

# Sweet and sour history: Melbourne's early Chinese restaurants

Barbara Nichol explores the history of Chinese restaurants in Melbourne, from cookshops to the suburban takeaway, and discusses how immigration restrictions affected the lives and businesses of Chinese restaurateurs.



Chinese restaurants emerged as a commercial enterprise on the Victorian goldfields. By the late 19th century, despite restrictive immigration policies and a declining Chinese population, many were operating in major centres. They were initially known as cookshops and were often associated with other Chinese businesses. In Melbourne these were concentrated in and around the eastern end of Little Bourke Street. Hie Yick, for instance, was a tea merchant who also operated a cookshop at 209 Little Bourke Street in the late 1880s.

The overwhelming majority of Australia's original Chinese community came from Kwangtung Province in Southern China, with its distinctive Cantonese cooking style based on fresh fruit and vegetables, fish, poultry and pork. Rice was grown in abundance and served as an ideal and nutritious base for a variety of food combinations, with herbs and spices.

The number of Chinese restaurants in Melbourne grew steadily over the first two decades of the 20th century. Eighteen were listed in trade directories in 1920. By the 1930s, they included among their customers city workers, students, recently arrived refugees from Europe, and Melbourne's bohemian community of artists and writers.

By the eve of World War II, eight Chinese restaurants had spread beyond the Chinatown precinct around Little Bourke Street. They were operating in the inner suburbs of Brunswick and Fitzroy and the culturally diverse bayside suburb of St Kilda.

Melbourne's restaurant sector flourished during the war years as the city filled with thousands of Australian and Allied troops, as well as people employed in war-related jobs. Melbourne's Chinese restaurants gained a reputation among American servicemen for their tasty dim sims. By 1945, some 300 restaurants were open for business in the city and suburbs; 23 were Chinese. On Friday nights all over Melbourne, people could be seen carrying saucepans into their local Chinese for takeaway sweet and sour and dim sims. By 1970, 150 Chinese restaurants were operating in the city and suburbs.

### Restrictions and regulations

The Australian Chinese restaurant sector is certainly a success story, but for many early restaurateurs who built their businesses in Australia while supporting families in China during the time of the White Australia Policy, life could be very lonely. The intent of the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* was not just to halt immigration of non-Europeans, but also to limit the settlement of those who were already living in Australia. The Act's administration also subjected Chinese businesses to considerable regulation and contact with government officials.

Total exclusion of Chinese people was never going to be a reality. From the outset, some businesses with a need for staff not available locally were allowed to bring workers into the country under a Certificate of Exemption from the Dictation Test, provided the government did not consider the business to be competing unfairly with similar European enterprises. A manager of a successful restaurant wishing to pay a visit to family in China, for instance, could apply for permission to bring in a close relative to look after his business affairs in his absence. From 1934, cooks and café workers were officially admitted for limited periods, provided the restaurant met certain requirements. For restaurants established before 1947, businesses required a turnover of £2500 for each application, up to a maximum of eight staff. For those opened after 1947, the turnover requirement was doubled. Small businesses had little hope of reaching the required target.

Businesses were responsible for the welfare of staff under exemption and were required to pay a bond each time a Certificate of



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Exemption was issued (generally valid for one year) or a renewal approved. Applications were made through the Consul-General for China and were subject to close scrutiny. Government officials inspected restaurants each time an application or request to renew a certificate was made. These inspections were frequently unannounced in order to catch staff who did not appear to be working in their approved occupation.

A restaurant's customer base and the kind of food it served also had a significant bearing on the success of applications – Chinese food and European customers being a combination regarded favourably. For example, the Tientsin Restaurant in Acland Street in St Kilda began life as the Tientsin Café in 1934. It was a very successful business which operated over many decades, attracting an almost exclusively European clientele. Unlike many smaller restaurants that offered a mixture of European and 'Australian' Chinese dishes, the Tientsin's menu contained no European dishes. By comparison, a smaller business in Little Bourke Street was refused permission to bring in staff from China because government officials determined that the business came into direct competition with European restaurants, as half of its customers appeared to be 'Europeans who mostly did not indulge in special Chinese dishes.'

On the whole, Chinese restaurateurs were astute businessmen who knew the law and were prepared to test the boundaries of the Act to further their business interests in Australia and support families in China. How much the government would concede often depended on how vigorously businessmen were prepared to push their case. In 1934, for instance, when the government officially sanctioned the introduction of cooks and café workers from China, restaurateurs frequently used these provisions to bring male family members into the country. The following story provides one example. It has been reconstructed from records in the National Archives, which help open a window onto the world of one of Melbourne's early Chinese restaurants.

### The case of the Canton Tower Café

The Canton Tower Café near the old Eastern Market in Bourke Street served the community from 1925 until the late 1940s. Louey You Hing was one of three business partners and had lived most of his adult life in Victoria. Over the years, he made four journeys back to China – the

[top] A menu from the Canton Tower Café.

[opposite] Melbourne's Chinatown precinct, 1990.

last undertaken in 1941 when he was 73 to spend the remainder of his life there. During his visits to China, a son, Louey Park Sun, and later a grandson, came from China to manage the business.

The Canton Tower was a busy café of moderate size with a seating capacity for 30 diners upstairs and 30 downstairs, catering 'principally for European custom of a good class.' By 1940, the business was employing eight staff and had a turnover of about £5000 a year. Service was available from 10 am to well into the evening. To quote one inspection report, the café was 'plainly furnished but clean.' The inspector noted that the café created 'a favourable impression.'

In April 1934, Louey Park Sun applied to replace his ageing cook who, he claimed, wished to return to China. He said it was not possible to obtain the services of a local man, and the café was expecting increased patronage during the centenary of Melbourne celebrations the following year. The request was approved in May, subject to the old cook leaving for China within three months of the new cook's arrival. Matters became complicated when it was discovered that the old cook was domiciled in Australia; that is, he was in effect a permanent resident. The Consul-General for China pleaded the café's case with the

Department of the Interior in Canberra, reassuring officials that the new man would be in charge of the kitchen and that it was desired that the old man be kept on to do light duties rather than be forced into unemployment, a sensitive issue during the Depression.

Approval was granted in June and 24-year-old Louey Fat arrived in August. In October, Canberra officials received a memo from the Collector of Customs in Melbourne, cautioning that, 'This youth's appearance would indicate a studious nature rather than that usually associated with that of a cook.' Unannounced inspections at various hours were made, and on each occasion the inspector found Louey Fat employed as a waiter.

The Consul-General made further representations on behalf of the café. Support was also offered from a local advocate for the Chinese community, the Reverend Farquhar Chisholm, who claimed that over the period of the inspections, the café's waiter had been ill and attending hospital, requiring Louey Fat to assist with table service.

Officials in Canberra remained unconvinced and cautioned the Consul-General and Rev. Chisholm that it viewed misrepresentations very seriously. Officials ordered checks to ascertain whether the times the waiter was

attending the hospital coincided with times Louey Fat was observed waiting on tables. The case dragged on. Inspectors claimed to have received conflicting statements from café staff about Louey Fat's cooking expertise. Despite further representation on behalf of the young man, his Certificate of Exemption was cancelled in July 1935, and he sailed for home in August.

The Canton Tower's story is typical. We can't know how adept Louey Fat was with a wok, but it is known that many young men made the trip to Australia to work in family restaurants where they developed their cooking skills 'working from the bottom up', as one retired restaurateur put it. While official restrictions affected business operations and personal lives, the restaurants had become an integral part of Melbourne's changing cultural landscape by the late 1930s. As immigration restrictions eased in the postwar years, many young cooks and café workers managed to remain in Australia, establishing families and founding restaurant dynasties which have enriched our lives, and tastebuds, over many decades.

**Barbara Nichol is studying for a PhD in History at the University of Melbourne.**



**[left]** A customs official suggested that Louey Fat looked more like a student than a cook.