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The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures In The World Of Chinese Food



Synopsis

FEATURED ON TED.com and The Colbert Report. If you think McDonald's is the most ubiquitous restaurant experience in America, consider that there are more Chinese restaurants in America than McDonalds, Burger Kings, and Wendy's combined. Former New York Times reporter and Chinese-American (or American-born Chinese). In her search, Jennifer 8 Lee traces the history of Chinese-American experience through the lens of the food. In a compelling blend of sociology and history, Jenny Lee exposes the indentured servitude Chinese restaurants expect from illegal immigrant chefs, investigates the relationship between Jews and Chinese food, and weaves a personal narrative about her own relationship with Chinese food. *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles* speaks to the immigrant experience as a whole, and the way it has shaped our country.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Twelve; Reprint edition (March 23, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0446698970

ISBN-13: 978-0446698979

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (115 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

I was intrigued by this book when I read a glowing review of it on Yahoo news, and was able to finish it over several hours sitting in the local bookstore. Much like a fine Chinese meal, the *Fortune Cookie Chronicles* is fairly light, quite tasty, and in the end both filling and fulfilling. Because the book is so well written, it's a lot of fun and you'll learn more than you could have ever imagined about Chinese food in the United States (as well as elsewhere), something many of us -- myself included -- have long taken for granted. The book traces the incredible history of Chinese food in the United States, with the author setting out to explore why it is so popular across the country. Along the way she is able to spin delicious yarns on such topics as the birth of General Tso's chicken

(including a hilarious trip to the General's home town in rural China where absolutely no one has ever heard of the dish), the Japanese origins of the fortune cookie, the reasons for the Jewish love of Chinese cuisine, how human smuggling supplies the many thousands of Chinese workers who run Chinese restaurants across the country, and other areas. One of the most fascinating things I learned from the book is that the Chinese food we all know and love barely resembles real Chinese food -- the type of food people eat in China. In traveling to China to sample and research food and culture across the large nation, the author herself was initially surprised by this, and as the book progresses the fact helps demonstrate how the development of Chinese(/American) food is symbolic of the broader change to the culture of Chinese people who have moved to and settled their families in America. Indeed, more than being about the strange growth and metamorphosis of Chinese dishes in the U.S.

Like the author, I was often puzzled as a child why the food in Chinese restaurants was nothing like the food I grew up eating in Taiwan and at home. So I thought this book was be perfect for examining the evolution of Chinese food into Chinese-American food. This book was very informative and had a lot of interesting trivia and brief history tidbits. This book was mainly a light read, but there are certainly dark aspects connected to the current Chinese restaurant industry (as evident in the chapters "Golden Venture," "Mystery of Missing Chinese Deliveryman," and "Waizhou, USA"). I liked her self reflections, probably because they echoed mine. The reason I did not love the book was because I did not think it was well-organized. I thought she jumped from topic to topic. Some chapters would tie back into the fortune cookie story, others wouldn't. I think she needed a central theme to tie in her varied chapters. The chapter named "Greatest Chinese Restaurant in the World" was probably the worst chapter. Her criteria on defining the greatest were paradoxical - first, the Chinese cuisine had to be adapted to that certain part of the world properly, yet they cannot be "Pan-Asian" or what she wrote "nothing 'fusion-y'." Maybe it's because I'm not a foodie or a chef, but I thought fusion was the combination of other ethnic cuisines, thereby making her first criteria contradictory. For instance, she readily admits that in Mumbai, she tried the "Indian-Chinese fusion fare." And surprisingly the one she deemed the Greatest Restaurant is actually a fusion restaurant. One thing that surprised me was that she wrote couple times that a lot Chinese restaurants were dives.

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