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LIFE + STYLE



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mailbag



Name: Erin Yoshimura

Based in: Arvada, Colo.

Story: As the regular Wasabi Woman columnist, she wrote When Cultures Collide. (p.18)

Background: A certified corporate trainer and coach who has created emotional and cultural intelligence training programs for clients including KUSA/9News and Raytheon.

Why this topic: "With all the coaches and leadership trainings I've undergone, there's one thing that is sorely missing - ethnic cultural values. In coaching, we're taught to coach the whole person. Well, if cultural values aren't touched upon, it's like half of who we are gets missed. This topic heats up my inner Wasabi!"

What she wants you to know: "Asian Americans can't wait for 'someone' to create personal and professional growth tools geared toward our needs—we need to do this for ourselves."

Name: Navdeep Singh Dhillon

Based in: Los Angeles and New York

Story: Chinatown: Tasting the Real Deal (p.34)

Background: Has a degree in creative writing and spent two years teaching English in Dandong, a small town on the border of North Korea and China.

Currently, he runs nsd photography, a wedding photography business.

Other Publications: Modern Bride, That's Beijing, Rave and The Fresno Bee.

What he wants you to know about the story: "Don't let business people define 'Chinese' food for you. There's more to the food than combination platters and all-you-can-eat buffets. Chinese cuisine varies quite drastically from one region to the next. While nothing beats the real thing, if you do a little research, you can find something close."



Name: Jennifer Kim

Based in: Los Angeles

Story: Work Hard and Prosper? (p.26)

Background: A freelance writer and teacher who has degrees from the University of Michigan and UCLA and would like to write a children's book one day.

Other Publications: The Los Angeles Times, Jane magazine and KoreAm Journal.

What she wants you to know about the story: "I got to talk with a very interesting cross-section of people who are helping their parents financially in one way or another, and I discovered that Asian immigrants are not financially planning in the same way as Caucasians. The Asian immigrant relies more heavily on the child, and any reader currently in this position might find comfort in this article."

Chinatown

Tasting the Real Deal

story and photos by Navdeep Singh Dhillon

HAVING LIVED, traveled and, most importantly, eaten my way through the different regions of China for more than two years, I have become quite picky about the type of Chinese food I will consume. Combination platters with sweet-n-sour chicken and my choice of chow mein or fried rice just don't cut it for me anymore.

The main problem with Chinese restaurants in the United States is that everything is mixed together. You shouldn't be able to find Northern and Southern cuisine on the same menu because odds are that the chef isn't well trained in both styles of cooking. Restaurant owners are usually counting on the fact that you have no point of reference. I, however, do, and I'll admit it, I'm an elitist.

No, I am not an expert in Chinese cooking, and I can't give instruction on the different schools of cooking in Chinese cuisine or the various methods of dumpling preparation. But I do know the real deal when I sink my teeth into it.

Satisfying my finicky palate has admittedly become a challenge, but I have yet to give up, well aware that finding authentic cuisine is not impossible, it just takes patience. Bearing this in mind, I decided to navigate my way through the one place you can allegedly find anything you can find in China: San Francisco's legendary Chinatown. From authentic Northern jiao zi to Southern dim sum and everything in between, it is all here. It's just a matter of looking in the nooks and crannies.

Read on to savor my findings.

1.

San Francisco Eastern Bakery Inc.
720 Grant Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94108-2114
415-433-7973

With the musical sounds of Cantonese being spoken by the staff and the television perched above the counter tuned to the latest soap opera, this is a great place to start your culinary adventure through Chinatown. I came to see if their cha siu bao—pork buns—were really the “best in town,” as the sign in the window boasted. They were. The barbecued pork filling had the perfectly pungent blend of seasoning. The 80 cent baked or steamed pork buns, however, aren't the only reason this bakery has been here since 1924. Also deserving credit are the eatery's scrumptious dim sum breakfast menu at bargain prices, the mooncakes, freshly made Southern-style pot stickers and tapioca drinks. The 25-minute wait for the pot stickers and tapioca drinks is well worth it. For less than \$10, you can have an incredibly hearty breakfast/brunch.





2.

Sweetheart Café
909 Grant Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94108
415-262-9989

While I generally steer clear of chains, this is my one exception. After a big breakfast, the Chinatown branch of Sweetheart Café is the perfect spot to cool off, Chinese style of course. From the outside, this might look like a regular ice cream parlor, but don't be fooled. The instant you walk in, you're surrounded by colorful packets of Chinese candies to your left, ice cream and tapioca drinks to your right. The flavors have an Asian flair, including ginger milk and coconut pudding, both for \$1.95, and lychee ice cream or passion fruit with pearls for \$2.75. And if you'd like a blend of East and West, try the lush, chocolatey cookies 'n' cream drink with pearls for just \$3.50. If you're thinking pearls like the kind you find in Vietnamese tea, think again. These are huge black tapioca pearls that give a cold drink that extra kick, especially on a warm San Francisco day.

3.

Yee's Restaurant
1131 Grant Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94133
415-576-1818

If you're like me and you gauge a good restaurant by the quality of the food, the portions, how crowded the eatery is and how boisterous the customers are, then Yee's Restaurant is sure to have you in bok choy heaven. There's no need to second guess yourself and worry about what a dish will look like after you've ordered it. For lunch and breakfast, tables are filled with a variety of freshly made dishes. Grab the ones you want, leave the ones you don't. For \$15.99 you get three huge entrees of anything you see or just ask the chef to make you something not yet prepared. If you're feeling adventurous and want to try something straight from the streets of Hong Kong, grab a steaming hot plate of sautéed pork intestines or pork's blood and skin with chives. And remember, tofu isn't just for vegetarians; try the roast pork with tofu or the seafood tofu clay pot. If you and your stomach aren't in an adventurous mood, opt for the garlic bok choy. It's divine! If you arrive early enough, between 8 a.m. and 11 a.m., you can save even more with the breakfast special, just \$2.50 per item. The special is written in Chinese. Ask the owner or chef to translate.

4.

The Pot Sticker
150 Waverly Place
San Francisco, CA 94108
415-397-9985



Any restaurant specializing in "Szechuan, Hunan and Mandarin Cuisine," is bound to have a few inauthentic dishes. But still, The Pot Sticker, which specializes in jiao zi (dumplings) offers up a variety of dumplings representing different regions of China. If you're feeling courageous, try the dumplings in hot oil, a bellyful bargain at 12 for just \$4.95. Also deserving a gold star: fresh shrimp with leek dumplings (\$6.50 for 10) are succulent and satisfying without being heavy. For heartier appetites, try an order of the barbecued pork spare ribs for \$7.95 or go big with the whole Peking Duck at the bargain price of \$24.



5.

Z&Y Restaurant
655 Jackson Street
San Francisco, CA 94133
415-981-8988
www.zygarden.com

I was drawn to this restaurant by the promise of huo guo from the Sichuan region of Southwest China. Huo guo is Mandarin for what is translated in restaurants here as “hot pot,” but it literally means “fire pot.” The hot pot concept is simple: cook the food yourself in a pot placed in the middle of your table. Order uncooked foods such as meat, vegetables, noodles and seafood and then cook items in a delicious broth for a few minutes. Finish off with a dip into tasty, spicy sauce. The version Z&Y serves up pales in comparison to the real thing, but if you have a strong craving to satisfy, it will do in a pinch. They have several varieties to choose from such as the Sichuan spicy chicken hot pot (\$15.95) and the Yunnan lamb hot pot (\$17.95). The hot pot comes pre-cooked for convenience, but make liberal use of chili oil sauce to spice things up. Or opt for a more authentic Sichuan experience by trying the spicy pig ear with five spices (\$4.95) and numbing spicy seaweed (\$3.95). If you don’t want to venture that far out of your comfort zone, try the chicken with explosive chili pepper or the spicy fish with flaming chili oil (\$9.95).

6.

**Old Mandarin
Islamic Restaurant**
3132 Vicente Street (at 43rd)
San Francisco, CA 94116
415-564-3481

If you’ve had your fill of pork from Chinatown and are in the mood for an authentic meal, this is the place. Since Muslims do not eat pork, they are experts in cooking other meats like lamb, beef and chicken. The specialty here is not Sichuan, Hunan or Cantonese cuisine. They are strictly a Beijing hot pot restaurant with Beijing wait staff and chefs and real Beijing copper hot pots and portable burners. The price of a hot pot meal depends on what you order, but is about \$15-\$20 per person. In addition to the copper hot pot with the burner, you can order uncooked ingredients like razor thin slices of lamb, see-through squishy noodles, various types of tofu and a plethora of greens. Once the ingredients are cooked, dip your chopsticks into the hot pot and grab whatever you like. Smother it in a delicious dipping sauce and be prepared for a scrumptious meal.