

Blissful Beshert: Jews and Chinese food

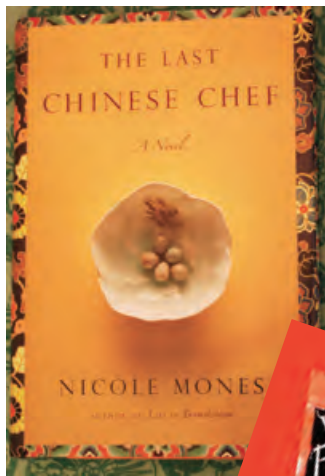
Jews and Chinese food go back a long way, but it's more than just a matter of good taste. In *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food* (Twelve, 2008), Jennifer 8. Lee investigates the cult of Americanized Chinese food. She dedicates a chapter to Jews and Chinese food, titled "Why Chow Mein is the Chosen Food of the Chosen People", but also writes about this relationship in other chapters.

Of course Jews are famous for eating Chinese food on Christmas, but Lee reveals another layer of this bond. As Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe settled into their new homes in the US, they indulged in Chinese food for a few reasons. One, it was more exotic than the European fare they were used to, so by eating Chinese food, Eastern European Jews felt cosmopolitan and worldly. Jews also flocked to Chinese restaurants, because the Chinese proprietors didn't view them as Jews, but as Americans. It was one place where Jews felt assimilated and treated the same as other European Americans. And unlike Mexican and Italian cuisine, also popular ethnic fare in the US, Chinese food doesn't use much dairy. It worked with kosher diets.

But more than just enjoying Chinese food as connoisseurs, Lee relates how Jews have played an important role in the phenomenon of Chinese take-out. A Jewish family named Epstein founded and owns Kari-Out, a company that supplies the small soy sauce packets included in Chinese take-out. Kari-Out also packages and supplies fortune cookies, disposable wooden chopsticks, and the thin white cardboard containers synonymous with take-out Chinese food in the US.

Jews of all strata enjoy Chinese food. Lee recounts the Great Kosher Duck Sandal of 1989 that brought down a beloved kosher Chinese restaurant outside Washington, DC named Moshe Dragon. The orthodox community loved their Chinese food so much they were willing to overlook the laws of kashrut all in the name of tasty kosher Peking duck.

Lee also travels to Kaifeng to interview an ancestor of the lost Jews of China, a community that built the first synagogue there in the 12th century. Other chapters of *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles* recount the history of Chinese take-out restaurants in the US, their delivery menus, and of course, their fortune cookies.



Westernized Chinese food has no place in *The Last Chinese Chef* (Houghton Mifflin, 2007) by Nicole Mones. This delectable novel chronicles two stories—one of Maggie McElroy, an American food writer, the other of Sam Liang, a Jewish, half-Chinese chef who returns to his father's birth city of Beijing to learn the ancient art of Chinese cookery.

Maggie travels to Beijing in search of missing pieces from her late husband's secret life. Her food magazine editor assigns her a story in Beijing—to interview Sam Liang, a rising star in Beijing's culinary world, descended from China's last imperial chef—to keep her mind away from the tragedy of losing her husband in a car accident and learning he led a secret life on his business trips to China. Brought together by food, Maggie and Sam develop a close friendship and support each other through rough patches each encounters during Maggie's visit to Beijing.

As a prelude to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the city launches a contest to choose the best regional chefs in China. Sam enters as one of ten contestants and aims to recreate an imperial banquet. Trained by his three 'uncles', close friends of his father's, Sam learns the various components of Chinese cuisine: taste, texture, and appearance. The one person missing from Sam's side is his father, who escaped China in the early 1950s when Mao cracked down on imperial cuisine.

Sam's Judaism is only touched upon superficially. He learned to cook back in the US from his Jewish grandmother, but when he moves to China, he delves into his father's culture, learning the language, the customs, the cuisine. His Jewish roots seldom appear in his new life in China.

Mones, the author of *Lost in Translation* (no relation to the popular Hollywood movie, but much more substantive than the film), first traveled to China in 1977 as a young textile entrepreneur. In the late 1990s, she began writing about Chinese food for *Gourmet* magazine, so except for the fictional plot of *The Last Chinese Chef*, the book could very well serve as a food memoir of her culinary experiences in China. The cone shaped corn cakes, succulent tofu infused with a crab reduction, fish head soup, and countless other dishes explode onto the pages and into the readers' appetites. ♪