

Upbeat music plays in background as Marissa Howard samples Pyng Ho chef's creations.

MH/DeKalb History Center: Mm. Thank you.

Chef: Sure

MH: This has really made my day.

Chef: Yeah?

MH: Yeah, thank you. And watching and all that.

Chef: And then this you are eating, Korean, they all have at least once in their life. This.

MH: This?

Chef: Yeah. Back in the old days, they used the pork belly part, the fatter the better.

MH: Mm-hm. So one of the other dishes I saw was the hot and sour—or was it sweet and sour? Kind of like a sweet and sour chicken? Is that another--?

Chef: [Says the name of the dish; in Korean]

MH: Yes

Chef: That's ginger and garlic [inaudible].

MH: OK, ginger and garlic. OK.

Chef: That's—OK, this is another good example of Chinese dishes. [Name of dish] made famous in Korea. There is something like that, but it's coated with a different when cooking. But when you come to Korea, we'll adapt to Korean—all Korean people like it spicy with garlic and sour—it's very popular over there. Over here it's number-one chicken, more than General Tso [spelling?] at Pyng Ho.

[MH laughs.]

MH: General Tso's is another—was there ever a General Tso?

Chef: There is such a person.

MH: There is?

Chef: But the dish is—there is no such dishes.

MH: Yeah, I didn't—

Chef: But it's—Do you know the Pacific 77 Fleet? Have you heard of that?

MH: Maybe, yeah

Chef: When that went to Taiwan for official visit, the President Chiang, you know, do the state dinner for them. You know, made all those fancy dishes that head chef [inaudible], it's American. They don't do sweet. So they made some dishes, but they don't even have a name. So everybody loved. They asked, "What is name?" So he named the most well-known name, a general in China, General Tso.

There is such a person. It's the Qing Dynasty, one of the most famous, maybe generals. That's all there is. No, seriously, you've heard of Egg Fu Young, right?

MH: Mm-hm

Chef: Egg Fu Young is such a well-known, good dishes. But somehow you become part of [inaudible]. You deep-fry the whole thing.

MH: Yeah

Chef: Egg Fu Young is very hard to make. Originally you only used it [inaudible] I don't know they use it [inaudible] to translate it to English, from this river crabmeat, to make it real soft, almost like omelet.

MH: OK, yeah

Chef: It's nothing to do with deep-fry.

MH: Mm-hm. I think—doesn't it come out as sort of like a egg—like kind of a pancake, and it kind of--

Chef: Yes, yes

MH: Like a pancake

Chef: So you feel some—another dish you ought to try at Pyng Ho is the scrambled egg with shrimp. Make it real soft and runny. That's very popular among Chinese customers. We do that a lot. You know--but again, food is food, you know? To be authentic or not, I don't think—it's important, but not that important. You got what you like, no matter how I think the cook is. The eater got to enjoy. Don't you think?

MH: Yeah

Chef: You know, I think it's good, but the person who eats it—but now, seriously, the food, the ethnic food in Atlanta is big changing. When we opened, if we served a whole snapper, red snapper, no! The customer used a napkin to cover the eye.

MH: You need to cut the head off?

Chef: Yeah! If we serve a fish without a head, that's not very strict. It's not good dishes.

MH: Yeah

Chef: I tell you, that would be the one dishes—the customer think, "I lost my appetite." [Both laugh.] I said, "Sorry. I thought it was good dish [inaudible]." Do you like Chinese eggplant?

MH: Yes

Chef: That's something we eat at Pyng Ho—

MH: With garlic—

Chef: Yeah. [*Shows MH a photograph.*] This is 1930 at Pyng Ho. You see this cart?

MH: Mm-hm

Chef: This is a cow that's moving the--

MH: Oh, it's a whole cow

Chef: Yeah. Let's see if I have picture. This is—the city government in Incheon sent it to me.

MH: Oh!

Chef: That's Pyng Ho, 1930. This is [inaudible] that's moving. I won't say what they're picking up. [*Both laugh*] I never saw this picture until last year.

MH: Yeah

Chef: It's—Incheon government sent it to me. They said we will do the interview, and they gave me this. [*Laughs*]

MH: Oh. There's a museum there, I think—right, in Incheon, there's a—

Chef: Yeah, yes, about this time, yes. That's a Pyng Ho rival restaurant.

MH: Oh. [*Chef laughs.*] [*MH makes inaudible comment.*]

Chef: No, no, there is nothing wrong.

MH: Oh, that's funny.

Chef: But my dad was the leader of the community [inaudible] Chinese, yeah.

MH: Mm-hm. Were they in Chinatown?

Chef: My dad at the—Pyng Ho is not in Chinatown. The museum is in Chinatown. At that time, it's not Chinatown.

MH: It wasn't a—

Chef: Well, it is. We don't call it that until '80 or something.

MH: Hm

Chef: It's not officially formed, not until then.

MH: Do you think this kind of food is being—do you think there's more restaurants serving this, or do you think it's becoming a little bit—or you don't see it as much?

Chef: In [inaudible] area when I started doing this Korean-Chinese food, I probably was the only one. So this is really exciting, my second year of thirty years of family [inaudible words]. I [inaudible] Incheon the Pyng Ho restaurant, "You look awful young."

I said, "What are you talking about?" And then I said, "No, you're talking to [about] my dad when he was—" She was living in Incheon when he was.

She says, "Every single person in Incheon knows Pyng Ho."

I mean, it's a very well-known restaurant, but I didn't know it was that well-known. When I left, I was in high school. That was—and then, my dad actually know her. It's a small world. Well, part of the reason is, you know, south Georgia has a army base—something—Fort something— [Fort Stewart?]

MH: There's a couple of those—

Chef: Yeah, there's a army base. Part of the reason there's a lot of Korean family married to American GIs. That's why we have lots of customers like that. I try to show you the fish that I did. It was so funny. "Take that away." 1960 Pyng Ho menu in Korea. So the [inaudible] they were eating is 150, which is about our \$1.20-something.

MH: Is that a picture, or is that a—do you have a physical copy?

Chef: I don't have anymore. I asked them to send [inaudible]. It's in the Incheon city government, their archive, whatever. I was—I wish—if I'd known—When my uncle sold the restaurant, he would give away everything in there, so. I wish I had [inaudible]. At that time—if you go to most Chinese restaurants in the '60s, '70s, there's no menu. Only have price tags, the basics, because it is by union—they force you to set the price. You can't do it on the front. That's the reason why the Chinese left there. All the rules.

MH: There's also—I'll definitely take this [*laughs*]. There's also a community in Costa Rica, though, of Chinese immigrants—in Costa Rica, too? Like a large or—

Chef: In Costa Rica?

MH: In Costa Rica

Chef: So many left. Unless you're talking about the old—the one—the beautiful—the Panama Canal? Those families. Those are second, third generation. One of my best friend is dating one, this girl. She don't even think she's Chinese anymore. She don't know anything about it. But later on there's a lot of new [inaudible] going back to my dad's time. But most of them left, because at that time the—they went through a big depression, all the money lost the value. My dad retirement only got ten percent left afterwards. That's the reason he has to come—he hasn't left there. I tell my dad, "Come to America. I wish you'd do that two years ago."

MH: Yeah. Do they—were a lot of Chinese doing stores and—

Chef: In Costa Rica the old, old Chinese, the one—the second, third generation of the ones that [inaudible] the Panama Canal, all open restaurants, kind of like a chop suey—yeah. They even serve a piece of white toast with everything Chinese and butter. My uncle—my aunt has a restaurant over there.

MH: Oh, OK

Chef: It's awful! I wasn't making fun—

MH: Well, you have to kind of make do. I remember—it reminds me of [inaudible]—I studied in Poland for like a month or two during college, and there's a Chinese restaurant and it also—it just wasn't—it was like Polish-ified. It was not good. [*Both laugh.*] There's a lot of cabbage and like stuff like—

Chef: Yes! Polish has a lot of cabbage, definitely.

MH: And which--I love cabbage, but I was like, "This is not"—I think like the—it sort of was like a chop suey kind of thing, but it—I think it had turmeric or some sort of yellow in it. It was just like—I had no idea what was going on with it. [*Laughs*]

Chef: Chinese food—my great-grandfather, which he hates me. I mean, the reason I—my grandfather took me to cooking when I was little, I [was] causing so much trouble. I had too much energy, they said. He passed away in '98. It's—I got all these pictures starting just like last year, because of this injury. Trying to show you my grandfather. [*Scrolling through digital images on phone?*] I just messed it up.

MH: So was it common for a lot of the men to be cooking, versus the women?

Chef: Oh, woman cannot go to commercial kitchen. There's no way, back in those days. There is no way that they will have any woman chefs. It was impossible. I don't know why. Woman is just as good. They don't have to lift the heavy, but, you know, there are plenty of other way to do that.

MH: So do you—do you have two children or one child?

Chef: Two, my son and my daughter.

MH: Do they cook?

Chef: My daughter. She likes to eat. She enjoys food. She criticizes my food a lot, which I like. I don't let her say, "I don't like it." Tell me why you don't like it. But if you don't have any suggestion, don't complain. So that made her real good. My son, he likes to eat, too. But it's just, "Fine, fine." He's not so picky compared to my daughter. This is my grandpa and my dad. Can't you tell he likes to eat better than my dad? [*MH laughs.*] My dad don't complain. Oh, he will eat anything. That's the reason I say to my mom, "That's the reason your cooking's not improving, because no one say anything." It's got to be people are complain so you get better. I'll try to show you the fish. There was a--most proud of the fish that I ever did. [*Continues searching for image or photo.*] Oh, well, I give up. There you go.

MH: That's impressive. That's--

Chef: That fish—all the bones taken out, and—

MH: Oh!

Chef: --and then put them back—

MH: Is that a snapper?

Chef: Yes. Gulf red snapper.

MH: How do you debone a snapper and keep it intact like that?

Chef: I'll show you one day. [*Both laugh.*] I don't know how to explain what I'm saying. I don't mind to show you, but that's why—all these Chinese dishes. You know, the menu for six, eight pages for what? Beef and broccoli, beef and vegetable—it's same thing! But if you're serious and want to [inaudible phrases] other chef, [inaudible] six people, make up six or eight dishes, mainly seafood or less meat, or keep this budget and [inaudible phrase]. If you look at the menu, and all you're looking for is what you're familiar with, you're not ordering anything. So that's the reason the Chinese menu is so big. Who's going to read this? That's the reason that I come out with the menu like that. So, you know, you want to choose what we have, or you want to make your own choice? If you want to make it simple, make it much more fun, rather than [inaudible] the menu and try to read it—

MH: So you can just go to the chef and say, "I would like this kind of—"

Chef: Most of my regular, she come here on Friday, I used to have her sit at her own table, they didn't order, they don't know what they want. I decided. And then I have a few—one group that come. One of the Emory group, the fun part is only the host know the menu. So every time I bring dishes, six or eight of them, they try to match the best wine for it.

MH: Oh, that's fun.

Chef: Yeah, the one that lost that don't do a good job—the one that do the best job don't pay, so the rest of the people pay for the party.

MH: Is that where you brought the fish out?

Chef: That's one, yeah. For them it was first, yeah. So I tell them I like red wine better than the white wine. I don't like white wine. So [inaudible]. And then one day [inaudible] all the pinot noir there is. I was so impressed. From different countries, same pinot noir can be so much more complex. I was so happy that day. That's how I got to know—because food, I got to know so many different foods in a lifetime. Food is fun.

MH: Everyone loves it, everyone has to eat it.

Chef: So you have to eat, you might as well make the most of it, rather than just to fill your stomach. Got to make your tongue, your mouth happy.

MH: Mm-hm [*Both laugh.*] Yeah.

Chef: Good?

MH: Yeah, very good. Very good.

Chef: I hope I helped.

MH: Yeah, yeah. And the other thing I wanted to ask, we have—this is just to sign—it's not anything. It's just so that we can keep it in our collection, and we'll create a folder and a file in our archives, and that's all it is.

Chef: OK, sure. Do I get a copy later? Or—

MH: Yes, and actually I wanted to talk to you about that, too.

Chef: OK, I [*inaudible, from a distance, as he goes to find a pen*]. [*Returns to table.*] All right.

MH: So we're going to transcribe this also, so it'll be like a written, searchable—and we can make it public, unless you don't, you know, don't want it to be. But other people digitize—The other thing that we had an idea was, if you know someone that could translate, we would love to be able to translate this interview also to Chinese. Yeah, if there's someone, we'd love to—

Chef: I can ask.

MH: Yeah, I mean, we'd love to do that to be able to have something that's both in English and in Chinese. And our archivist, Jennifer, she'll send you, like a—she does like a gift—so she'll send you like a thank-you like, but it would be more like a formality. Those are just copies.

Chef: Same?

MH: Yeah.

Chef: And I keep one of those? Or this for me?

MH: We'll send you one, yes.

Chef: That's fine, that's fine.

MH: Also if you have anything—we also have a archives, so if there's any—even like menus from ten, fifteen years ago that you have, we'd love copies, if you have those. Or we can have—like, store them, and for--

Chef: Like a old menu?

MH: Mm-hm, yeah. That would be—or any—any, you know-- any little pieces of paper, like that's something that we would—and you can think about it, just—we [*inaudible*] and we want to-- We'll keep them, and we'll keep them safe in boxes for the future.

Chef: All right. [*Inaudible*] [*Leaves and comes back with menus.*] Should be something [*inaudible*]. Old menus--

MH: Oh, my--old menus, or if you have—I mean, we don't even—if, you know, or just a copy or photographs. And I actually, for this article, I might ask you for just copies of some photos to use, you know, in the article. And I can send an email that—yeah, just like old menus or—I don't know, if you have a photograph of when it, you know, from--

Chef: When it opened?

MH: Anything—yeah. Or paper materials—

Chef: Yeah, I'll send some. But I think, you just pick from there. And then if you like that, if I can find a physical one, I'll give it to you.

MH: Yeah, because we're trying to—you know, part of it is, people might find an old menu interesting from—

Chef: Yeah, actually, some of this old menu copies is from my customer. They have sent me one a long--some time ago. So I was impressed some time. OK, yeah, I think so.

MH: But just keep in mind that this is something you can send in an email to Jennifer about.

Chef: OK, all right. I see it. I see it. OK. Great.

MH: And-- *[Both laugh]*

Chef: Not a problem.

MH: Thank you

Chef: Sure

MH: This was wonderful. Thank you so much for inviting me into your space and your kitchen and talking to you and, yeah.

Chef: We'll be back in forty years. *[Laughs]* *[Inaudible]* Yeah, I'll be sixty.

[Conversation inaudible over background noise.]

Chef: Good evening!

[Conversation inaudible over background noise.]

Chef: Take care

MH: Thank you!

Chef: Have a good one.

[Various background sounds]

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by CS