

Grace Young

Author, cook Grace Young brings authentic Chinese food to your kitchen

By Stephanie Han

While many people love to eat Chinese food, it remains a cuisine seen in the homes of the average American as leftovers and familiar white take-out boxes. Its ingredients are perceived as unfamiliar and can intimidate even the most ardent Chinese food lover from trying out a few recipes.

Grace Young's book "The Wisdom of the Chinese Kitchen" (Simon and Schuster, \$27.50) may lessen the gap between the Chinese food lover and cook, and encourage people to try recipes in their own kitchens. It also serves as an introduction to the celebrations and rituals which revolve around food in Chinese American families. "This book shows the dualism, the two cultures we were exposed to growing up American and Chinese. It's historical. It brings food alive," says Ken Hom, a chef and cookbook author who recently moved to Paris from Berkeley. "This exposure to another culture is something that is really special, especially as these things are beginning to disappear within the second generation."

Because the majority of Chinese immigrants to the Bay Area are Cantonese, chances are the food you eat at the restaurant down the block is Cantonese. Or a version of it.

The Western palette and the acumen of the Chinese restaurateur to satisfy their customers' cravings often alter the cuisine that is served in these establishments. Young realizes this and to her credit has written a book which adheres to the traditional recipes found in Chinese homes. This is the food her Mama and Baba and the aunts and uncles made: the food served piping hot onto the kitchen table every night when Young was a girl growing up in San Francisco.

Her father, Delvin Young, was born in San Francisco's Chinatown but raised in Canton. His wife, Helen, was raised in Shanghai but immigrated to the states in 1949. Grace Young lives in New York City, but frequently returns to San Francisco to visit her parents. Although she grew up eating Cantonese food, at age 14 she began studying under a well-managed French chef. She went on to work for various companies as a recipe developer and consultant and food stylist. She has developed recipes from mainstream cookbooks as well as "the best of China" and the "the best of Thailand."

This book is a resounding tribute to her family, Cantonese food, and her cultural heritage.

"The Cantonese were considered to be the best cooks," Young says. "Their cuisine is the most highly developed. It has the broadest range of flavors, yet the subtlest tastes."

The book features photographs of her family, explanations of the dishes, warm anecdotes and recipes for beginning and advanced cooks.

She discusses the lore of rice and champions the irreplaceable cleaver. Discussion of the food processor, which many cooks now view as an essential part of the kitchen, is nowhere to be found in this book. “Doing it by hand makes a difference in the taste,” says Young.

There are photographs of the ingredients necessary to create the authentic dishes, along with detailed instructions on the art of shopping and finding ingredients. This book demystifies Chinese cuisine, simultaneously showcasing its special qualities.

Of particular note is the section on achieving yin-yang harmony, or rather, the balance that food provides. While the cookbook doesn't feature the Chinese version of the nonfat milk shake, or any recipes for herbal medicines, it does discuss and provide recipes for foods and soups that have healing qualities.

Young refers to the foods in the Cantonese tradition as warming, cooling or neutral. The combination of the ingredients and the way they are prepared can invigorate or soothe and provide balance. In particular, young stresses the importance of Yun or soothing foods, and focuses on three types of soups.

“That is one critical area that has never been explored in Western Chinese cookbooks,” Young says. “I almost feel as though it's a secret that the Cantonese have, a culinary mystery. That's one thing I think is special, that these recipes reveal for the first time. “There are soups they drink for every day to balance their meals, special Yun soups which harmonize the body. And many times they cleanse and remove toxins from the body. And there are particular soups they drink for different reasons.”

These particular vegetable soups are seldom served in Chinese restaurants, but are eaten at home at the beginning or end of a meal. Sometimes bland, they are substitute for the milk, water or soda that often accompanies a Western meal.

“Bow are the restorative soups, after you've had an illness and are in the convalescent period. They're for after you've had your fever and you are feeling weak... The restorative soup is too rich to digest when you are sick.” Examples of this in the book are chicken soup, chicken wine soup and black chicken soup, says Young.

Also included are recipes for legume-, fruit and nut-based soups called tong shui which invigorate the kidneys and moisten the internal organs. Often sweet, they serve as snacks or desserts

Jook, a rice porridge is a traditional favorite. In many Chinatowns you find jook shops. A filling low calorie meal, jook is a favorite of the dieter. An example of the Chinese correlation between food and healing is found in the detailed description for winter melon soup. Winter melon, in season now has many benefits. The rind cleanses the blood, the seeds stop constipation and the flesh soothes the lungs.

This is also the soup to eat during the heat of the summer when hot soups are often consumed. “It takes more energy to digest cold food,” explains Young.

she says that food should not be used as an alternative to medicine or visits to the doctor. But she says paying attention to food preparation is certain to bring good health and yield other surprises.

“I started off recording recipes and I never dreamed this project would lead me to this level of depth about my own family and Chinese culture,” she says. “I’m surprised how touched they are by this book a beautiful thing has emerged. My family is much more conscious of the history.”

The following recipes are from “the Wisdom of the Chinese Kitchen”:

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