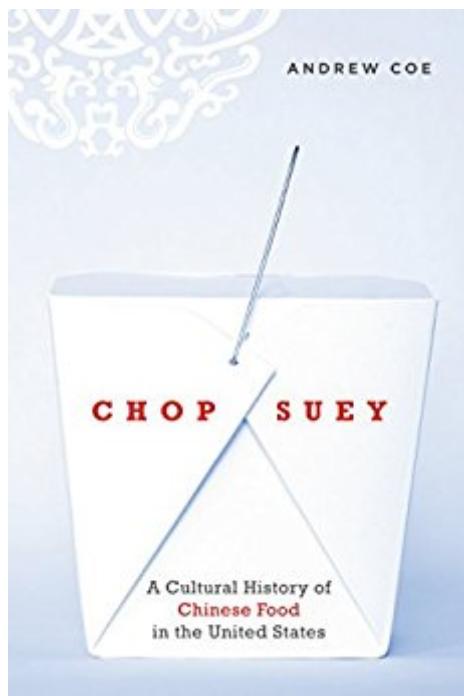


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Chop Suey: A Cultural History Of Chinese Food In The United States



Synopsis

In 1784, passengers on the ship Empress of China became the first Americans to land in China, and the first to eat Chinese food. Today there are over 40,000 Chinese restaurants across the United States--by far the most plentiful among all our ethnic eateries. Now, in *Chop Suey* Andrew Coe provides the authoritative history of the American infatuation with Chinese food, telling its fascinating story for the first time. It's a tale that moves from curiosity to disgust and then desire. From China, Coe's story travels to the American West, where Chinese immigrants drawn by the 1848 Gold Rush struggled against racism and culinary prejudice but still established restaurants and farms and imported an array of Asian ingredients. He traces the Chinese migration to the East Coast, highlighting that crucial moment when New York "Bohemians" discovered Chinese cuisine--and for better or worse, chop suey. Along the way, Coe shows how the peasant food of an obscure part of China came to dominate Chinese-American restaurants; unravels the truth of chop suey's origins; reveals why American Jews fell in love with egg rolls and chow mein; shows how President Nixon's 1972 trip to China opened our palates to a new range of cuisine; and explains why we still can't get dishes like those served in Beijing or Shanghai. The book also explores how American tastes have been shaped by our relationship with the outside world, and how we've relentlessly changed foreign foods to adapt to them our own deep-down conservative culinary preferences. Andrew Coe's *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States* is a fascinating tour of America's centuries-long appetite for Chinese food. Always illuminating, often exploding long-held culinary myths, this book opens a new window into defining what is American cuisine.

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Customer Reviews

I have often been told that if you have not traveled to China, then (as an American) you have never eaten Chinese food. I expected Chop Suey to be a foodie book about the evolution of the way food is prepared in China to the way it is served in our Chinese eateries. Chop Suey bills itself as "A Cultural History Of Chinese Food In The United States". It's really more of a history of how America has viewed the Chinese. It is not until a hundred pages or so in that the details of Chinese cuisine come into play. Prior to that, the book is a history of the China / American trade and a limited look at propaganda produced from those early voyages. There is a report here or there about the Americans being offered a meal they could not appreciate, but the primary focus is on the bigotry between the two. From that point Chop Suey moves into the exploitation of early Chinese immigrants, the extreme racism they faced, and how they tried to hold on to their culture and cuisine in the face of it. Along the way many found jobs as cooks or opened fast food counters trying to prepare a food that met the expectations and tastes of their customers. Since those expectations were rooted in post colonial bias, the food that resulted bore little relation to what the Chinese ate at home. Moving into kosher Chinese food and eventually to Nixon's visit to China, Chop Suey continues to be a history of Chinese American relations with food as the tie and excuse for the journey. The murder of a young woman has little bearing on Chinese food as we know it, but such side trips relate to what seems to have been the author's real intention, exposing how racism kept our palates from a true cultural exchange. There is a wealth of information in Chop Suey.

I have to admit that from the cover I expected a fluffy but entertaining book in the style of *Eat My Globe* but I actually got a lot more than that. This is a fact dense book, well researched. The book opens with the new country of America sending its first ambassador (actually a merchant, which is very apropos on both sides) to China. It then diverges into a brief history of Chinese food in China - and Coe does a marvelous job of editing here, considering it's over 10,000 years of history and at

least four major regions, each with their own sub-regions with their own culinary traditions. Then back to the US, where Chinese restaurants arrived in the 1850s to feed all the Chinese people who'd come over looking for the mountains of gold. Americans never really developed a taste for the food till the 1900s, at which point it had become bland and homogenized enough to appeal to our whitebread tastes. Finally we go through the Jewish-Chinese food boom, the revitalization after WW2, Nixon's re-opening of China, and the state we're in today. The book ends with the happy yet sad state of affairs that you can get real Chinese food in the US if you know where to look, but most of it is still neutered to what we find acceptable - but we do that to all cuisines. Unfortunately the history of Chinese people in the US is also the history of racism, so you will feel very uncomfortable about some of the quoted newspaper articles and accounts which are sprinkled with racial slurs and provincial attitudes - and not just about Chinese. Coe commendably reprints these without any squeamishness, as they're crucial to understanding American attitudes towards China.

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