

# The legacy of Kowloon: A restaurant, a family, and the remarkable perseverance of Chinese cuisine in America

The Route 1 landmark is a testament to one family's ingenuity and drive when all the odds were stacked against them.

By Deanna Pan Globe Staff, Updated October 18, 2022, 6:47 a.m.



Bob and Andy Wong in front of their family's restaurant, Kowloon in Saugus. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

**W**hen William Wong took over his in-laws' Chinese restaurant in 1958, his vision for the place was boundless. He imagined an escapist fantasy in Saugus, on a colossal scale, unlike anything the Boston area had ever seen.

Inspired by his Hawaiian honeymoon, and eager to capitalize on America's postwar fascination with the South Seas, William would over the next few decades transform the humble eatery into a Technicolor Polynesian paradise, big enough to seat 1,200 guests. He outfitted it with faux palm trees, gurgling fountains, and ceiling lights that mimicked the night sky. He installed a mural of a dazzling volcanic lagoon in one of the dining rooms; in another, he lodged a replica of a ship.

He renamed the restaurant Kowloon, in homage to the Hong Kong peninsula where he began his safe passage to the United States from China in 1939, amid the Second Sino-Japanese War.

It wasn't long before Kowloon became an icon among locals and out-of-towners alike. Six-plus decades later, the neon sign in front of the restaurant's pagoda still beckons drivers hurtling along the highway. One of the last vestiges from a time when quirky restaurants and attractions reigned over Route 1, Kowloon remains one of the largest — if not *the* largest — Chinese restaurants in New England, serving 20,000 customers a week.



Kowloon's predecessor, Mandarin House, in 1963. FROM KOWLOON RESTAURANT

But the latest chapter in the restaurant's history is coming to a close. A year and a half ago, the third generation of Wongs to run the family business set in motion a plan with the Town of Saugus to eventually tear down the restaurant and redevelop the property. Two big apartment complexes — what else? — will rise in its place, with a new, smaller Kowloon operating out of the ground floor of one of the buildings. The news prompted a New England-wide [freak-out](#), with patrons on social media prematurely mourning the loss of another beloved Boston area institution.

"I didn't want to wake up one day and say... 'I can't do this anymore. My family doesn't want to do it. What are we going to do with the restaurant?'" says Bob Wong, William's affable 67-year-old son, who has co-owned Kowloon along with his mother, Madeline, and five siblings, since his father passed away in 2011. He worried about being "behind the eight ball because we had no plan."

Kowloon's rise to legendary status is a testament to the Wong family's hustle and ingenuity in a country that has never truly given Chinese food its due. Since its arrival on the West Coast during the Gold Rush, American Chinese cuisine has battled an unearned (and often racist) reputation as [inauthentic](#) at best — and [unfit](#) for human consumption at worst. Yet for many Chinese immigrants, survival hinged on making their food accessible to the very people who wanted them gone. Chinese restaurants served as their safe havens, binding them to their culture and identity.

"The story of Chinese American food is not told enough, and there's not enough respect placed around it," says Lilly Jan, a lecturer on food and beverage at Cornell University. "And the story that it tells is of the entrepreneurial spirit and the adventurousness and the bravery of so many of these people."

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The history of Chinese food in the United States dates back to the late 1840s, when early Cantonese immigrants — mostly merchants and entrepreneurs — brought their culinary traditions to California to feed American miners prospecting for gold. But [anti-Chinese prejudice](#), fueled by competition for work during a period of economic decline, fettered the growth of Chinese restaurants across the country. In the years surrounding the [Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882](#) — which, for several decades, banned Chinese laborers from immigrating to the country or becoming US citizens — journalists and propagandists accused the Chinese of dining on rats, cats, and dogs. Using chopsticks was derided as barbarism. A preference for rice became a totem of racial inferiority.

And yet, Chinese American restaurateurs persisted and adapted, creating a lifeline for generations of immigrants, shut out of other opportunities, in their pursuit of the American dream. At the turn of the 20th century, Chinese restaurants began proliferating across the nation, first in Chinatowns, and then elsewhere, propelled by the popularity of chop suey, their most famous culinary invention. They strived to appeal to the tastes of their patrons, developing regional delicacies such as Fall River's [chow mein sandwich](#), as well as

dishes that would become beloved staples, such as General Tso's chicken. Before the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 repealed quotas sharply restricting Chinese immigration, Chinese restaurateurs in the United States took advantage of an exception in federal law — known as the [lo mein loophole](#) — that allowed them to go to China and bring back employees.

Madeline and William Wong, shown in 1971. FROM KOWLOON RESTAURANT

“The rise of Chinese food is a story not just of marginalization and exploitation but also of the resistance and perseverance of Chinese Americans in the face of enormous hostilities,” writes historian Yong Chen in *Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America*.

Kowloon is part of this sweeping history. Before it was Kowloon, it was the Mandarin House, a former ice cream parlor that Cantonese immigrants Chun Sau and Tow See Chin had converted in 1950 into a Chinese restaurant with no more than 40 or 50 seats.

When they were ready to retire in 1958, the Chins sold the restaurant to their daughter Madeline and her husband, William Wong. William was born in Boston, and at the age of 6, was sent to boarding school in Canton, China. He returned to Boston as a teenager. Like his wife, he had experience in the food service industry, having worked for his parents, Goe Shing and Lem Ding Wong, at the Mai Fong restaurant they owned near Symphony Hall.

Little did any of them know, they were about to create an icon.

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The restaurant in an undated photo. FROM KOWLOON RESTAURANT

Kowloon started as a two-person enterprise, with William in the kitchen and Madeline seating guests and waiting tables. They served dishes to appeal to the American palate — steaks, pork chops, veal cutlets, club sandwiches, and BLTs — alongside chow mein, chop suey, and egg foo young. Business blossomed. They hired more staff, purchased more land, expanded the building, and overloaded the menu with classic American Chinese dishes and Polynesian cocktails. William spruced up the now spacious interior — measuring in at approximately 50,000 square feet — with its now-legendary paradisiacal decor.

“People thought he was crazy because he was taking up valuable space,” recalls Bob Wong. “Instead of putting in tables and chairs, he was putting in fun things to look at.”

Bob, meanwhile, fell in love with the business early on, scrubbing dishes at Kowloon long before he learned to drive. His parents worked seven days a week, from morning until close at 2 or 3 a.m. Days would pass at their Belmont home during which Bob would never see them.

As Bob grew older, he felt compelled to ease his parents' workload so “they didn't have to work so hard.” He started helping to run the restaurant after he graduated from the University of New Hampshire with a business degree. “It was always to make them proud and take the burden off of them so they wouldn't have to do the day-to-day things,” Bob says.

Like his father, Bob had grand ambitions for Kowloon. The opening of another massive Chinese restaurant on Route 1 in 1989 — the extravagant, ill-fated Weylu's — prompted Kowloon's next reinvention. A local house band had performed at Kowloon for years — in the '70s, you could go dancing in one of the main dining rooms seven nights a week. Bob took this to the next level, bringing in big-name acts including Frankie Avalon, the Temptations, the Spinners, and the Village People, for shows in the upstairs banquet hall. Bob and his brothers also started a comedy club in the early '90s, hosting legendary comedians such as Phyllis Diller and Jerry Seinfeld.

Even the menu grew: Kowloon added a Thai kitchen, and, later, a sushi bar. The Wongs opened fast-food locations, modeled after Panda Express, at malls and shopping centers across the state — though they would shutter those after the leases proved too expensive. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spurred more innovation: a [drive-in movie theater with carhop service](#) in the parking lot, and an outdoor dining area with enough seats for 600 people.

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Diners inside one of Kowloon's many rooms. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

I didn't visit Kowloon for the first time until September 2021, two years after I moved to Massachusetts. My friends and I sat at a corner table beneath a thatched tiki-style roof, within view of the ship William Wong had installed decades ago. I ordered a strawberry daiquiri, and my friends split a pu pu platter piled high with golden-fried egg rolls, sticky spare ribs, and juicy slabs of teriyaki beef. After dinner, we danced alongside dozens of blissed-out, red-faced patrons in the outdoor dining area, where an R&B cover band was performing Whitney Houston's greatest hits.

It was a blast — the perfect antidote to the tedium and despair of the pandemic. Everything was just as I'd expected, from the heaping portions to the kaleidoscopic cocktails — dangerously sweet and easy to drink.

What surprised me, however, was the unmistakable twinge of nostalgia that hit me while I sipped my daiquiri.

Among my most vivid memories of growing up in southwest Ohio are the Friday nights my family and I would spend at some far-flung Chinese restaurant. These dinners were nonnegotiable for my dad; the drive always seemed interminable. The Chinese restaurants in my hometown were takeaway spots, with paper menus and dishes denoted by number. The restaurants Dad preferred — with names such as Grand Oriental, Jade Garden, and China Cottage — were a cut above, with white tablecloths and uniformed waitstaff, and like nothing we had close to home.

These dinners were treated as special occasions, deserving of a dose of pomp. My sisters and I would wear our best clothes from Macy's or McAlpin's. Sometimes Mom would put hot rollers in our hair. From the moment we alighted from our parents' car into the parking lot, the entire experience felt like an event. We'd marvel at the Foo dogs outside; the Laughing Buddha at the door; the tiny paper parasols in our rumless cocktails; the live tank of squirming lobsters; the curling blue flame at the center of the pu pu platter. If these were markers of inauthenticity, I never knew — and my dad didn't seem to care. Growing up, I always felt a little unmoored, unsure about my identity and my race. But, at these places, I felt special, like I belonged to something great.

Dinner was always a smorgasbord of American Chinese classics, served atop a rotating lazy Susan: crispy egg rolls, juicy pot stickers, stir-fries bathed in chili oil. Flaky steamed sea bass, steeped in a soy sauce and ginger medley, was the *pièce de résistance*, unless Mom had called ahead for Peking duck. At the end of the night, we'd take turns reading the aphorisms from our fortune cookies out loud.

As my sisters and I got older, we'd argue with our parents about our Friday night plans. Movies, sleepovers, and football games took precedence. Soon, our parents started going out to dinner without us.

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Chef Amorn Vutcharangkul prepares a Thai dish in a Kowloon kitchen. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Walking into Kowloon's largest kitchen, one of three at the restaurant, is like encountering a Babel of Chinese dialects. Amid the din of sizzling woks, heated to 500 degrees, cooks communicate in Cantonese, Taishanese, Fujianese, and Mandarin as they prepare a dazzling array of Cantonese and Szechuan dishes with mechanical precision. Within reach are vats of bean sprouts, minced garlic, and diced onion, and the largest cans of sliced water chestnuts I've ever seen.

The cooks, mostly in their 60s, are among the oldest employees at Kowloon, and their jobs are the hardest to fill, according to manager John Chang. Their skills are difficult to replicate — they must know how to cook almost any cut of meat or species of seafood; and they must be brutally efficient (the restaurant prepares as many as 600 pu pu platters on a typical Saturday). Years of experience have given them a finely tuned understanding of "wok hei," a Cantonese concept for the magical interplay of flavor and aroma in a stir-fried dish.

"It's different from any other restaurant that only serves steak and asparagus," Chang says, bristling at the suggestion that Chinese food is often perceived by the American public as cheap. "It costs so much to make. It takes so much skill to make."

The restaurant employs over 250 people, including 55 cooks. Several of the staff are Chinese immigrants the Wong family has sponsored over the years. For Bob Wong, maintaining a large and loyal staff — by showing loyalty to them — is part of the legacy handed to him by his parents.

Chang, 53, who was hired nearly four decades ago, is one of Kowloon's longest-serving employees. Chang's family was part of the Chinese diaspora in Venezuela, and William and Madeline Wong sponsored their move to Boston. Chang started bussing tables at Kowloon when he was 15, and worked for the restaurant through college. (His first language is Spanish; he had to learn Chinese on the

job.) Bob Wong persuaded him to stick around after he graduated. All these years later, the Wongs feel “like family,” Chang says. “If I leave, I feel bad. That’s how the feeling is.”

Chinese cuisine head chef Bing Yang Huang prepares a fried rice dish. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

That loyalty and attachment, Chang says, extends to the rest of the staff, thanks in part to the Wongs’ commitment to their workers. It’s not uncommon, he says, for the Wongs to cosign employees’ home loans or hire them lawyers for their immigration cases. When Chang was in college, the Wongs once fronted him money to cover his tuition.

“The father had a vision of a big Kowloon and the children carry [it] on with more compassion to it,” Chang says. “They’re very humble. They don’t think they’re better than you in any way.”

For many families, working at the Kowloon was a pathway to the middle class that otherwise wouldn’t have been available to them. Thomas Lew, now 76, was hired at a time when job options for Chinese immigrants were largely limited to laundry or restaurant work. Lew did both, but he preferred the pace and variety of restaurants. He was in his early 20s when he started working at Kowloon; he stayed for 30 years. Even his children helped bus tables and seat diners.

In the ‘80s, he and his business partners started their own restaurant, called Royal Dynasty, in Wilmington. They sold it in 2012, and Lew, now retired and living in Allston, still thinks fondly of his time in the industry. But work was grueling, he says, and the hours long. He’s grateful his children and grandchildren don’t have to make their living the same way. (One of his kids, he boasts, works in the pharmaceutical industry, and two of his grandchildren have jobs at Amazon.)

“For us, because we didn’t have other options at the time, [and] we didn’t speak English that well . . . it was hard to change professions,” Lew says. “But the newer generation, like my children, they go to college, they learn things. When they come out of college, they go work [using] what they learned.”

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Bob Wong outside Kowloon earlier this month. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

That’s what makes Kowloon’s success — and what happens next to this restaurant — so bittersweet. Bob Wong says his children and his siblings’ children have no interest in taking over — and they don’t have to. (With pride, Wong explains that his daughter is a Harvard-trained physical therapist, his oldest son an engineer, and his youngest son works in real estate.) For a Chinese American family, whose elders arrived in this country with precious few options, this is the ultimate sign of having made it — a new generation with the opportunity to stake out their own dreams, chart their own paths.

At the end of his life, William Wong apologized to his children. “He said, ‘I wish I didn’t make you work so hard,’” Bob Wong recalls. It was one of the last things he told his son, and Bob, who never begrudged his parents for their long hours at the restaurant, pushed back against the notion.

“To get the chance to work with your father and see him every day,” Bob says, “that was a gift.”

As long as Bob and his siblings are content to keep working, it’s unclear when Kowloon will transition to its next phase. The Wongs are partnering with the local developer behind the Essex Landing apartment complex in Saugus to redevelop the property. In the meantime, Bob Wong’s latest big idea is starting a line of classic Kowloon cocktail mixes, so anyone can make the restaurant’s signature mai tai or scorpion bowl at home. When the new, smaller Kowloon launches, Bob says he wants to give his employees the right to buy shares in the business.

Meanwhile, the legacy of Kowloon will live on in the memories of patrons for whom the restaurant is inseparable from birthday celebrations, wedding showers, prom nights, and funeral receptions.

One such customer is Jason Decesare, who, one afternoon this summer, stopped by the restaurant with his 13-year-old daughter on the way back home to Rhode Island from a trip.

Decesare hadn’t been to the restaurant in at least 30 years, but when he saw its glowing red sign along the highway, a memory pulled him into the parking lot. His father’s softball team used to go to Kowloon, he explained. He remembered his dad and his teammates spontaneously breaking out into the *Gilligan’s Island* theme song at the replica ship.

As soon as he walked in, he asked the hostess, “Where’s the boat?”

“My dad just passed away, and being part of the softball team was everything for him,” Decesare told me later. “There’s a small piece of my heart at Kowloon — I swear to God.”

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The author, right, as a child, dining at a Chinese restaurant with her family. FROM DEANNA PAN

Growing up, I never knew why those dinners at Chinese restaurants were so important to my dad. But as I write this story, I’m beginning to understand: For him, Chinese food was more than a meal; it was a tether to the life he’d left behind.

Dad was born in Kolkata to Chinese parents, who were forced to flee their homes in China and Burma in an era of war and revolution. He immigrated to the United States in the 1970s for his medical residency — and met my mom, a nurse, at the hospital where he completed his training. As the oldest child, he helped bring over his parents, and, later, his younger siblings.

Perhaps these meals were his way of making up for everything he had sacrificed in the process of becoming an American — his first home, his first culture, the ability to speak to his parents in their native tongue. Perhaps, they were meant as a gift to us, his biracial children, a tangible token of our identity.

For my family, and many Chinese American families, Chinese food is more than what we eat. It’s a symbol of hospitality, generosity, and even resistance to the forces of assimilation in a country that is often hostile to difference. The spices we use, the recipes we follow, are their own kind of language, passed like heirlooms from generation to generation.

Recently, I was reminded of an ancient Chinese proverb that roughly translates from Mandarin as, “To the people, food is heaven.” In our family, like so many immigrant families, there is no greater expression of love than sharing a meal together.

My dad doesn’t leave his house as much anymore, but I hope I can take him to Kowloon before the building is razed and the construction starts, so he can witness William and Madeline Wong’s Route 1 paradise for himself. Kowloon is part of a living history, a history that connects all of us in the Chinese American diaspora, and one I know my dad can find the same pride and comfort in that I do.

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