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MY TURN

■ **Wayne Chan**



A 23-year-old journey for magical rice

We just arrived back from a three-week vacation in Italy! Do you know what I was looking forward to the most?

Chinese food.

OK, settle down. Don't let your calzone collapse; we had pizza and pasta up the wazoo. Besides, this is my story, so let me tell it!

The last time I was in Italy was 1991. My wife Maya and I had just married and we headed to Italy for our honeymoon.

Now here's the thing about what it's like for me when I travel somewhere — I'm pretty flexible when it comes to food. I'll happily eat and enjoy the local cuisine no matter where I am. As they say, "When in Rome ...," and since we were actually in Rome, I was happy to chow down on pizza, pasta, cheese, cured meats, whatever — with one caveat.

I have an inner voice, and this voice stays with me, providing guidance, feedback, and critique, especially at mealtimes. He provides a running commentary during and after each meal. It goes something like this:

1st meal of pizza or pasta — "This is a fantastic meal, nearly as good as Chinese food!"

2nd meal of pizza or pasta — "Chinese food would be better, but this is a great meal!"

3rd meal of pizza or pasta — "Look, I'm reasonable, this is doable, but let's eat Chinese next time."

4th meal of pizza or pasta — "I thought I'd made myself clear. When are we getting Chinese?"

5th meal of pizza or pasta — "So that's how you're going to play this? I hope you're a fan of indigestion!"

6th meal of pizza or pasta — "Four letters! G-O-U-T! Understand me now?"

So, listening to my inner voice, at some point during the trip we found a Chinese restaurant. And since there was no internet (or Yelp, for that matter), we went to the first Chinese restaurant we happened upon. It was in the center of Rome, which meant it would be expensive.

I don't remember everything we ordered on that first Rome trip, but I do remember the fried rice. It cost U.S. \$25. One bowl of fried rice cost \$25 ... in 1991. If I recall, back in 1991, \$25 could buy you a used Honda Accord. In 1991, for \$25, Tony Bennett would serenade you while dining by candlelight.

Of course, I'm exaggerating. But for \$25, that had better be the best fried rice on earth.

Here's the thing — it was the best fried rice on earth. It was amazing. What was even more amazing — every time we went to another Chinese restaurant in Italy, the fried rice was incredible. I'd never had anything like it in the U.S., or in Asia, for that matter.

It was something about the rice. Each kernel was round and luminescent — almost like a pearl. Each bite was chewy, unlike any rice I'd ever eaten. It was absolutely delicious. I just couldn't get enough of it.

In fact, after the third or fourth Chinese restaurant in Italy, I asked our server to inquire to the kitchen where the rice was bought. One way or another, I was going to bring some of this rice home. She looked at me as if I had asked the oddest question — and I guess I did.

Besides, it wouldn't have happened. After I mentioned to my beautiful, talented, and newly wedded wife that I would love nothing more than to bring a few bags of this wondrous rice back home with us, I believe her response was, "Forget it. We are not lugging around bags of rice throughout Italy. It's probably just Arborio rice anyway."

Ahhh, wedded bliss.

For the next two decades, every time we've gone out for Chinese and ordered fried rice, I've reminisced about that rice in Italy and how our rice pales in comparison. Perfectly round, luminescent, chewy goodness — it wasn't Arborio rice! I know my rice and that wasn't Arborio!

Fast forward 23 years and Maya and I, along with our three kids, are in Rome. I've regaled our children with tales of the magical rice I'd eaten long ago, and of the dastardly woman who deprived me of bringing some of it home. They were with me; now that we were back in Rome, nothing would stop us on this sacred search for glorious gluttony goodness. We would eat Chinese food in Rome.

Our first stop was a Chinese restaurant near the center of Rome. With inflation being what it is, I figured a bowl of fried rice at today's prices would require me to first call our credit card company to raise our credit limit. To my surprise, the price was reasonable.

The suspense as our server brought our order to us was incredible. This was the moment I had been waiting for — for 23 years! As the waitress carefully lowered the steaming bowl of fried rice onto the table, the three kids and I constantly dabbed drool from the corners of our mouths while Maya looked on in disgust from our collective voracity.

The upshot? It was the same rice that we have back home. The same for the next Chinese restaurant we went to, and the one after that. The dream was over. The kids and I huddled together and mourned over what was not to be. Tears were shed.

OK, maybe tears weren't shed. But now that we're back home, I'm heading to a Whole Foods Market to test the gourmet rice.

Maybe it was Arborio.