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Interview with Ms. Chan (Ho Wah Restaurant)

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Date of interview 04/08/2021

Ms. Chan with Ho Wah Restaurant

Interview Transcript:

MG: Awesome, it says we are recording we are good to go- Thank you for your patients Ms. Chan [Thumbs up] 0. 36:42

JD: Hello Ms. Chan. My name is Judi Davis, and I am here with Mimi Ghosh. We would like to thank you for participating in the CSUMB Peninsula Asian Cuisine Oral History Project. Your participation is valued, and we are looking at the region's connections and the archive of Ho Wah's Restaurant in Marina, California. 0.36:03

JD: So, our first question today is that we would like to ask is, um, [audio] we understand that the term "deluxe" translates to "Ho Wah" and brings to Marina California a variety of cuisines. We wonder if you can explain your love for the multicultural Asian experience in America and how the food translates into the dishes that Ho Wah creates? 0.35:29

DC: Ho Wah, Ho Wah, the name of the restaurant [wind chimes] [Wind] Ho Wah, it means deluxe.

JD: And how is your love for the multicultural Asian experience in America, um, with the food, and how does it translate into the dishes that Ho Wah creates? 0.35:04

DC: So, you mean, you mean ahh, the Ho Wah, or I don't quite understand. [wind chimes] 0.34:55

JD: Okay, so what we are wondering is how does the food that you make at Ho Wah - How does it translate into your American culture here in America. 0.34.28

DC: How do we? Can you repeat it again? I am sorry? [Loud windchimes and Wind]

MG: Judi, I think, let me see, um, can we rephrase the question. [reading question] 0.34.28

DC: I'm sorry, I can't hear you.

JD: [Inaudible reception]

MG: Judi, okay, so I think your like breaking up a little bit. So, I think just to simplify a little bit, so if you could explain, your um, just the thought process behind the food that you create at your restaurant. 0.33:21

DC: I am sorry, can you speak louder? I tried to put my speaker to the loudest one. [traffic noise]

MG: Oh, that's okay. Would you mind explaining the thought process behind the food that you recreating, is there any? 0.33.06

DC: Ah! Okay, okay, so we got our um, our own recipe from the family, so ah, all our family like the recipe, the sauces, and everything, and so we try and ah, um, try to figure it out if a lot of American can try this kind of food and our culture, and it would be great. And we try to... We find that a lot of the Chinese Restaurants, they use the MSG. You know what this means? MSG? 0.32:30

JD: Yes.

MG: Yes, we studied.

DC: Yeah, the MSG to make the food tasty. But we don't use MSG. So, we use our own family style to cook, so no MSG and it is still very tasty, and the second thing that we would like all the people love the food because we don't use the canned vegetable. [JD & MG acknowledge okay] So we use the fresh one, so it cost more, but more healthy. So, um, so um, now a day not many people use the fresh vegetable. So, ah, like the mushroom, they use from the can, from the big can. So, we, use the fresh ones cost more higher, but healthier, so the point we want to open a restaurant is healthier. That's why we don't use the MSG's. So, our menu mention about that and the second point is all fresh vegetables., so we don't use the can.
0.31:18

JD: Oh, very good!

MG: Yeah, Yeah, good!

DC: The jicama, the texture similar like the water chestnut. 0.30:54

JD: Yes, they are all fresh vegetables that's beautiful, thank you [MG concurs]

DC: So, we rather than pay more spend more time to prepare rather than not make healthy food. [JD & MG agrees] 0.30:42

MG: I had a follow-up question; actually, this is not on the list of questions that we emailed you, but I was wondering, ah, why do you not use MSG in your food?

DC: Oh, because using MSG is terrible. So, when we cook at home, we don't use MSG. {MG Okay} Yeah, we Chinese, we don't use it, real Chinese, we don't use it.
0.30:11

MG: I see

DC: The real Chinese or Asian people don't use it. Oh, Ah, Ah, I cannot say all Asian, but for the Chinese, for our traditional, we don't use MSG. Only American's, they love to eat it because more tasty, but, but, some of the Americans

they become allergic. They are sweating, and their heart beating or have the skin; ah, um, allergic for the skin, itchy. Ah, ow you say, rash, [MG concurs yes] [JD states allergic reaction] yes, yes, allergic reaction, rash. Some people they eat the MSG, they have the heart attack, the heart beating or ah, sweating some Americans, yeah so. 0.29:33.

DC: So, we try, NO, NO, NO, FOR SURE we don't use MSG!

MG: Okay, I see, I see, alright, thank you very much, thank you.

DC: So, Chinese, when we cook at home, we don't use any MSG we use the chicken broth, the base to add to the, to add to the wen we cook, sometimes we add the chicken broth, so some people they use their own chicken broth, they sue the bone, the chicken bone, to Ah, simmer, ah how you say... Simmer, Simmering [JD & MG agree] Yeah, the simmering broth, the juice, and to put in the food to cook it. 0.28:51

The bone needs to cook for many hours, at least 6,7,8 hours. [JD & MG comment wow, that's good]

MG: That's a long process 0.28:41

DC: Yes, long process, long process to make all the bones, sometimes with all the skin and the meat too. But the meat for sure, we don't put the skin in it, but too much fattening. The fat, [MG, the fat, yes] 0.28:26

JD: So, Ms. Chan, we would also like to know, um, and we'd like to take the opportunity to acknowledge that we understand that the past few years have impacted the restaurant industry and especially the last year. And we would like to know what challenges in the past year you have experienced and have been um, and have there been any realizations of your immediate community and how they have reacted out in support. 0.27:57

DC: Oh, Yes! So Um, first off, I would like to thank you, ah, the local community, they are very supportive since the pandemic, and ah, we try to do special, like \$24.99 have a bunch of a food because at the time I realize that some of the people

they don't have a job, and they cannot get unemployment money right away, it away maybe two-three weeks. We do the promotion \$25.00, so you have the soup, appetizer fried rice, Chow Mein and the two entrées, is very good deal.

JD: Yes, good deal!

DC: Yeah, Yeah, Yeah, to help the community, and ah, one of the local lady, her name is ah, Cathy, she's very helpful, she helps the Marina community do a lot of stuff. So, when I have something to understand because my English is not good enough, she is native-born here, so she knows about the [inaudible]. So she tells me a lot too. And some of the local people, they know we had a hard time. So, they try to come to support every week, I mean once a week and they, he a gentleman, he don't doesn't want to expose his name, he donates the food every week or every two weeks to the community. 0.26:29

Sometimes we pick the medical field; sometimes, we pick the grocery field, the grocery people. [JD & MG concur, hmm, hmm] Sometimes the homeless, so we pick some people, yeah! 0.26:07

And so far, we drop about 30% business. 0325:57

JD: That's great, and what a wonderful contribution to your community, and thank you for that! So, um, another question here is ah, is there something you would like us to know about your restaurant, specifically cuisine and the history in general? So, do many of your dishes have a specific history that you brought with you that you know create in your restaurant?

DC: Awe, Judi, when you spoke, thought the zoom the static makes the words not so good. Sometimes I can hear, sometimes I can't.

JD: Repeats question to Ms. Chan

DC: oh, yes, the cuisine, Okay.

JD: Yes, what you brought with you from China to America.

DC: The history of what?

JD: Of your cuisine.

DC: The cuisine, okay [Wind]

JD: Yes, what you brought with you from China to America that, um, you're sharing with American culture. So, um, you could let us know what recipes that you brought with you?

DC: Awe, the recipes, right? [JD & MG, yes] You ask me where the recipe come from? Awe, yes, I tell you. From the family, so my family they cook good food, and my husband family too, so I combined the two-family recipe, two different family recipe and go together. 0.24:27

JD: That's interesting.

MG: Wow, awesome!

JD: So, you've taken both families and created one cuisine with the good food?

DC: Yeah, yes, and the Americans love the flavor, they like the sweet and sour, somethings, so our popular dishes are the Orange Chicken, we sell that a lot, and ah, the Salt and Pepper Wing is my family like it. 0.23:59

JD: Yes

MG: Hmmm

DC: I have one more secret recipe that I have not exposed yet because I don't know if the American like it, that much so I need to do some sample to let the American people to try. 0.23:48

JD: Oh, great, great.

DC: My family secret recipe, yeah, [JD wonderful] She my grandmom, she creates it. A lot of the family and the friend from Hong Kong, yeah, we from Hong Kong like it. But I don't know if the American like it or not. So, I will try later on to make some samples to let the American try it. If they like it, I put it on the menu! It's very good dishes.

JD: What is the name of it?

DC: Awe, let me see in English.

JD: you can say it in Chinese if you like.

DC: translates 酱排骨 Jiàng páigǔ M 0.23:05

Chinese name is ah, Fu spareribs. So, I don't know how to translate the name of the sauce, but it's made with the sparerib, so fu` sparerib.

JD: So, it's a meat dish?

DC: Yeah, the meat dish is in our family very popular, so when we have the New Year or the big festival, we must have this dish!

JD: Oh, Okay, well.

DC: I don't know if America will like it or not, so I want to try it later. 0.22:35

JD: We would love to try it!

DC: I have to let America try it if they like it or not.

JD: Inaudible connection

DC: Sorry, Judi, I cannot hear.

MG: Judi, you're breaking up. Do you mind typing it in the chat?

JD: Inaudible – typing question in the chat.

MG: Is the weather nice in Marina right now?

DC: Monterey very nice, you see the weather is very nice. Where are you from?

MG: I'm from the Bay Area.

DC: Oh, Bay Area, [MG yeah] Bay area very nice too. Bay area.

MG: Yeah, yeah, it's very beautiful.

DC: Yesterday not that good, today very good.

DC: So, what university are you going to?

MG: University? We go to ah, California University Monterey Bay.

DC: Monterey Bay too, but you at home right now.

MG: yes, I'm at home right now because of the pandemic, yeah.

DC: The pandemic, pandemic, so you at home right now awe, San Francisco, [MG, yeah] San Francisco, you know China Town? They have a very one famous bakery. The name is Golden Gate Bakery. Always long life!

MG: Let me search it up. Let me see what it looks like. Golden Gate Bakery.

DC: They not always open, they like it they open, they don't like it the don't open
[Laughter]

MG: So, people still go there?

DC: Oh yeah, even from New York, the people still go there and stand in the long line every day.

JD: Judi finishes chat transcript of question.

DC: From Judi to everyone, we wonder if you can share any personal attitudes that have shaped your love for food? Oh, yea, I don't understand this one. Can you explain it?

MG: Oh yeah, Judi, can we rephrase this?

JD: The question was how do you find authentic recipes, but...

MG: Oh, well, we already talked about that then, oh yeah.

JD: Yes.

MG: So, about the recipes, were they passed down through the generations, or were they just your parents' recipes?

DC: From my grandparents.

MG: Grandparents too, that's beautiful.

DC: My grandparent and from my husband's family.

MG: From his family, okay, that is awesome.

DC: Sometimes we have some of a good friend they are a chef as well. So, we try to ah, exchange our opinion, yeah, so like make a recipe of the sauce like that, so we let them try as well, and they create some new things, and we exchange the opinion.

MG: yes, cooking is all about community. My family is Indian, and ah, we would have these bigger pot lucks with all the families and their children, so everybody brought their own food. My mom used to make a coconut shrimp. She made like a shrimp curry, and she put it inside a real coconut, and I know, like all the other moms, liked her recipe, so she exchanged it.

DC: Oh yes, yes, we like to have some good friends, so we like to exchange our opinion and create some more new dishes to let the people try our... what our heart!!! [JD & MG smile and give thumbs up]

MG: I think Judi has the next question in the chat.

DC: Oh, okay.

JD: Do you have a favorite comfort food?

DC: Awe, do I have a favorite comfort food, you mean in my restaurant? 0.17:15 My favorite food is the salt and pepper chicken wing, or awe seafood fish, awe, anything salt, and pepper. [JD & MG agree]

The Hong Kong people really like it, so I bring it here. So, the American like it. We sell a lot of the salt and pepper wing, fish, tofu, a lot every day. And the other one is the Orange Chicken, American really like it! Especially for the kids.

MG: Yes, yes, my sisters both love Orange Chicken.

DC: Yeah, our sauce is very different, yeah!

JD: Yes, my son always orders the Orange Chicken.

DC: Next time you come, we will make you the wing and the orange chicken. Oh, and we have the shopping mall, from our restaurant is located in not a good location. A pretty old shopping mall, so not in the shop area. So, some customer say it is the hiding gem.

JD: Oh, the hidden gem.

DC: Oh yes, hidden gem. And oh, one of the customers in the begging he come almost every day, he sees nobody in my restaurant, its emptied. So, I don't know he awe, how you say, editor, food editor on our community weekly, the free newspaper, the name is Weekly, so he wrote a review. He wrote a good review.

And say the food is very good, but nobody knows, so that is why after that we getting more popular.

MG: That's great, that's good, that's how things start by word of mouth, and that's awesome, that's so good to hear.

DC: Yes, because our shopping mall is not full, so nobody knows, yeah.

MG: I am happy that happened to you! Congratulations.

DC: Oh, yeah, and so the Mayor, the Mayor for Marina, so we are located in Marina. The Mayor he always come he's vegetarian, vegan, so he loves our green bean in homemade garlic sauce, very good too. Homemade in the garlic sauce and eggplant. He really like it.

MG: Oh yeah, I've had the green beans in garlic and the little garlic pieces, and they are like fried amazing some of my favorite food!

DC: Yeah, and fresh, fresh, not from the can, everything fresh. So, these two gentlemen, because nobody know, only the people word of mouth, so I told you not many people know, we are not in the big shopping mall, so not too many people know, only the people word of mouth, yeah.

MG: Yeah, yeah, yeah, okay, so we know the restaurant industry is hard to break into, so we wanted to know what was your inspiration for starting this restaurant?

DC: What is the inspiration? So, I'm sorry, what this mean? Inspiration?

MG: Maybe your motivation. Why did you do it?

DC: Oh yeah, motivation [MG thumbs up] what is the motivation to run the restaurant, right.

MG: Yeah.

DC: So, as I mentioned before and I try a lot of the restaurants I come to America. But I am not the owner, so I work a lot of the different restaurants. Ah, American, Japanese, Chinese, especially Chinese the first time when I come. My English was not good enough, so I went in the Chinese restaurant, and I find out a lot of Chinese restaurant the food too many MSG. MSG, and they use the canned! The canned vegetables, because it cut down the awe, food cost. You know the Chinese food very cheap, right, so they use the quality in my mind is not good enough. So, it's not good enough, so compared to the Italian restaurant they can sell 20 dollars for one dish, Chinese maybe under ten or less in some area, so then I find out if one day, if I have the money, maybe I would like to have my own, so no MSG and have fresh ingredients and clean and nice food. 0.12:46
It is my dream that come true now.

MG: If you could own a restaurant anywhere, where would you own it? Where would you go?

DC: Would I want to own it?

MG: Where? Where?

DC: Oh, I would like to won it in oh maybe awe, Maybe in Carmel, more tourist.

MG: Carmel, yeah, that's a beautiful area. Fancy too.

DC: Carmel by the Sea, yeah or Cannery Row, lots of passersby.

MG: Cannery Row is also beautiful.

DC: But I still thank the Marina community, they support us awe, they supporting us, yeah so that's why every time they come, I love to say that if they don't come to supporting us the employee doesn't have a job, and we don't have the money to pay the rent as well. [JD & MG, comments yes]

MG: Okay, what is the food Americans are missing out on. [MC hmmm] What's the one dish you think people are missing out on?

DC: Ah, Salt and Pepper Wings, every time they come, the repeat customer or the new customer come, I asking them if they ever try. So, I make them some on the house.

MG: Oh, that's so nice.

DC: Yes, so they try it and come back and say, hey, last time you gave me some free food, that's very good, I want to order this! Yeah.

MG: That's great, that's great! Now when people try it and they want to come back, that the best!

DC: Yeah, Yeah, even though they order them, try a couple pieces. If they have a big order, I love to make a whole order for them,

MG: Oh, wow.

DC: To appreciate it, they give us the business, and they can try our famous dishes, so it's a win, win, situation! Win! Win!

MG: Yeah, Yeah! [JD & MG smiling] and they must be so happy also. They have a new favorite now.

DC: So, every time they haven't tried it, we love to give them so they can try it. One more thing, now we try to cut down on our credit card processing fee. [MG hmmm]

So, now we, the employee and me, we try to tell the customer, it would be great if you can pay in cash to support our small local business, so we love to make some dessert for them or the wing, either one, on the house for them to appreciate they pay in cash.

MG: Oh, okay, that's also very good. That's amazing, amazing. 0.9:46

DC: Yeah, but some customer maybe they misunderstand, they think we complain to them to pay in cash, and we got some complaint on yelp. So, our point is not to

push you to pay credit card; we say cash still welcome, but if you pay in cash, we appreciate it. And we explain to them that we try to cut that credit card processing fee. For the papa and mom restaurant. The fee is really high even though it's the kind. We still need to pay around thirteen cents or twenty cents to the bank.

MG: Interesting.

DC: Even though it's the kind, they still want to make the money.

JD: Yeah, people are not always kind.

MG: Yeah, maybe people just don't take the time to understand what you are saying, or they have another view.

DC: Yeah, we say it would be great if you can pay in cash to support the small local business and some people, they would say you don't take credit card? I said, 'we do.' We still do. I say credit card still welcome, [JD & MG yeah] But some people get mad, they get mad! [laughing]

MG: You are doing everything that you can; that's not your fault. Yeah.

DC: Yeah, we try to do the best but recently some customer they order the food, and then they don't come and pick it up. It wastes the food, and of course, I was pissed off! Because the Chinese food we make it, you cannot take it back to re-cook it for another customer. 0.08:13

So, the customer, she order some food some food, and I call her back, and I say, hey hi, your order is calling from Ho Wah, your food is ready, and she hang up, and I try to keep calling, and she didn't answer, and she did it on purpose, and last week as well. \$70.00 big to go, they don't come to pick it up. [JD & MG empathize] 0.07:47

MG: Awe, that's terrible, especially for a small business. Especially during a pandemic.

DC: Yeah, that's why I say you waste the food. You know many people in the world they don't have the food. 0.07:36

That's why the food bank is here. And you waste the food if you don't come! I think they are very selfish. Maybe they want to punish the restaurant. I don't know.

MG: I worked in a restaurant. I worked as a waitress, where people ordered online, and we put their credit card information in, and we rang them up immediately before we made the food. 0.07:14

DC: Awe, but sometimes they decline too. Some customer they order the food, and they eat it, they call the bank, they decline. They pick customer over us; this always happens. They bad people, the bad people BAD, bad people. [MG: What?]

MG: They call the bank?

DC: They in the hotel, mostly in the hotel. They order the food they ate it, and they call to complain something no good, something no good. We offer to make another one and say no, and call the bank to dispute the charge. 0.06:33

JD: Yeah, it's hard to deal with the public sometimes.

DC: Yeah, Yeah, some bad people they do take advantage.

MG: I'm sorry, Ms. Chan, that's just no good.

DC: Yeah, so on the other hand, we had the hard time too. [JD & MG empathize] So, one time I remember the pandemic just started at that time I just come back from Hong Kong, in Hong Kong at that time every people wear the mask, but in America, it's not welcome to wear the mask. So, I'm scared, I really scared. I wear the mask in the United States they think you are sick, but in Hong Kong, in Asia that time every people, they wear the mask even [inaudible] So, so in one time, I told a customer in the beginning you not trying to wear the mask. But the lady she didn't try to wear the mask. I said mame would you mind to wear the mask? She was really mad. She throws the pen to me. I think I told this to what is the name of the professor? Dustin Wright? [JD & GM yeah, Dustin Wright] Yeah, yeah, yeah, I

think I mentioned to him, I forgot he wrote on the first magazine, she threw the pen at me and she was really mad! And she called to complain your food not that good. [Laughter] and she put her anger, she put her anger on the food [MG that's terrible] 0.04:55

MG: Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah, I agree, I agree. Even though, even thoughts, yeah.

MG: Okay, I just have two more questions if you have some time?

DC: Yeah, sure, sure.

MG: Have you ever thought of creating a cookbook for your recipes?

DC: Ah, I spoke to my husband. We are not ready yet.

MG: Not ready yet? Maybe one day then, huh?

DC: Maybe yeah, maybe one day, but we are not ready at this moment [MG okay, okay] 0.04:11

JD: We hope to see your smiling face on the front cover of the cookbook. [Laughter]

DC: Even though if we made cookbook some the dishes are difficult to cook at home [JD & MG oh, I see, yeah]

MG: Do you need a lot of equipment for that? Like heavy kitchen equipment?

DC: Mmm, you need to have some equipment, yes! [MG, I see] This is why it's commercial, yeah, even if you put the recipe in the book, it's still difficult, so one of our customer he live at Pebble beach, he loves our salt and pepper wing, and he try to cook at home. He say, he try to cook at home, but it isn't like us. He come back to tell me. I need to buy your wing. [Laughter] It funny. He try to do by himself 0.03:13

MG: That's so sweet, that's so sweet, though, that he tried.

DC: Yeah, and he told me that he cannot make it. Yeah, I say even though I tell you how to make it difficult. Oh hum, how you say, the fire, the fire not strong enough flame, Commercial the fire, the flame, yes [MG concurs] It's not strong enough at home, so, it's different 0.02:47

MG: I see, I see, that makes a lot of sense! Awe, one last question.

What makes Ho Wah restaurant special to you? [Windchimes]

DC: I'm sorry?

MG: What is something that makes Ho Wah restaurant special to you?

DC: Special to me? [MG hmmm] Special to me is the repeat customer to come to visit us. Yeah, and share their experiences in Ho Wah or the other restaurants so we can get some experience opinion from the other restaurants, so it is um, it is what, a good way to love and share.

MG: That's amazing; thank you so much, Ms. Chan. We really appreciate you taking the time to do this, and if you want, I can send you this recording to you later.

JD: Okay, thank you.

MG: Yes, thank you for taking the time.

DC: No problem, thank you.

Interviewee: Ms. Chan

Interviewers: Judi Davis-Deacon and Mimi Ghosh

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Overseen by: Dr. Dustin Wright

Biography: Ms. Chan is a first-generation Chinese American born and raised in Hong Kong, China. Ms. Chan and her husband immigrated to America with dreams of owning a restaurant. They are now residents and business owners in Marina, California. Ms. Chan came to America and worked in many different types of restaurants, but found employment in Chinese restaurants to be a comfortable place to work as she was fluent in the Mandarin language and was learning to speak English. This experience brought Ms. Chan to the realization that she wanted to get a higher quality of Chinese cuisine to the Marina community. Ms. Chan now owns and operates a small Chinese eatery called Ho Wahs. She rents a small space in an older strip mall in Marina, California, creating local specials. Ho Wah's, known as the Hidden Gem, was described as a dream come true by Ms. Chan and a place she always wanted. She prides herself on creating family recipes handed down from both her and her husband's ancestors. A fusion of generational recipes, Ms. Chan only uses fresh ingredients to prepare her dishes, never canned products or MSG. Since opening Ho Wah's, Ms. Chan and her husband have strived to use the highest quality of fresh ingredients in her food preparation. Ms. Chan is an active member and contributor to the Marina community, helping those in need with her traditional family recipes that create Ho Wah's unique Chinese cuisine.

Summary of Transcript: (0.31:18) Ms. Chan explains the reason for making Ho Wah's cuisine by using only fresh ingredients and the cultural influence of not using MSG in her dishes. (0.27:57) Ms. Chan acknowledges how the restaurant industry has become impacted by COVID and the community members she teamed with to help those in need. (0.23:05) Ms. Chan explains a dish she wants to introduce to the American public from her grandmother's recipe and the importance of her family ancestry and traditions. (00:15:03) (0.17:15) Ms. Chan

speaks to her favorite comfort food. (0.12:46) Ms. Chan speaks to the operations of the Ho Wah restaurant and the difficulties that have arisen since the pandemic. She talks about food quality, expenses, and why she opened her Chinese restaurant in Marina, California. (0.08:13) Ms. Chan offers her insight to how China and America differ in facing the struggles of the pandemic. She also shares her business is impacted by the often abuses of customers who take advantage. (0.04.11) Ms. Chan discusses the possible development of a cookbook and speaks of the challenges in making Chinese cuisine in the home.

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