

Chop Suey as imagined authentic Chinese food: the culinary identity of Chinese restaurants in the United States.

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Chop Suey as Imagined Authentic Chinese Food: The Culinary Identity of Chinese Restaurants in the United States

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Abstract

At least until the 1960s, chop suey was synonymous with Chinese food in the United States, where most Chinese restaurants were called chop suey houses. By uncovering the history of chop suey, this article analyzes the development of Chinese cuisine in the U.S. as an example of transnational cultural exchange. The authenticity and culinary identity of Chinese food in America often rested on its real or imagined Chinese roots while its popularity depended on how well Chinese restaurant proprietors adapted the flavors, ingredients, and cooking methods of Chinese cuisine to the tastes and markets of local American communities. The dynamic interaction between Chinese food and American customers functioned as a complex cultural negotiation. While Chinese restaurants helped shape the American diet, Chinese food was at the same time being shaped and transformed by American popular taste. By appealing to a wide range of American diners, chop suey eventually evolved into a popular American ethnic food and a central component in the culinary identity of Chinese restaurants. Chop suey generated numerous jobs for Chinese immigrants and established a culinary bond between Chinese food and American customers. Also, as an imagined authentic Chinese dish, it represented a type of affordable exoticism in the eyes of American consumers, meeting not only American tastes but also their social expectations of Chinese culture.

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