

Cecilia Chiang: The root of Chinese food in the U.S.

By Suzette Laboy
The Associated Press

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. — Cecilia Chiang is credited with introducing Americans to the taste of authentic Chinese food, though that wasn't her initial plan.

Chiang wasn't a chef and hadn't intended to be an American restaurateur. It was a case of an investment falling apart. As the story goes, in the early '60s she loaned friends some money to open a restaurant in San Francisco. Except they backed out at the last minute and in order to save the deal, Chiang decided to do it herself. "Maybe it was my destiny," she said during a recent interview.

In time, that business grew into the city's famed Mandarin restaurant, forever changing Chinese food in America. It's a story few Americans know, but many more soon will. Chiang's life is the subject of a new documentary film, *Soul of a Banquet*, directed by Wayne Wang (who also directed *The Joy Luck Club*).

The film follows Chiang as she prepares a banquet to honor the 40th anniversary of Alice Waters' Chez Panisse restaurant. The film — an unfinished version of which was screened at the South Beach Wine and Food Festival — weaves in details of Chiang's life in China before she came to the U.S., as well as her family's struggles while she was running the Mandarin restaurant.

Chiang, 94, grew up in China at a time when servants did the cooking. She attended college in Beijing, but thought she'd never need to work. When the communists came to power, Chiang and her family fled to Japan.

A few years later, around 1960, she visited her sister in the U.S. She had no plans to stay, but while there made a loan to friends looking to open a restaurant. When the deal fell apart, she couldn't get her money back on the lease, so she went into business on her own.

Meanwhile, she was eating at the restaurants in San Francisco's Chinatown neighborhood and noticed something strange: They were serving dishes she had never heard of, things like chop suey and egg foo young.



"I thought it was really funny. You call this Chinese food?" she recalled. "This is something really ridiculous, so I thought if I'm going to open a restaurant, I really want to

AUTHENTIC CUISINE. Cecilia Chiang poses by a 1950s painting showing her in Japan, at her home in San Francisco. It's hard to believe there was a time before there was authentic Chinese food in America, but the tipping point was 1961, when the now-94-year-old Chiang opened the famed Mandarin restaurant in San Francisco. Her story is featured in the new movie, *Soul of a Banquet*. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

introduce Americans to real Chinese food."

Not that this was easy. She'd never cooked in a professional kitchen before and she spoke Mandarin, not English or Cantonese (the language of most of her San Francisco suppliers). And then there were the customers. She refused to serve American-style Chinese food, instead creating the menu from her memories of what she ate as a child. For many American diners at the time, this was new and strange.

"It's not easy when I first opened the first year because all the dishes on the menu, people were not very familiar with that," said Chiang. "Hot and sour soup? All these funny names, but then they tasted and after years I educated them to eat my food."

Chiang retired and sold the restaurant in 1991 (it closed down about 15 years later). But the legacy continues. Her son, Philip, is a co-founder of the restaurant chain P.F. Chang's. And Chiang still enjoys cooking authentic Chinese food for herself, as well as teaching the cuisine to young chefs.

"The most important thing, I just want to educate America about the Chinese food. And I think I did it," she said.

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