Is “chop suey” really Chinese? What about the fortune cookie? And who exactly is General Tso? Chinese food in America is a mix of ingredients from many sources and culinary traditions. And today, there are more Chinese restaurants in the U.S. than McDonald’s, Burger Kings, and Pizza Huts combined. Just how did Chinese food become so popular?

The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and the National Museum of American History are proud to present the spicy, complex, and delicious story of Chinese American food culture.

SWEET & SOUR: CHINESE AMERICAN FOOD FROM CHINATOWN TO MAIN STREET, is a visually exciting, thought-provoking, and revealing look at this mainstream cuisine. From immigrant-only destinations in the early 19th century, Chinese restaurants transformed into exotic eating spots, and ultimately became everyday fixtures of life in the U.S. SWEET & SOUR is a classic American story of immigration, adaptation, and identity—with food as the protagonist.

Visitors will discover how the earliest Chinese immigrants came to America’s West Coast, and can follow the fascinating story of Chinese cuisine as it becomes popular all across the country, from tiny hamlets to major urban centers. The success of Chinese food was hard-earned, as Asian immigrants faced decades of prejudice and restrictive laws. In spite of these challenges, close-knit Chinese communities found ways to maintain a food culture rooted in China, while adapting to Western culture and tastes.

Filled with arresting historic and contemporary photos, ephemera, lively text, engaging film and interactives, vintage objects and surprising props, the exhibition will delight and inform audiences of all ages.
BECOMING AMERICAN

CHINESE WORKERS ARRIVED IN THE UNITED STATES during the first half of the 1800s. They worked as miners, building railroads, in agriculture—and as restaurant owners.

Life was difficult for these early immigrants, and SWEET & SOUR tells the story of how they helped build this nation while struggling for acceptance in their new home. The Chinese were increasingly looked upon as outsiders who refused to conform to societal norms, stole jobs from Americans, and sent wages back to China. Throughout the last decades of the 19th century, anti-Chinese feelings and propaganda rose in the U.S., particularly on the West Coast. This wave of resentment culminated in the 1882 Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese immigration.

While discriminatory laws drove many immigrants to return to China, those who remained created bustling, self-sufficient “Chinatowns.” In these enclaves, early Chinese restaurants initially fed their own communities, but eventually introduced Americans to Chinese dishes. Over time the traditional Chinese foods brought to the U.S. by Chinese immigrants were adapted and adjusted to the American palate, substituting local produce for hard-to-find Chinese items, and altering the seasonings to suit local or regional tastes.
Chinese butcher and grocery shop, late 1880s, in San Francisco, home to the oldest Chinatown in North America. Serving as both cultural and commercial centers, Chinatowns continue to thrive in major cities across the country. Photograph by Isaiah West Taber, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
CERTAIN DISHES HAVE PLAYED STARRING ROLES in the story of Chinese food in America, and the stories behind them offer a fascinating look into our nation’s culinary and social history.

By the early 20th century, Chinese restaurants were attracting Americans intrigued by the new flavors and inexpensive dishes they offered, especially chop suey. Visitors to SWEET & SOUR will learn how this single dish ignited an explosion of interest in Chinese food across the U.S., quickly spreading from the East to the West coasts, and everywhere in between.

The history of the fortune cookie intrigues and delights. How did these crispy sweets, unknown in China, become so closely associated with Chinese food? Who really invented them, and who writes those bewildering fortunes? There is much to tell in the story behind this iconic food. And the equally compelling tale of General Tso’s Chicken represents the hunt for the origins of familiar dishes, and encapsulates how American and Chinese influences have combined to form a wholly new cuisine.
THE FIRST CHINESE IMMIGRANTS WERE MALE WORKERS in need of familiar and affordable meals. Small eateries and communal kitchens that initially only catered to Chinese men slowly began to attract workers from other ethnic backgrounds. Adjustments were made for western tastes, but dishes and ingredients often remained unaltered for Chinese patrons—a practice that continues today.

While early Chinese restaurants featured Cantonese-style cuisine, immigration patterns in the 1960s created a new wave of dishes from regions like Szechuan and Hunan—and fostered a renewed interest in Chinese food. Today, the American experience of eating Chinese food is as varied as the communities that serve it.

Whether it’s casual dining in a family-run neighborhood eatery, the elegant ambience of a five-star Chinese restaurant, a crowded dim sum feast on a weekend morning, or eating from take out boxes at your kitchen table, this cuisine is more popular than ever. Venues can supplement the exhibition with their region’s own variations on popular Chinese dishes.

The history of Chinese immigration in this country is reflected in the evolution of Chinese restaurants. Fried rice or steamed, carry out or dine-in, Chinese food represents economic opportunity, a path to integration, and a critical hub of cultural exchange.
REGISTRARIAL REQUIREMENTS

SWEET & SOUR: CHINESE AMERICAN FOOD FROM CHINATOWN TO MAIN STREET has been designated a moderate security exhibition, and will be offered only to those institutions able to meet the Smithsonian’s requirements. Key requirements are listed below.

SPACE
- Limited-access, gallery-type area. An open mall, hallway, or lounge area is not acceptable.
- Locked, environmentally stable interior exhibition storage and staging areas.

PROTECTION
- Guards or other trained personnel, in sufficient numbers to assure the safety of exhibition components, whose sole duty is the supervision of the exhibition while it is on display.
- Exhibition area must be locked and secure during closing hours. Alarm and/or guards during night hours are preferred but not required.
- Fire protection according to local ordinances and subject to SITES’ approval.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROLS
- Temperature and light controls are required.
- Humidity control may be required. Standard levels are 68 to 72 degrees Fahrenheit, and 45 to 50 percent relative humidity.
- Light levels may be specified between 5 and 15 footcandles. Direct sunlight should be diffused or eliminated to prevent fading of panels and photographs.
The exhibition itself is only a portion of what SITES delivers. As a host of SWEET & SOUR: CHINESE AMERICAN FOOD FROM CHINATOWN TO MAIN STREET, you’ll receive a lot of extras to round out your exhibition-to-go:

**A COMPLETE PACKAGE**

- Complete curatorial and registration information
- Complete shipping, handling, and installation instructions
- Wall-to-wall insurance coverage under the Smithsonian’s policy
- Public relations support, including sample press release, images, logos; digital graphic templates of promotional materials; and advice on promoting the exhibition and hosting special events
- Educational and programming resources, educator resources, speakers list, bibliography
- Exhibition website, access to SITES social media promotional tools
- Excellent opportunity to showcase regional Chinese cuisine specific to your area

A SITES exhibition is in your future! Contact Minnie Russell
russellm@si.edu
Your lucky number: 202-633-3160