



# Food, culture & family



↑ Audrey & June's 21st birthday, Chequers nightclub, Pitt Street, Sydney, 1955

← Cooks eating dinner, Eastern Restaurant, Dixon Street, Sydney, 1953

↓ Lim's Café, early 1950s

Showcard for Cecil Parkee, performing as Lei Moon Chee, novelty entertainer →



Restaurants are important sites where food, culture and family intersect in many communities. Annette Shun Wah evokes a vivid sense of Chinese-Australian restaurant culture in this extract from her speech to open *My Chinatown: Restaurant Kids*, a community based social history project, presented by the Asia-Australia Arts Centre at Gallery 4a, Sydney. My Chinatown, another exhibition featuring Chinese-Australian culture, is on show at the Powerhouse Museum until October 2003

I suppose for many Australians, our Chinatowns conjure up two things: shopping and food. Sometimes it's just one thing: shopping FOR food. But Chinatown has meant so much more to the story of the settlement of the Chinese in Australia. And, in fact, the story of Australia's Chinatowns is an integral part of the story of Australian society.

In our book, *Banquet — Ten Courses to Harmony*, my partner Greg Aitkin and I traced that story through the connections that the Chinese have to food, not only through restaurants, but also market gardens, fruit and vegetable wholesaling, commercial food manufacturers, grocery stores — right up to the current day with television cooks and celebrity chefs.

And if you wonder why food was such an important part of the Chinese-Australian connection, it is because, in many cases, Chinese were prevented from working in other areas. The White Australia Policy made it extremely difficult to get into the country in the first place, and, once you were here, you could only be employed in jobs that a European would not be suitable for.

Our earliest Chinese eateries were established in Sydney's original Chinatown in The Rocks, feeding new arrivals, fresh off the boats from Asia. Some of the best food to be had was actually in the gambling dens on George Street.

But by 1869, more and more Chinese had given up digging for gold and were instead growing vegetables in 'far flung' suburbs such as Alexandria or Rooty Hill, or fishing around the Northern Beaches. Each week they'd travel to the city to sell their produce at the markets, which were located where the Capitol Theatre now stands. Lodging houses and cook shops sprang up, and Sydney's second Chinatown was established.

It's interesting that while we often think about early Chinese cafes serving Westernised versions of Chinese food — sweet and sour, lemon chicken, chop suey and so on — Australia's earliest restaurants often included some very authentic and extravagant dishes. These were the places where important banquets took place —

big family celebrations or where the community's leaders entertained people they needed to lobby, like politicians, police commissioners and tax collectors. For these banquets sharks fin soup and birds nest were on the menu. It was in the suburban and country restaurants that chefs had to adapt to local tastes, and local produce, giving rise to the so-called 'chop suey cuisine'.

For decades, there were few European faces to be seen in Chinatown. Those who grew up there remember it as a close-knit community. That sense of community has changed in the present day Chinatown, but it still serves as a first port of call for new arrivals, offering support and guidance, not to mention the tastes of home. The glittering yum cha palaces of the 1980s not only signified how easily Hong Kong fads and fashion spread to Australia, but also reflected a more affluent Chinese community — those who'd been here for generations and the new migrants. And all the while, the rest of the Australian community has been gently seduced by different tastes, different ways of doing things and seeing things, until it is impossible to imagine Sydney without its Chinatown or Australia without its rich and enduring Chinese history.

So as we look at the rich collection of photos in the *Restaurant Kids* exhibition, let's not simply regard them as a nostalgic trip down memory lane, but as a record of how we've become the society we are today... how our differences have made us more compassionate, imaginative, resourceful and strong. Because those are qualities we need now more than ever.

**Annette Shun Wah** is a writer, actor and television producer. Her speech quotes widely from the book *Banquet — Ten Courses to Harmony*, which she researched and wrote with Greg Aitkin (published by Doubleday)

