



Pointers from the master
(From left) Mather culinary staff member Antonio Cyprian gets a few pointers from resident Constance Chang while preparing Sweet-Sour Cabbage. | Eric Davis-for Sun-Times Media

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All-you-can-eat

CHINESE BUFFET CREATOR CONTINUES TO INSPIRE

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Contributor

For Evanston resident Constance Chang, life's been a smorgasbord experience. Long before globetrotting was as common as it is today, Chang had already sampled distinctly different cultures, living and working in three countries.

Born in Shanghai, she has lived in the United States since 1994, when she moved here with her husband from Tokyo. There she introduced Japan — and ultimately the world — to the wildly popular all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet.

The world's first such spread, an introduction by sampling of Chinese foods like tea-smoked duck, lemon chicken or beef stir fry, debuted in 1959 at Chang's storied Peacock Hall, her restaurant in the Tokyo Hotel. It was among four Chinese eateries through which Chang familiarized foodies with Chinese cuisine during the 42 years she and her husband lived in Japan.

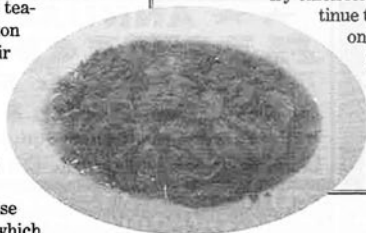
"When we arrived, most people only knew about a few Chinese foods, like spring rolls and sweet-sour pork," she said. Her guests, including Japan's Emperor Hirohito and 100 celebrants from his 60th birthday in 1962, were eager students and helped to popularize Chinese food.

Constance Chang's Shredded Beef with Onion and Green Pepper

1/2 lb. beef tenderloin
1 large bulb onion
3 pieces green bell pepper
Garlic, to taste
8 T oil
1 T sake
2 T soy sauce
1/2 T sugar
1/2 T baking powder
1 tsp. garlic, minced
1/2 tsp. salt
Ground pepper, to taste

Shred beef, onion and green pepper. Mix 2 tablespoons oil, sake, baking powder, soy sauce, sugar and garlic in large bowl, and marinate beef in mixture for at least 30 minutes.

Heat 3 tablespoons oil in cooking pan. Add salt. Stir-fry onion for 2 minutes. Add peppers and continue to stir-fry. Remove pepper and onion from pan. In same pan, heat 3 tablespoons oil. Add the beef and stir-fry until color changes. Add ground pepper to the beef. Add pepper and onion, and stir-fry until beef is fully cooked.



LEFT: Stir-fry dishes such as Constance Chang's Shredded Beef with Onion and Green Pepper helped popularize the Chinese Buffet. RIGHT: Constance Chang's Sweet-Sour Cabbage is simple to prepare — and healthy. Photos by Eric Davis-for Sun-Times Media

Sake's a must

Chang was, in turn, influenced by Japanese cuisine. She incorporates such regional ingredients as sake into her marinades. "You must have sake," she said, explaining that the flavorful rice wine intensifies taste and removes odors

from beef and fish.

Not on the menu at Chang's Peacock Hall: Fortune cookies, which she clarified as a legendary myth of Chinese cuisine. "We don't have fortune cookies in China," Chang pointed out. "When I came to America and saw them, I thought: 'That's a good idea.'"

Constance Chang's Sweet-Sour Cabbage

1/2 head green cabbage
3 red bell peppers
1 green bell pepper
3 T vinegar
3 T vegetable oil
3 T sugar
1 tsp. salt

Shred cabbage and peppers. Heat oil in cooking pan. Add salt. Stir-fry cabbage and peppers. Add vinegar and sugar.



Mather, the continuing care retirement community in Evanston where Chang lives, "She's Japan's Julia Child," referring to Chang's Julia-esque resume, which includes writing cookbooks, establishing a culinary school and, yes, even hosting a cooking TV show in Japan.

Chang, 93, continues to sample new ways to enjoy life: She leads chair aerobics exercise classes every morning, shops her way through Chicago's Chinatown and teams up with fellow Mather residents to play games such as mahjong. She's even been known to step up to the stir-fry pan over a high flame in the kitchen, appropriately clad in bright pink-colored Crocs. "They're comfortable,"

Chang said of her Mario Batali-like foot gear.

One block from The Mather, there is new evidence of how Chinese cuisine in another kitchen continues

to inspire: 527 Café, a sandwich, salad and pasta eatery, opened at 527 Davis Street on Oct. 4. The Asian infusion menu whimsically mixes teriyaki with guacamole (Salmon Teri Taco); Mongolian marinade with Philly-style cheese steak (Mongolian Cheese Steak) and bok choy with spaghetti pasta (Shrimp Pasta). The Asian-inspired smorgasbord continues to evolve.

Japan's Julia Child

For Chang's friend Jamie Merrell, a facilitator at The