour pork were among my favorites. Pressed Duck was made by boiling a whole duck for a couple of hours in a combination of water, soy sauce, fresh ginger root, star anise, and green onions. The duck meat was then removed from the carcass and shredded. The shredded duck was pressed into the bottom of a pan and sprinkled generously with corn starch and then steamed. The following day it was removed from the pan, cut into squares and deep fried. It was served with sweet and sour sauce and sprinkled with crushed almonds. Amazing!

To a young boy in middle America, eating fried rice off a plate with chopsticks was not only exotic but challenging. Chinese teapots full of jasmine tea were "free." At the end of the meal, the check came on a small platter with enough fortune cookies for everyone at the table to have one of their own. In the middle of each sweet cookie, shaped like a Chinese ingot, there was a "Chinese saying" like, "Your dreams will all come true"; "Wealth awaits you very soon"; or "Don't mistake temptation for opportunity."

In all of my 50+ years in China, I've never once seen Chop Suey or Pressed Duck on a Chinese menu, nor have I ever been given a fortune cookie at the end of a meal in China. Chinese food in middle America was a combination of real Chinese food, American ingredients, and chefs who did their best to modify Chinese flavors to suit their perceptions of American tastes. But some restaurants didn't even try. I remember one Chinese restaurant in Oklahoma called The Chopstick - yes, only one. When we asked the blond-haired teeny bopper waitress what she would recommend from the menu, she said "the cheeseburgers are pretty good. I've never tried the Chinese food."

Ignoring her advice, we ordered "Chinese Shrimp". Unable to find the shrimp in the breading, we all wished we had taken her counsel.