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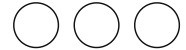


Hochul at pl a school b

OPINION

# Door is open, table is set

Joyce S. Chan  
July 25, 2021



Waving United States flag.  
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Since 1977, the most amazing Hong Kong-style Cantonese food was created right in Scotia, but you probably never found it on a menu. It was the staff meals at my parents' restaurant, Dragon Garden.

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Twice a day, at 2:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m., we shared bowls of bone broth with chunks of carrot and potato, chive and char siu omelettes, whole fish with sizzling scallion ginger oil, and water spinach with smashed garlic. On Fridays, my brothers and I would wait for my mom to come home at 9:30 p.m., pulling out plastic tubs of leftovers. A great night meant a pint of hand-packed strawberry ice cream.

My family was one of the first Chinese families in Scotia. There were zero other Asians in 1977 in a town with a population at the time of about 7,300. My parents moved to the Capital Region from Chicago. My mother had immigrated with her family, met and married my father, who was visiting, as a student arrived in Alabama. Alongside three other Cantonese couples, they opened Dragon Garden, Jade Fountain in Guilderland, China Inn and Plum Blossom in Troy. Lum Fung and Tai Wah were already opened in Schenectady. Over the next 30 years, my parents' cooks and staff members would move on to open Four Seasons in Schenectady, Sam's Restaurant in Ballston Spa, and East Wok on Wolf Road.

There weren't many options for getting Chinese produce and ingredients. There was only one Asian supermarket in the Capital Region, Kim's Asian Market. A truck from Chinatown in New York City would bring provisions once a week. In a pinch, a quick call to a restaurateur would bring bundles of Chinese vegetables, boxes of seafood and calendars for the upcoming lunar new year.

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Growing up, I rarely went without a Cantonese dinner. My mother would prep the ingredients for my grandmother to cook, and head to work. We still enjoyed our fair share of Jumpin' Jacks, McDonald's, Olive Garden and American Taverns.

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TWES UNION

My parents didn't let us hang out at "The Restaurant" often. We would visit after lunch but had to leave before dinner. The adults had to get to work. We weren't allowed in the tableclothed dining room. There was a bare table in the back room. We played hide-and-seek among the pallets in the basement. We prepped fruit skewers for mai tais. During high school, I spent weekend nights answering to-go orders and staffing the cash register. I was occasionally a dishwasher, when the chef de partie/busboy, Wilson, originally from Guatemala, was on vacation.

Wilson recently found the old restaurant Facebook page and messaged: "Hi, I want to thank you all. Because of

you I became a permanent resident of the U.S. and next week I will be a citizen.” The restaurant industry can be a rotating door. I don’t think my parents realize what a path, stability and resource they provided.

I write this during a time of increased violence and prejudice against Asians. If food is the bridge, then how does one “break bread” and get to know individuals from Chinese communities — or any under-represented peoples? Meet me in my world.

And yes, it takes a lot of work to create meaningful connections, encouraging, frequent signals that the door is open. Eastern and Western cultures have very different approaches in connecting. Being American-born, I had a hard time understanding this until a recent conversation with a Chinese-born colleague. For first generation individuals directly from China, a non-democratic society, work and creating a life for family is the priority. It is not inherent to engage and truly share with other communities. It’s not a good or bad thing, it’s just not a priority.

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Differences in language, humor and nuances in communication make it all the more difficult. How does one approach another community that identifies so much through work? Many restaurant staff are in an industry of 10-hour days. There need to be different routes in getting to know, learn and grow together, other than the role of the Chinese restaurant owner. There’s

going to be inherent resistance, but show that the door is open. The world is here right in our towns, as humans. Everyone can bring their whole selves to the table.

*Joyce S. Chan is a second generation Chinese-American born in Schenectady. She is the communications administrator for the Downtown Troy BID and a visual artist.*

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