

Asian Food Delights

Celebrity chef has Portland ties

Thirty years ago, Asian food was an exotic and rare cuisine for the American palette. Fast forward to today, and the Asian food aisle is present in almost any grocery store, and eateries featuring fares from the Far East are perhaps as prevalent as fast food.

Martin Yan has helped introduce Asian food to American audiences serving as host of PBS' "Yan Can Cook."

With a thick Cantonese accent and infectious enthusiasm for Asian food, Yan has steadily un-shrouded exotic fares for American audiences, always ending the show with, "If Yan can cook, so can you."

Portland holds a special place for Yan, whose father spent years working in Chinatown making money before returning to China. Yan was in town for a cooking show at Wong King's Restaurant on Division Street, a place the chef has high regards for.

You have an interesting back story. Has that influenced your work?

When my father went back to China he opened a restaurant, and I basically grew up in the restaurant business. My mother ran a grocery store. So throughout my life I've been associated with food, hanging around with food and restaurants and the kitchen.

Did you have any challenges presenting Asian food to Western audiences?

I basically make it very mainstream. I try to demystify Asian and Chinese cooking. I use whatever is available in the market place. Now if you go to super market, you can find soy sauce, hoisin sauce, sesame oil, bok choy, wonton egg roll wrapper, all kinds of stuff. I think that cooking Chinese food you don't always need the exotic ingredients. You might need some more traditional ingredients. Here's an example, a typical

Chinese dish is beef and broccoli; there's nothing exotic. The only thing that might be exotic is the oyster sauce. If you don't have oys-

ter sauce, you stir fry the beef with garlic and ginger and then throw in the broccoli and put in some soy sauce and it tastes good anyways. Some of the simplest home cooking doesn't need any exotic ingredients.

Are there any exotic ingredients or dishes you'd like a western audience to try?

I always tell people when you go out to a Chinese restaurant the key is to look at a variety of cooking techniques too, not only ingredients. Everything in Chinese, in lifestyle and food and cuisine and cooking is about yin and yang. Ying and yang are contrasting force, but at the same time you put them together and they are harmonious. You put that little water chestnut with tofu. Tofu is very soft very moist and water chestnut is very crunchy, so it's a contrasting force, but you put it together it's a perfect balance. Cooking is common sense with imagination with some understanding of the yin and yang force.

The big thing in Portland is the local food movement. What are your thoughts on it?

Chinese cuisine is the best to use local food and organic food. You go to China, they have a lot of farming, a lot of fish, farms that are all sustainable. When they raise the poultry and the ducks and chicken they just use scraps, rather than feed them hormones, like wild animals. Free range, they run around and grab the insects, and bugs, and worms. They're the best tasting chicken. The Chinese have learned to recycle things years and years ago. And the Chinese always say, if it's not fresh, if it's not in season, don't eat it. Any local tomato is much better than a green tomato packed in a container with chemicals and ripened for weeks. They're tasteless because when they pick they're green, and they ship it to the warehouse where it ripens, but it's not ripening under the sun on the vine with the heat. Where I live, I go to the farmers' market twice a week. I only buy ugly looking tomatoes. The uglier it is, the better the taste.

What did you have for Chinese New Year?

Chinese New Year is probably the most important celebration and holiday in the Chinese calendar. During this time most of the Chinese would celebrate with a lot of food. Food is the main focus of celebration. And Chinese New Year has a lot of symbolism. You see a lot of tangerine, a lot of orange, a lot of chicken, a lot of fish. I have twin boys and I invited a couple friends and I cooked a big rooster and I marinated it in soy sauce, hoisin sauce, five spice power, a lot of garlic and ginger, and stuck it in underneath the skin and marinated it. I rubbed my seasoning underneath the skin because if you do it on the skin it's tasteless, so I put it underneath the skin, and I roast it. I had some glutinous rice with some



Portland holds a special place for Martin Yan of 'Yan Can Cook' on PBS because his father spent years earning a living in Portland's Chinatown.

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