

MARISSA HOWARD: OK, yeah. I know how that is. My husband is also a—he works for his dad.

Restaurateur: Uh-huh

MH: And it's the same sort of thing, where he feels guilty about taking off and this, and I'm like, "There's only two people in the office. You don't have to work so much." [Laughs] But—so, the thing—how this sort of started is I do some research. I don't know if you're familiar a lot with the DeKalb History Center—

Restaurateur: Mm-hm

MH: We're in the Old Courthouse.

Restaurateur: I know where that is. I have seen the building many times and never went in.

MH: Well, next time, you're welcome. There's—we have an archives and—archives and library and—if you don't mind, this might be easier if I—

Restaurateur: That's what I'm saying [inaudible]

MH: So we have a repository and library and archives. And I sort of started to do a lot of research during, you know, the past year and a half, when we haven't had a lot of public programs. And one of my other things that I've started to really love during quarantine is, you know, Chinese and learning food and just like I've really fallen in love with it. And I had this quest to find one of the oldest Chinese restaurants in Atlanta, and I was starting to discover that there were restaurants in the '20s in downtown, and I was like, "That's crazy!"

Restaurateur: I know the family, yeah.

MH: Oh, is it—

Restaurateur: Wang's Place? Yeah, his grandson later on worked for me. That's how I learned.

MH: Oh, cool! yeah, and I was like—but then I was like, "I have to find it in DeKalb County."

Restaurateur: Right

MH: Because we're in DeKalb— [Briefly interrupted by employee who needs to speak with Restaurateur.] And so I was like, "I have to find DeKalb County," and that led me to, you know, city directories and newspapers, and I came across your restaurant and then found, you know, the history on your website. And I was also sort of, my mind was blown at the amount of history that you have listed and on your website, and I hope more people read it, and I wanted to record it. And also part is, you know, our collection for so long has been focused on, you know, "old white men" history. And I—part of our goal is to really expand some of the other collections that we have, including Hispanic collections, Asian collections—because there's so much of that in DeKalb.

Restaurateur: Great!

MH: So that has led me to you, and just want to hear a little bit about your story and this restaurant, and then eventually I want to put together sort of like a compiled list of generally some of the larger restaurants that have been around for a while. But I'd love to share more of your story and this restaurant sort of as its own separate piece, if that's all right?

Restaurateur: Yeah, though actually the website that [inaudible], it took me almost a year to write it, put it together. Ever since my grandfather, the one who taught me how to cook, I thought I need to do something for the family. And right before that, about three—maybe six—months ago, Incheon City government official approached me wanting to do a Pyng Ho history, too. And, of course, by that time, my grandfather had passed away, and I started trying to get some information, pictures, like that. He even offered me a picture of Pyng Ho, 1930s.

MH: You said that was in Incheon?

Restaurateur: Incheon

MH: Incheon

Restaurateur: At that time during '60, '70, it was the biggest restaurant in that city. We [inaudible] serve about twelve hundred people. So all the major gatherings, pretty much, is happening at Pyng Ho. Start talking to my grandfather, he went to Korea—I think he was under twenty—sixteen, seventeen. And then he opened his first Pyng Ho, like [inaudible]. But Pyng Ho is not like [inaudible; music obscures words] like gradually. The restaurant was not that wide but was one block long.

MH, *laughing*: Narrow, yeah

Restaurateur: Adding, adding, adding, adding, on. That's what happened. Actually time was right, Chinese food was popular. One of the most popular dishes is called [inaudible].

MH: Yeah, I've—that's the black bean—

Restaurateur: Noodle—

MH: Yeah, black bean noodle

Restaurateur: So that's almost like American, like spaghetti for Americans.

MH, *laughing*: Yeah

Restaurateur: You know, even though it's not Korean food, every single Korean loves it.

MH: Yeah. I read a little bit about Korean-Chinese food, and what I understand is it's not so much of a fusion as its own genre of food. Is that--?

Restaurateur: Yeah, at that time, in 1930, 1940, up until Korean War, Korea was kind of, very poor. And those noodle dishes were mainly made for the Chinese labor at the port. But later on, the Koreans made their own version of it. It's much darker and not as much of original bean paste anymore,

but sweeter, more saucier than what ours is. But depending on who you're asking, it's like spaghetti in America, is there one better than another?

MH, *laughing*: And I'm sure every family has their own.

Restaurateur: Yes, exactly.

MH: There's no recipe. Everyone's family makes the best.

Restaurateur: Yeah, if you go to northern China, Shandong Province, every family has their own way. It's very [staple? stable?]. For Northern Chinese, we eat more noodles than rice, because the weather and availability.

MH: There's more dumplings, too.

Restaurateur: Oh, dumplings, yeah, always making fun--the reason northern Chinese are taller than the Southerners is because portion-wise we eat bigger. So all the famous generals are from the north, and the politicians are from the south. [MH *laughs*.] That's what we say, but it's not a true statement! But it's just making fun of each other.

MH: Yeah. So, another thing I was hearing about so much of the—how do you pronounce it, the gin-gin—

Restaurateur: In Chinese, it was [inaudible]. But in Korean it's [inaudible].

MH: [*Repeats inaudible word*] Is that, for so many, it's like a bowl of comfort food?

Restaurateur: Yes, just like I said. Just like spaghetti for Americans.

MH: And so how—why is that? Like why are—even today, if so many people eat a bowl today, like, they come here and they eat it, and it just brings them home?

Restaurateur: Yes. Back in those days, on your birthday, Chinese tradition on your birthday, we have to eat noodles. Koreans, usually we eat the seaweed soup. But during the '70s, '80s especially, on the graduation, on the birthday, you go to Chinese. And then [inaudible] is the most inexpensive dish to prepare. At that time the economy is not that great, so everything costs 50 yuan, which is 25 cents, 30 cents. Almost like chop suey during the '70s.

MH: Which I'm still trying to figure out what chop suey—

Restaurateur: Chop suey literally translates “mixture of leftovers.” There's no such dishes in China.

MH, *laughing*: That's what I—yeah.

Restaurateur: It's—well, there's a lot of stories. One of them that I heard is during a state dinner in San Francisco, they're at the round-table dinner, and every dish they bring, the American guests, they keep [inaudible]. So the host saying, “Oh, what are you serving now?” Like the kitchen

round the food, “Oh, they don’t have no more,” so put them together, what’s left of the ingredients, make the sauce.

MH: That’s the other thing, in all these newspaper articles and advertisements in the ’70s, it was all, you know, and even like at the grocery store, you can now buy chop suey and make it at home—

Restaurateur: Chop suey is just mixed vegetables, some meat—there’s no bean sprouts to make it crunchy over some crispy noodles. But there’s one similar, called chow mein. Chow mein—but it depends on who you’re talking to, again. Chow mein literally means “stir-fried noodles.”

MH: So it could be anything.

Restaurateur: That’s why later on it becomes lo mein, the soft noodle. And then there’s also one called pan-fried noodles. Pan-fried noodles is very similar to the chow mein, except we use egg noodles to pan fry it, like a pancake, and then pour in whatever the meat and vegetable, you know. You should eat with a brown sauce over it on the crispy noodles. You know, Chinese restaurants in America originally they served Chinese [inaudible] real world.

MH: Yeah, the 1850s

Restaurateur: Something like that. And the first cuisine introduced to America is Cantonese, because that’s the first door opened in China to Westerners, too, at the same time.

MH: What’s the big difference with Cantonese versus, say, Mandarin?

Restaurateur: Ah, Southern Chinese food—Cantonese, like what you say—they have their own version of seafood and the meat, of course. Mainly their food is sweeter, softer, compared to Southern—Northern Chinese. I’ve come from Shandong Province. Ours would be the taste a drier form—not like wine, speaking more like, we don’t use as much sugar, but we use more bean paste. We do more quick stir-fry. And dumplings for Southerner are more like a snack, dessert; for Northern Chinese it would be like a main staple.

MH: So more like steamed, with Cantonese?

Restaurateur: We all steam. They cooking form is pretty much the same. Typical example would be like sweet-and-sour pork. If you’re Southern, sweet—Cantonese, sweet-and-sour pork, you’d see more like a red sprout sauce. But if you go to Northern China, Shandong Province, the sweet-and-sour, we don’t use any of the red. The red sauce is coming from the ketchup. Ketchup is the one the Chinese adopted the most. But I also read somewhere that the ketchup that’s made from China is “ket” means “tomato-eggplant,” and “chup” means “extra.” I don’t know how true that is—

MH, *laughing*: Sounds good.

Restaurateur: Yeah, but anyway, that's one of the main differences. And when it was introduced to America, like the sweet-and-sour pork, egg foo young, you know, Chinese food at that time was kind of exotic adventures. Like in the '70s, if you go to a Chinese restaurant and order dinner for two, Mongolian beef, sweet-and-sour pork, sizzling rice soup.

MH: Maybe a Polynesian flair?

Restaurateur: Yes, yes! A flaming volcano, a Zombie—

MH: Oh, my gosh, I love it. One of my favorite places is Trader Vic's. It's such an interesting—but it seems kind of this classic '70s with this mixture of Polynesian and—

Restaurateur: Before this restaurant was remodeled, it was Polynesian decor.

MH: I saw that it was Mai Kai.

Restaurateur: Mai Kai, yes. That's who we bought the restaurant from in 1979.

MH: So, since we're talking about right then when you remodeled it, I also noticed that at first some of the things at Pyng Ho said that they're Mandarin. So could you tell me a little bit about that?

Restaurateur: Mandarin is very broad term. Generally speaking, there's eight different types of cuisine in China: Northern is mainly based out of Shandong Province, which is where our family comes from. Mandarin, you can say that's Northern Chinese; it's not really a particular province. You can consider it Northern, because I think it has something to do with when Manchuria took over China, become Qing Dynasty, so they collect a lot of well-known dishes, become part of the [inaudible] people's dishes, so that call it Manchuria.

MH: So saying that the restaurant was Mandarin at the time, that was a conscious choice.

Restaurateur: Yes, because we're Northerners. At that time not much Northern Chinese restaurants in Atlanta. You know, most of the places were [inaudible] Korean Cantonese.

MH: I noticed that there were a few Szechuan, maybe?

Restaurateur: Yes. At that time, it was not a true Szechuan. Not like today.

MH, *laughing*: Oh, my God; that's one of my other favorites.

Restaurateur: Do you like—I used five times more dried pepper than ten years ago. And the customer gets much more sophisticated about food now. Like I say, used to be dinner for two is very adventurous twenty years ago, thirty years ago. Now they want to be numbing chicken, they want—

MH, *laughing*: The soup, oh, my gosh— [Inaudible]

Restaurateur: Yeah, the fish—Szechuan broth—all that in here. Then, you know, one of my popular dishes, Shandong chicken—chicken, ginger, and garlic—I changed it three times actually. Originally it was Mandarin chicken; made it much sweeter to cater to American taste. And later on, the

chicken has a bone in there, so I took the bone out, and I cooked it—I prepared with chicken breasts. Later on I think my customer is ready for what we can do. So we used the dark meat, the thigh part, but now I changed it to the Shandong chicken. It's the most popular chicken here. And then I made it much spicier than twenty years ago.

MH: So when you first were cooking twenty years ago, were any of the [jin-jin—inaudible/spelling?] on the menu then?

Restaurateur: Yes. At that time, I hate to say it, we mostly catered to Asian customers. At that time, Decatur had, I think it's Catholic—Korean-Catholic church in Decatur. Now they've moved to Gwinnett. At that time every Sunday we have more Korean customers than any other kind of customers. So at that time they ordered my [inaudible] and jumped on the spicy noodle soup, the sweet-and-sour beef, and the [inaudible—gumpoongee/spelling?]. [Inaudible dish] means "the chicken with ginger and garlic," that was [inaudible], fills eighty percent of the dishes. And later on the church moved to Gwinnett, ten or fifteen years ago; I lost a lot of customers. And then when Emory's starting to have a lot of Chinese students, so now I started to put the real menu out.

MH: So I notice that there's two menus.

Restaurateur: Yes, after the comeback from covid-19, I combined to one simple menu. So I have three languages on there.

MH: OK. Is the other one Spanish?

Restaurateur: Korean

MH: Korean? OK, Korean

Restaurateur: OK

MH: So you also spent some time in Costa Rica?

Restaurateur: Yes, two years.

MH: Two years?

Restaurateur: That's why my food, sometimes, I have a little craziness. I—

MH, *laughing*: Does a banana come in there every now and then?

Restaurateur: No, like one of my favorite sauce is Costa Rican national sauce, Lizano. Have you had that? Have you heard of that?

MH: Probably, maybe. I've been to Costa Rica once; maybe I had it, but—

Restaurateur: On the friend things, you can't have better sauce than that. But then I add a little spices to it. And another favorite thing to eat is, I like sashimi. And I love to use the mahi-mahi to make sevicehe with.

MH: Mm. Yeah.

Restaurateur: They use [inaudible—sounds like “their weight”?] and then they use a lot of cilantro and garlic, so that’s kind of similar to [inaudible].

MH: Yeah, a little bit.

Restaurateur: Except the acid part, we don’t use the fruit for the acid. We use more rice vinegar.

MH: Vinegar, OK. So your family moved from Korea to Costa Rica—

Restaurateur: Costa Rica, yeah. And then when I finished high school, I came to America by myself. I decided to go to California. I spent eight months, ten months. And my uncle is over here getting ready to open the restaurant. And I want to go to Georgia Tech, so I come over here. At that time, I-85 only had two lanes. The old airport—you go to the airport so easy! It only take for thirty minutes. And then I saw a great opportunity. I saw—let’s see, the restaurant that I worked before my uncle’s opened, on the weekend, and then I still go to school. I said, “Oh, my God. This is so easy.” I mean, because I learned to cook when I was little, for fun. And I realized people—they don’t stir fry much, because they use a wok that is not a jet-burner. The flame goes straight; it’s not shooting it. So to do a Mongolian beef is almost impossible. So we had to get our own, go to New York to get a burner—

MH: The big butane, 900, a thousand BTUs.

Restaurateur: So in other words, I would be able to bring you Mongolian beef to cook within a minute, minute and a half at most, on the stove, it’s totally hot. That’s the biggest difference in Northern—we don’t do slow-cooking much. There is some dishes like that, but those mostly we know we call “bao” [spelling?]. It’s a quick stir-fry, on high heat.

MH: Is the essence from the wok, is that [inaudible]. Isn’t there a term for, like, the essence of the wok?

Restaurateur: Oh, gochi [spelling?].

MH: Go-chi? [spelling?]

Restaurateur: “Go” means the wok, “chi” means energy, also means the heat, actually, kind of like the burning smell of the side of the wok to bring in the meat. If your wok is not that hot on the surrounding, you won’t get that.

MH: You certainly can’t get it from a wok that you pick up at Target, either.

Restaurateur: That's why at my home my—I put my stove on my deck, a portable one, because even if you put a stove in your home, then your home is going to smoke around every day. That's why we put it outside, our portable stove to cook.

MH: We're redoing our back deck, and we have a little outdoor kitchen that we're doing. My husband has a pizza oven. But I told him, I was like, "Can I do a wok situation?" He's like, "We have a turkey fryer, so we might try it with a turkey fryer, butane—"

Restaurateur: Yeah, if you use the turkey fryer, if you buy a converter—not a converter, to reduce the flame like this, so the flame is shooting in the center—the reason the wok versus other sauté pan, other method of cooking, we only heat the bottom of it. Not right here. That's why, if you keep stir-fry, the heavier goes on the bottom, which is the meat; the vegetables and sauces on the side, and you [inaudible] reduce them. So a lot of the old Chinese foods are greasy, yes; but it's not in your food. If you quick stir-fry it, if you see my [inaudible], we clean it every week, it's full of smoke and grease. But it's not in your dishes. And then another thing is we eat with chopsticks. We don't scoop the sauce over the rice. So we pick up the meat and vegetables; the oil and the sauce are still on the plate. That's another custom difference. It's not a right or wrong thing; that's how we eat. I don't know what else to tell you.

MH: So where were you getting all of your ingredients when you first were—

Restaurateur: Oh, at the beginning was hard. For example, even the Szechuan chili whole pepper was not available. And then sea cucumber dried, you have to order from California, Los Angeles, to bring it over here. But ours we brought ourselves from Korea. At that time we have a lot of Asian customers, so we do a lot of Chinese weddings. So we had to, if we need a sea cucumber, then we have to get the one from Yellow Sea, that type, not the one from Seattle, Washington.

MH: So your customers would bring some of the ingredients early on?

Restaurateur: No, we bring ourselves. And the canned food, like bamboo shoots, baby corn, straw mushrooms—those things were much more expensive than today. Now it's much more available, except right now. Right now, it's a totally different story. All the canned food increased about thirty percent, because the Chinese company is broken. And Szechuan peppercorn, now it's much more available. Back in the old days you have to get a small [inaudible] air mail over here, and then the— [inaudible] [Laughter] and ask for translation, now I know how to say it, but back in those days, [inaudible] peppers, it's [inaudible]. So—

MH: And then it goes numbing, and they're like, "What's happening?"



Restaurateur: Yes! So I tell my customers, when I do the numbing part, especially when you taste the numbing pepper, if you drink something cold, you get the combination effect *[laughs]*.

MH: So I think it must be such a shift, because now you can go to the Kroger around the corner, and there's *[inaudible—Lango Mao?]* on the counter, and it's sold out, because now everyone is getting really into it. So it must be such a huge, interesting shift between in the beginning and now. As you said, peppers, you know, you're putting ten times more peppers now. So, can you tell a little bit about that shift between the beginning to now, seeing so much of maybe food that you grew up with, or sort of know, and it's been insider food that's now—

Restaurateur: Now actually for restaurants to use, still not that available, especially, you know, in Atlanta. For the peppercorn or a lot of those dry spices, you still have to special order. It's not that easily available to even the wholesaler. But right now much more people request it. Most of the restaurants, they have to order it, mail order it through from China. We have enough for the cost to have reason to. What's available at local grocery stores, we don't use *[laughs]*. Yeah, again, at the same time, the more customers now, *[inaudible]* more exotic dishes. Just like thirty years, the stir-fry flank steak with green onion over the rice noodles, I even tell my younger customers, that's Styrofoam *[laughs]*. Ingredients are definitely much better available, and then the customer is definitely getting much more sophisticated, even ask for it, so that makes me more excited to cook more better, fun food for everybody.

MH: Where do you see your food going in the next ten years or twenty years?

Restaurateur: Well, I think people now go towards more healthier, more environment correct, that type thing. I have a lot of customers ask for, you know, like a vegan, vegetarian. I even made a mock version of a firecracker beef for one particular family all the time. People definitely ask for much more healthy food. And then, like brown rice. They want to use the steamer, they want brown rice to cook the fried rice. And a lot of customers order their favorite General Tsao chicken, but they want a side order of steamed asparagus or string beans. Yeah, that's definitely—but I'm very impressed that the customers much more want to try things than I think—they don't know, so they don't want to make it *[inaudible]*. But now they—and because of media, I think. Definitely media helps a lot, lets them see. And then, like my dumpling, my followers, you know people ask for it. You know, I just let the people try it, except the few regular customers, they know. And now they ask for it.

MH: Do you sell them frozen to go?

Restaurateur: I—the packaging is not that good. I don't do that good job. I don't think I have that technology. If you just freeze them, if you're going to use next week, it's fine. But if it's not, if it's

not an airtight seal, it won't work, especially what we call [inaudible adjective] dough, what we mean, like a steamed dumpling, we use hot water to make the dough, it would be real tough. But the one day they used warm water, [inaudible] yeast, they wanted it raised, kind of like a soft—that'd be OK. You know, a lot of Chinese Emory students say, "Just freeze it so I don't have to come in and pick it up." They can steam it later themselves. I do that, too. The students who live across the street come a couple of times a day [*laughs*]. I kind of envy them, you know.

MH: So you started here. Did you first learn here, at this restaurant initially, you know, with your uncles?

Restaurateur: You mean the cooking part?

MH: Cooking, yeah.

Restaurateur: Well, I learned cooking actually from my grandfather. When Pyng Ho was opened, he was here, too. And he come from Korea—from Taiwan. Later on he went to Taiwan. We opened—my uncle's here, so my family was here to help start it. At that time it was much easier to find help, too. And then later on, there's a lot of—'80s, lot of refugees from Indochina, like Vietnam, Cambodia. The Chinese people—[inaudible] Chinese that live in Vietnam—those are the big help in the labor market for the Chinese restaurants, for Asian restaurants, you'd say. Now the new immigrants don't come as much as they used to be. So the labor market's very, very tough. Very, very—the shortage is incredible. And then, especially in Georgia, the transportation system is not as good as New York or San Francisco. So new immigrants that don't drive are afraid to come. And then China's economy is getting better, the dollar is not as attractive as twenty years ago.

MH: So there was starting to be this boom, it seems like, of Chinese restaurants in the '70s. Was it—what was that like, though, still being—I mean, there's still tons of Southern and barbecue, and was it—I mean, other than being seen as exotic, was it difficult being one of the few Chinese restaurants in the area at the time?

Restaurateur: I want to say, it was a little hard. One of the reasons it was hard is my communication skill, how to tell people what that [menu item] is. You know, then, so a lot of times we're afraid to—when a customer wants extra spicy, you can't eat spicy. Just a little spicy. You know, we don't have the—if you let them try it, they've probably already tried it. There's got to be some issues, but that's part of the thing. But like today, if a customer wants extra spicy, I am putting "spicy." I don't even question them anymore. I guess at that time, well, I think, "Oh, Americans don't eat spicy," just like Northern Chinese think Southern Chinese don't eat spicy; people from Szechuan, from middle-west, eat spicy. Kind of like preset [inaudible] already. So that part is communication, and when I do—

another big thing is when do the fried rice, we don't add soy sauce. A lot of Cantonese restaurants before us, they all put soy sauce in theirs, so that makes it hard later on. So I say, "If you want it, ask for it, I'm happy to do it." But normally I don't want to add soy sauce. That's—there's been a lot of misunderstandings at the beginning. But again, at that time, I was early twenties.

MH: Yeah, was there a lot of community support?

Restaurateur: Oh, yes, definitely. I have a lot of Chinese customers, Korean customers around. This area is very different because, I guess because the CDC and Emory—they take ethnic food much easier. I think, I mean—so, I remember on one snow day, it was a Friday, the second year when we're open. The road was too slippery, so people would just come in to have a drink until the snow stops. Nobody go home. Eleven o'clock, people are still here. Full of customers! Nobody can drive. I think it was 1980, '81. I can't remember. [January 1982 "Snow jam"] So one of the customer's boyfriend had a tow truck, take each one of them back home, until like one or two o'clock. I'm the last one *[laughs]*.

MH: Everyone was well fed, I guess, though.

Restaurateur: Well, yeah. They have a drink, and then, "Oh, we'll just have egg rolls. Once it stops . . . " five, six, seven--nobody made it. It was—definitely community. Talking about community, I can tell you this. When I got married, my wife don't have the green card. She come here on a tourist visa. So Immigration asked for the character witness, so I asked my customers. "Sure." So that, including the DeKalb County judges, Emory president, so on. When I go for the interview, we showed them. "I don't think this is even necessary." I said, "No." I feel so good—talk about community support! So I felt real good about it.

MH: So how did Decatur—how did your family find Decatur?

Restaurateur: [First sentence inaudible] I guess. And then a lot of Chinese families told me about it, this is a good area, because of the nearby CDC, Emory. People much more accepting of ethnic people easier. You have a less tough time than the, you know, other places. And then, at that time, we are living in the Northlake area, so—and that's [inaudible], yeah. Later on, of course, my kid went to Fernbank School, and then I bought a house behind here. So I lived in that house almost [inaudible; could be "twenty-something" or "twenty-seven"?] years. This area, I like it, seriously. You don't—it's not like other—people are much nicer. And then they don't move around that much. A lot of people stay here much longer. But lately they move out a lot, Decatur housing prices [inaudible]. So ever since we started our delivery business, a lot better, too. Yep, it's forty-one years now.

MH, *laughing*: So, time flies. So I notice also when older restaurants—Athens Pizza has been here for a while, and then up the road, Chinese--Golden Buddha. They both have been—

Restaurateur: Yeah, they're older than we are. Athens Pizza used to be over there, first building, that way. After they moved there, they had a fire, and they moved, they bought land over there. Oh, yeah, the family, every Sunday—Athens pizza family, every Sunday.

MH: And Golden Buddha has been here just a few years before this one.

Restaurateur: Yes, yes, yes. There's a few more, but they're closed now.

MH: Yeah, that's what I'm sort of finding, a lot of them.

Restaurateur: I remember there used to be—where the Publix is right now, there used to be a hotdog place. Used to go there to eat hotdogs. I remember that. And I miss that restaurant called Billy's on Scott Boulevard. I used to go there after work, and the beer was always good. I miss that. The [DeKalb] Farmer's Market has been around for a long time.

MH: That has, too. So did that open up so many options for your food?

Restaurateur: That—yes, that helped. Oh, that—I mean, that place definitely helps. They have fresh vegetables, I can get fresh Gulf red snapper, fresh sea scallops. Yes, I was very, very happy with that one, that place. That made it very easy for us. Like, we go to there almost every day. That was incredible. *[Although he is speaking as if this were present day—using present tense—he seems to be referring to the past rather than the present.]*

MH: Is that where you source most of your fish today?

Restaurateur: Not today. Today you have a much better choices. Seafood has a lot more choice. And Farmer's Market don't cater as much for restaurants, not like it used to be. Used to be they have—I don't know how to say this. Used to be they had a lot of Asian people work there, so they kind of know what we want. Now we—a lot of supplies in Gwinnett or some others like a wholesale place. They have much more choice. And then they deliver, too, so we don't have to go. That's another convenience.

MH: Was there any, like--thinking about mixing some Southern ingredients, like when you were talking about chili peppers, I mean, I guess there's probably, you know, local chilis that you could use at the time when you couldn't get Chinese ingredient peppers.

Restaurateur: Mm-hm. Try to use jalapeno, serrano—serrano's my favorite thing, I like spicy food. That definitely, oh, I do. Like a collard green? Chinese love that kind of vegetable. If you translate it word-to-word, we call it "wax vegetable." They cleanse you—when you eat something heavy, that's the best thing there is. Yeah, that, we definitely use that when we do the sweet-and-sour spareribs and use that as a side dishes on a special menu. What else would be something like that? You know, local corn, string beans. I mean, they are from local. That bean, it's way better, seriously. All you

do, put in deep fryer for twenty seconds, take it out, and quick stir-fry with black bean—it's crunchy. To me it's way better than the French bean or the long bean.

MH, *laughing*: The one that's, like, this long?

Restaurateur: Yeah, the long bean—

MH, *laughing*: It's fun, though, when you [inaudible]

Restaurateur: But their—have you ever eaten their pickle form?

MH: Mm—I don't know.

Restaurateur: The one in pickle form, the crunchiness is even more. It's another texture. Those long beans, you need to cook for a long time for bean sauce, bean paste. On the other hand, the string bean, the local one, you get to flash-fry it, take the moisture—the water—out of the vegetable so that they become crunchy. That's another example of quick stir-fry. And those long beans, you want to be kind of like a stew. Slow cooked with low heat so all the flavor goes in. And then the softer it gets, the better. It's my parents' favorite thing to eat. And then another local thing is the peanuts.

MH: Yeah, there's a lot of Chinese food that has peanuts, right?

Restaurateur: A lot. We eat because Chinese always say—peanuts we call [inaudible]. “Wha” [spelling?] means “flower”; [inaudible] means “burst.” It will make you not hungry. Oh—how do you say it? It stay in your stomach longer, we call. And then sesame noodles, kung pao chicken—and then the shelf life's good. So we use that a lot. And then that numbing spicy chicken, we crush the peanut for more aroma.

MH: Tofu. I—I'm also trying to get to the bottom of this, too, because when I was growing up—I was born in the late '80s—my mom said she used to give me tofu, because it's a good baby kind of food, and I still love it to this day. Now there's a factory here in Atlanta that makes tofu.

Restaurateur: Several of them

MH: Was—I'm trying to figure out, like was it in the grocery stores? I mean, where or how—was it a common thing? Like, where were people getting it? Or if in a restaurant, were you serving it, or where were you finding it? Were you making it?

Restaurateur: In the '70s?

MH: Yeah, '70s, '80s

Restaurateur: Yeah, there's always tofu.

MH: Was it a California health craze that—

Restaurateur: Yes, California—part of it from California, part from New York. Those are the main sources. Even today, I hate to say it, the one from California and New York, the tofu are better. I

mean, I love to use local ingredients, but the quality for making finished dishes—you know what is [inaudible] tofu?

MH: Oh, my God, yeah. *[Laughs]*

Restaurateur: If I use the one from New York, the brand, it costs, let's see—about—one is \$1.15, one is \$1.95. But the quality, the softness, the smoothness—the texture, I mean—for a Northerner [Northern Chinese], the texture is first, the flavor is second. That texture is incredible. The consistency is always the same. The one, your local, if you use for braised tofu, it's fine, the hard one. The soft one, I don't think they do a good job with it, in my opinion. But tofu was always available. I mean, we do a lot. One of the most popular appetizers is fried [tofu] in sesame and peanut, chili oil. Our—a young students, Emory students, they order for appetizers, they love it. That and the string beans, same way. All we do is fry it and put it on the--what do you call it—wax paper? To absorb the oil? [Maybe means paper towels?]

MH: So when you're saying it was always available, where were some of the suppliers for it?

Restaurateur: Yeah, tofu was always—but now because—ever since we have a local tofu-maker, it got cheaper. I guess, machine is one thing, [inaudible—“skewers”?] is another thing. Tofu is still the big deal. Have you ever had egg custard, real soft tofu?

MH: Mm-hm. It's like a steamed—*[Restaurateur makes inaudible comment.]* oh, yeah.

Restaurateur: That's a popular thing right now. But almost there's no soybean in there.

MH: They steam it—it's one they can steam or there's some that are like a custard, like an egg?

Restaurateur: You can steam them all, but the chief thing is the texture is even much softer than soft tofu.

MH: Oh, OK. Yeah.

Restaurateur: So we make it—one of the most well-known would be lightly fried like pepper sauce.

MH: I think I've seen it like—what is it? Gin-jai-ee [spelling?], the stew, like kimchi stew, like they sell little kits, the Korean kits?

Restaurateur: That's sundubu [spelling?].

MH: Yeah, sundubu [spelling?]. Yeah, I use--

Restaurateur: That's a little bit different. That's the Korean way. There—that actually has soy in there. The one I'm talking about is more egg, so they call it egg tofu, depends on which Chinese you ask for. Those are very popular among Asian customers. I think American customers don't like it—think it's too runny, yeah. Tofu, that's a big difference. Big difference, actually. I'm not talking about during

the pandemic, but before that, tofu was getting to be less expensive than several years ago. But now it's a different story—shipping costs. Some of the brands for the last two weeks, I don't have the [rest of sentence inaudible; music interferes]. You're very knowledgeable about Asian food, seriously!

MH, *laughing*: I love it so much.

Restaurateur: You'll have to come and eat some time.

MH: Oh, I will, yeah. No, it's just been such a fun, you know—eating and learning about it, because I cook a lot, too. So it's not just so much eating at restaurants, now, I'm like, "Oh, I want to make it at home." And so--

Restaurateur: Have a portable Chinese stove. It's very cheap.

MH: But we also are familiar with a lot on Buford Highway—which that also was—a lot of restaurants were shifting in the '70s and '80s.

Restaurateur: The Chinese don't go to Buford Highway.

MH: They go into Duluth, right? Yeah.

Restaurateur: Because all those restaurants mainly is for people from Cambodia, Laos. If you go to dim sum place, you'll see it's a different kind of clientele. And then the ones in Duluth, Gwinnett, will be new immigrants from China, from Taiwan, Singapore. It's very different. If you ever go to—do you ever go to that grocery store called Grand China on Pleasant Hill? It's very big. Any day you go, it's packed. Even on Monday. But that has more stuff at that—before that store opened, if I run out of something, I'm dead. But that's possible—that's only possible if we can get some of the spices. Now my chili bean paste I bought like this, and they ship it to me.

MH: Is that—is it—[inaudible; brand name of product?]

Restaurateur: Yes, very good! [Inaudible—name of product?] Means a chili oil or red oil. So they're not that salty, not that—won't dry easily. And then [inaudible] is the sauce for the [inaudible]. And you know, that's not a soybean; that's a lima bean.

MH: Mm-hm. So where do you see Pyng Ho going in the next few years, ten years in the future.

Restaurateur: [*Groans*] That's a good question.

MH: So will the family continue the tradition?

Restaurateur: I'm not sure about my next generations. It's hard to train somebody. It's so hard to find people to work. Every single restaurant has [inaudible] thing right now. But people—but Chinese food definitely is changing to a much more modern, better way. I'm kind of impressed, actually. People like it. They—and then they come here to ask for a lot of stuff, so it makes me kind of excited about it. But I don't know. I hope it is going a better way. That's [inaudible--how? all?] I can think. I

just don't want to hear the words, "being Americanized." It's a lot—at the beginning, Chinese food, during '60, '70, they want to be easy for the customer to accept, so they Americanized, made it sweeter, make it more saucier, you know. And I hate to say it, but you know, this [inaudible—sounds like "Kahuna"] beef? There's no such a dishes, [*Both laugh.*] but it's very, very popular. I never had a broccoli before I come to America. I know what is a cauliflower, but I never see a broccoli before. I never see a baby corn, either. [*Both laugh.*]

MH: What, you're telling me baby corn isn't a—

Restaurateur: Baby corn is bamboo. It's a type of bamboo, yeah. Straw mushroom—oh, my God. It's a luxury item during the '80s. Now it's OK, now the price is much more steadier. But those are [inaudible; voice trails off]. It's all kind of trendy stuff. The food is [inaudible]—you got to go with the trend, you got ups and downs. You know, for a while Korean food was popular, Thai food, Korean food, you know. Chinese is kind of like steady-going, because Chinese food people can accept much more easier. We need to come out with new, better, healthy [inaudible].

MH: So how do you—I don't want to say "fight"—but how do you, between Chinese-American take-out and what you're doing, I mean, how do you navigate—

Restaurateur: Balance it?

MH: --balance it between what your customers—you know, it sounds like there's a lot of customers who want more.

Restaurateur: Well, you can—we want to keep—I want to do more better, authentic dishes, but at the same time, you got to cater to what the customer wants, you know? If people—my customers been here like thirty, forty years, those old, faithful customers, I'm not going to change what they want. You know, if they come here, this is a neighborhood restaurant, they want to be comforted. The usual, get his martini, get his moo goo gai pan, right? You leave them alone. But when they come with family, "Steve, I got whole family here, give me my thing and then bring some of your specials, and let them try it." So you got to do both ways, balance. Not too much yin, not too much yang. But you don't want to be fun. Fair would be no fun. You want to be--keep doing this.

MH: That's why I appreciated having a traditional, you know, traditional menu, and then the other menu.

Restaurateur: Did you see the menu that I have? Did you see my menu? I tell them, I don't categorize as beef, chicken, and shrimp. I—let me show you this.

MH: Yeah

[*Restaurateur steps away to retrieve menu; brings it back to show MH.*]



Restaurateur: [Inaudible comment] See, I put in the different categories, like in [inaudible]. Then they can decide what they want, so create your own. I just list the sauce, and then you choose the ingredients. That way, have to make the decision. So for example, like this, I have a English, Chinese, but I also have Korean, for this one is popular for Korean customers. That's—so that's why the—make everybody happy. Could you give me two minutes? [Inaudible comment]

MH: But I don't want to hold you up too much—

Restaurateur: No, no, you're fine! You're fine. [Inaudible comment] You want to eat something?

MH: I'd love to, but I don't want to have you go cook it and then—

Restaurateur: I don't have that kind of microwave. *[Both laugh.]*

MH: [Inaudible], no, I can come back tomorrow, actually, for dinner—I'll bring my—

Restaurateur: Well, tomorrow, I will probably be busy. Or do you want to see some—how I cook?

MH: Yeah, that would be amazing, yeah.

Restaurateur: What kind of dish do you want to see?

MH: Well, I—

Restaurateur: Whatever, your favorite—it's fine.

MH: I—well, I don't eat meat, but I do seafood and—I mean, is it to try to the [jin jin myin?] —is there meat or—

Restaurateur: We can do a no-meat version. Do you use dried tofu? Do you know what that means? Dry five-spice tofu?

MH: I think so, yeah.

Restaurateur: Use that as a meat? Same, bean paste that I make myself. Yeah! *[Music continues . . . ]*

END OF RECORDING

*Transcribed by CS*