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Food for Thought: Oral Histories of California's Asian-Pacific Foodways

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Sushi Hut (Salinas, CA)

Mei Ling Wong, Joon Xiong, and David Xiong

Interviewee: Mei Ling Wong, Joon Xiong, and David Xiong

Interviewers: Elizabeth Vasquez-Sanchez and Daniel Brambila

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Overseen by: Dr. Dustin Wright

Audio Transcript:

Biography: Mei-Ling Wong is a second-generation Chinese American who was born in Kunming, Yunnan in China. Mei Ling moved to this country and met her husband Joon Xiong who was born in the same region. They both have been working in the restaurant business for the past 30 years. For the last 20 years, they have been working together in different types of restaurants in the Monterey bay area. In 2018 they decide to open their own restaurant named "Sushi Hut" and by applying all the knowledge they have developed in the past years, they build a menu with a mixture of different traditional recipes from Japan and China culture.

Summary of Transcript: (00:00:00) Mei Ling explains the different types of food that they sell and how these types of food are not from a particular culture in fact she mentioned that their menu is made from different types of food making their menu a multicultural one. (00:04:42) David, one of the family members of Mr. Xiong and his partner, tells us about some of the difficulties they had during the COVID 19 virus pandemic. He explains how difficult it was for him since he was a student who had to pay for his studies. (00:07:48) Joon Xiong explains some techniques that make the taste of his food have an original and special flavor that makes it different from fast-food restaurants. (00:09:15) Joon Xiong explains who his potential customers were and his fear of Mexican customers as he wasn't sure if they would like his food. He also explains to us that regardless of the age of the people, what they want is for their customers to have the greatest satisfaction tasting their dishes. (00:10:25) Joon explains some of his goals and what he expected when he opened his restaurant. He also mentions to us the importance of his clients and the satisfaction he feels when he sees that people really enjoy his dishes.

Interview Transcript:

Elizabeth Vasquez-Sanchez (EVS): Good morning! My name is Elizabeth and this is my partner Daniel. We are both students at California State University, Monterey Bay. We are both working on a project for our class, Pacific Food Empires, an ethnic studies course taught by professor Dustin Wright. The project is Food for Thought: Oral Histories of the Central Coast's [California's] Asian-Pacific Foodways. The purpose of the project is to highlight the experiences of Asia-Pacific migrations tied to the U.S. empire and Fort Ord, and create a durable historical record of often under-represented community. Before getting started, we would like to thank-you for your willingness to participate in our project. We would also like to share that this

interview will not be used for publicity purposes and will be recorded and archived at the CSUMB Digital Commons.

Daniel Brambila (DB): Thank you again for letting us interview you guys. We know that being in the restaurant or having a restaurant is a really challenging thing because uh you guys are always busy, there is a lot of customers that are coming, uh ordering food online, by the phone, so that let's make this quick, okay? So the first question we have is: can you describe your business and the type of food you sell in your restaurant?

Mei Ling Wong (MLW): Uh, it's a little bit of a combination. You know, it's not... we start as, uh, Japanese, now it's more like focused on just you know Asian [voice in the background]... let's just call it Asian. Yeah, because we have a little bit of like, uh, Korean noodles, we have, uh, Asian-Chinese soup, wonton soup. Then we have a little Japanese, Japanese noodles, we have Sushi... sushi is definitely Japanese. Yeah, so we have rice bowls, noodle bowls, so I guess that's more like, you know, towards American style, so yeah... a little bit here and there. You can call it like chopsuey. Yeah[background noise throughout]

DB: Yeah, that is good. That is pretty good. [pause] Uh, next question: is this a family business? [background noise]

MLW: Uh... it's a corporate, so there is partnership. [background noise]

DB: Partnership? [background noise]

MLW: Yeah, uh huh. [background noise]

DB: Okay, but your family works with you... or just you? [background noise]

MLW: Uh...um... kind of, yeah. Kind of, yeah. There is partner that don't come in, and there is, you know, yeah, others come in in the evening, yeah. [background noise]

DB: And how many employees do you have? [background noise]

MLW: Five total. [background noise]

DB: Five total? [background noise]

MLW: Yeah. [background noise]

DB: Okay, great. And another question: what was your inspiration to open a restaurant? Or what were you guys, like uh, thinking when you guys opened this restaurant? [background noise]

MLW: Well we've been in food business for quite a while. Yeah, so we... something we are familiar with.

DB: Oh, okay

MLW: Yeah, so I mean, you can't go wrong with food, right?

DB: Yeah [laughs]

MLW: Everybody needs food! [giggles] So, I mean, it's the right choice. Yeah, it's not doing something bad, right?

DB: Yeah, that's true.

MLW: Yeah, everybody needs to eat.

DB: [laughs]

MLW: So, we are on the right track, I would say.

DB: [laughs] Yeah, I would say the same thing. And another question, uh, is this like um [pause] You guys are here, from Salinas or [interrupted by MLW]

MLW: We are from Salinas, correct, yes.

DB: or you guys came from another place, or?

MLW: Uh, talking about what? Business wise, or where we are born?

DB: Business wise, I mean, like, if you guys uh [interrupted by MLW]

MLW: Well we've been to different places.

DB: Oh, okay.

MLW: Yeah, I mean, but the past uh, what? I would say 20 years, we have been here in Salinas

DB: Oh, okay.

MLW: Yeah, but we worked in various fields before.

DB: Various fields before.

MLW: Yeah, but we also in Asian restaurants, Chinese restaurants... we've done that.

DB: So you guys got to experience about, like, those kinds of?

MLW: Yeah. Yeah, we have the experience, and you know, it's something that you know, we enjoy!

DB: Mhm.

MLW: You know, it's like a passion.

DB: Passion?

MLW: Yes!

DB: Okay [giggles] Perfect!

MLW: Yes!

DB: Alright, um [pause] Well now that everyone is busy [giggle] David is going to answer some questions, uh, for us and, uh, he has been working here for about, like three years since they opened the restaurant, so he has a lot of, uh, knowledge about this restaurant. And also, he is one of the family members.

EVS: When did you open your restaurant?

David Xiong (DX): We've been open since [pause] June 2018 and [pause] we're working up to this day, thankfully. Uh, we closed for a bit, but everything is going well now. [pause] Over the past few years we... we learned about our customers and what they like and what they don't like. So, that is why we have a bunch of different foods like we have Japanese, we have Chinese; a lot of diverse foods.

DB: The next question, [background noise] David, will be about COVID-19. We know there are COVID-19 was a pandemic, we're in a pandemic situation in where all of us were, like, involved. Not only, like, restaurants, but also students, and every person who was, uh, living in this world. You know? And we want to ask you: how had COVID-19 impact your restaurant? And not only in the business way, but also in the personal way for you guys?

DX: [pause] COVID has impacted my restaurant because it had to be shut down. I lost my job. I needed the money because I am in school right now. I got to pay for school, pay for my supplies. Luckily though, it reopened and I am working on getting the money [pause] [door closes] Uh, the customers, they didn't want to get food from us because we were shut down, but luckily, they're coming back to us and enjoying the seafood [pause] and the many other things we sell. [pause] Like, for example, we sell soup. We sell noodles. We sell a bunch of other foods [pause]

DB: Well we want to thank you, again, for your time 'cause we know that you guys are always really busy... and I didn't have an idea of how busy you guys get. Like, uh, it's not the same thing coming like once in a while to this restaurant, and just one particular time and then see, like, a few people. But now that I am here for a little bit longer, I can notice that you guys have, uh, a lot of customers. And also, it's pretty much just, like, the time to get the lunch, you know? But thank you for your time and, as I said before, we're going to make this quick so you guys can be able to keep on working, and you know, giving this, this um... magic food to your customers. Okay, so, uh... Now, I am going to ask you some other questions, okay?

If we speak in general, not just for the students... uh, What would you like customers to know about your food and about your culture? You can be like... you can describe, uh, the type of food you sell, and why is that? The ingredients you use, or um, the style you use also, and how this, uh, connects to your culture.

DX: Something I would like the customers to know is that lots of the food that we implement in our cooking has lots of herbs. They actually make it a lot healthier for the, uh, ordinary customer. Another thing I would like the customer to know is, that while our food might take a while, we try to implement lots of herbs so it becomes a lot more savory, the flavor and everything, for the customer to have maximum satisfaction while eating their food. [pause] A major difference between, Uhm, our culture and, uh, what we notice here, is that while there is a lot of bad food places that use a bunch of artificial flavors, we try to take our time and use a bunch of herbs to implement savory flavors that are not artificial at all.

DB: I'm glad you mention this particular point about artificial flavor. That is pretty common in many restaurants, fast food restaurants and I noticed that the food here is fresh. You guys are making it, like everything is fresh, every ingredient is fresh so that makes a really true flavor to your food that's true. [pause] And for the next question, [background noise] who were your target customers and we want to ask you if you were successful or not, can you please share something with us about this?

JX: So when we came and opened up the restaurants, we had no particular targets on like what race, we should, like uh, be trying to satisfy more though we knew we wanted to satisfy all age groups, so no matter how young or how old you are, or we wanted you to have the most satisfaction while eating our dishes. While we were unsure if, uh, Mexican people would actually love the dishes that we made, surprisingly, we were extremely successful when we came and people loved the dishes... the savory taste of it, the herbs that were implemented in it, we got quite a few compliments on our dishes.

DB: Definitely,[surprising] we can see how people is getting aligned before you open at 10. That's... that speaks good about you and your restaurant. And for the next question, what are some of your goals and your restaurant. Uh, some of the goals you already have or some of the

goals we already completed. That's fine if you answer any of these any of this future goals, or if it was a goal that's perfectly fine.

JX: [pause] One of my goals, when I was coming here was to try to get customers regularly because regulars in our customers show us that we're doing something right. Well, we might not get like a ton of new customers, we keep on getting the same regulars and that's showing that we're doing something right. We just have to promote our business, a lot more, and continue well we've always been doing. Another goal of mine was to have multiple clients so, then I could, like, I could see my hard work, paying off of all my delicious dishes being tasted and complemented so I know for a fact that I'm doing something right.

DB: [pause] I feel like when you're... you love your work... You love your job, it doesn't seem to be a job you know? [giggles] and I see that passion, when you talk, when you speak about the satisfaction that customers have because of the love you put into your, your uh, your food and that's pretty amazing and the next question is what have been some challenges during the time you have been preparing dishes, when the time you have been open, interacting with people, interacting with customers, you know? So we're having some challenges during this time. [background noise]

JX: [pause] I think their biggest problem that we've had was, uh, the clients not having enough time, so we would have to like try to hurry up, but, uh, most of the dishes that we make take time to like, uh, implement all the flavors in. And so now, that is our major issue: on time we don't have enough time to satisfy the customer if they're in a tight schedule. Another challenge is that like new customers have a custom taste, so when they taste something new, they feel very strange about it and they don't know how to react to it. They don't understand if it's good, or if it's terrible, they dislike, or like it, so it's very difficult to, uh, try to please everyone's taste.

DB: I can relate with that and I'm pretty sure many people can do that. Sometimes people are just looking for a new... a new food and if you try and most of the time, if you try something new, is going to be weird for you, but doesn't, it doesn't mean that it is bad. It just means that is something new for you. And the next question will be: what would you consider to be successful, in your restaurant from the time that you start to now. Like, for example, those three years, what is something that you consider to be successful in your restaurant in this particular time?

JX: [pause] In the beginning, we didn't have many customers, but after a while we started to grow in the industry and research actually get lots of customers so every morning when I opened the doors, I already see a few customers lined up ready to eat, or waiting on us as which gives me a sense of accomplishment. [pause] [door closes] Well, I understand that we still have lots to grow in and we try to strive and adapt to our current situation and we try to adapt to the current situation, which is COVID. We try to, like uh, find a way that we can deliver food, food while not putting the customer at risk because our whole business is about keeping the customer, safe and satisfied.

DB: [pause] Well, it was nice to be here with you. Everything you have to us is very surprising, the world really needed to hear a story like this, we know that it takes effort and a lot of hard work from you and your team to bring quality food to your customers. Uh, we want to thank you for your time and put everything you have shared with us. We hope you do not find it uncomfortable and you continue to be successful, very successful in this restaurant and thank you all you guys for answering these questions. I know you guys are really busy today and everyday [laughs] but thank you. Thank you, for you know like, for let us, let us interview you guys

JX: I don't find it very uncomfortable. I actually enjoy seeing people interested in our company and I love to see people smile from the dishes that we make.

DB: Um, would you like to say something to the Monterey university students...

JX: Well, the thing I want to say to the new generation is: always keep an open mind in new cultures and new recipes is to learn new food from cultures is fantastic. Learn how it's made, learn what they do, and how much time and effort they put into the food.