

CHINESE-AMERICAN CUISINE: A HISTORY

1849

The “Canton Gold Rush” brings Chinese food to America

When news of the 1849 California gold rush spread across the Pacific, a stream of hopeful immigrants from China’s Guangdong province began pouring into the U.S. According to Asian American Studies scholar [Haiming Liu](#), this influx of Chinese immigrants led to the opening of America’s first Chinese restaurant: The Canton, in San Francisco. Just one year later, San Francisco was home to five Chinese restaurants.



1852

Anti-Chinese sentiment fuels immigration restrictions

According to [the census](#), by 1852 there were 20,000 Chinese immigrants in California, and they made up 25% of the workforce. As wages declined, Americans blamed Chinese workers for increasing economic struggles. [Time magazine](#) reported that during this time, politicians became vocal about their xenophobic and racist views about Chinese Americans. While [Chinese activists](#) spoke out against the new push for Chinese Immigration Restrictions, California began to tax immigrants far more than their U.S. citizen counterparts.

1882

Chinese Exclusion Act halts immigration from China

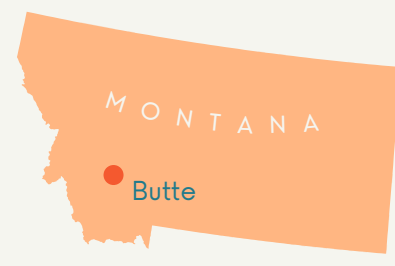
The [Chinese Exclusion Act](#) banned Chinese laborers from entering the U.S., and stopped those who already lived in America from becoming U.S. citizens. Not only did this fuel xenophobia, but according to [Time](#) it also slowed the Chinese restaurant industry for decades.



1909

Longest running US Chinese restaurant opens in Butte, Montana

The Peking Noodle Parlor opened its doors to Montana’s Chinese mine workers and other Butte locals in 1909. According to the [Smithsonian](#), the restaurant owners survived multiple campaigns to be evicted from Butte. The establishment is still open today.



1915

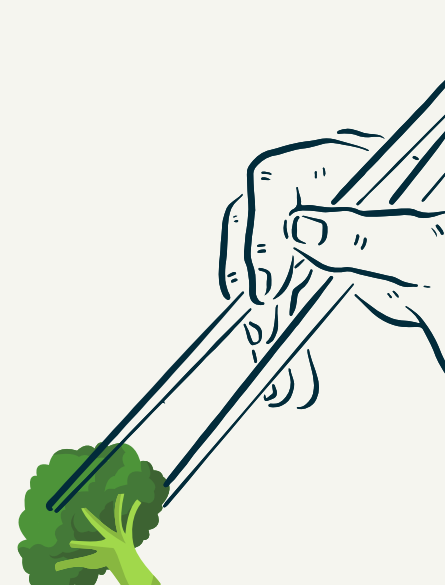
Lo Mein Loophole re-opens the door for Chinese restaurateurs

After decades of reduced labor due to the extended Chinese Exclusion Act, American legislators made an exception to allow Chinese restaurant workers and their families into the country. [Heather Lee](#), an MIT legal historian, describes this “Lo Mein Loophole” as the catalyst for a rapid expansion of Chinese cuisine throughout America.

1920

Chop Suey has its day in the sun

As Chinese cuisine boomed in the early 20th Century, chop suey became an increasingly popular dish among Americans. There is no set recipe for the famed mixture of American produce—from corn to broccoli, chefs would use whatever was available. Some call it the [greatest culinary prank](#) in history; others call it an example of cultural [engineering](#). According to historian [Yong Chen](#), chop suey represents the tenacity of Chinese-American entrepreneurs. Assimilation to American tastes was a means of survival.



According to the [1920 census](#), nearly 25% of all Chinese laborers in the U.S. were working in restaurants.

1943

Exclusion continues, even after the fall of the exclusion act

After China joined the Allied Nations in WW II, the U.S. finally ended the Chinese Exclusion Act. However, according to [Time](#) there was still a strict immigration quota in place that only allowed in 105 Chinese immigrants per year.



1965

An “authenticity revolution”

In 1965, liberal shifts in immigration policy allowed for an influx of Chinese immigrants with different cuisines. [Slate](#) reported that newcomers from Sichuan, Hunan, and Shanghai brought with them an “authenticity revolution”. Not only were more cuisines making their way onto menus, but restaurant owners in metropolitan areas were now catering to more Asian clientele.



1968

The MSG myth is born

In 1968, the [New England Journal of Medicine](#) published a [letter](#) called “Chinese Restaurant Syndrome”. This letter led to the false accusation that MSG is an unhealthy food additive. According to the [Seattle Times](#), to this day, Chinese restaurant workers are paying the price of this medical myth.

2023

An ever-changing culinary landscape

According to the [Chinese Restaurant Association](#), there are now over 38,000 Chinese restaurants in the U.S.. While American restaurant still impacts Chinese American restaurant workers, their food is persistently rated as a favorite in the U.S. Chinese American cuisine is ever-evolving, just like the diaspora.

