

A Traveler's Library

Books, Movies, and other Travel Inspirations

Chinese Food Not So Chinese

🕒 January 17, 2012 📁 Books, China, Cookbook, Destinations, General 📌 Brette Sember, China, Chinese food in America, cookbook, guest post 👤 Brette Sember

Tasty Travel Tuesday

Destination: China/America



Book: *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles* by Jennifer 8. Lee

By Brette Sember



Chinese New Year is January 23 this year, and brings in the year of the dragon, which sounds bold and flavorful like Szechuan Chinese food. What better time to explore China and think about whether American Chinese food is in fact Chinese at all. Jennifer 8. Lee does just this in ***The Fortune Cookie Chronicles***, one of the most in-depth, well-researched food history books to be found. It's also simply a lot of fun because Lee takes the reader on a journey not only across the U.S. and China, but to many other parts of the world as she tackles three main questions.

- Is Chinese food from China and what is the history of American Chinese food?
- Where did the fortune cookie come from?
- And where is the best Chinese restaurant in the world?



So Where is Takeout Really From?

Lee details her experiences as she travels through tiny villages and big cities in China (which she makes incredibly real – you can see and smell where she takes you), searching for the roots of the food we in America call Chinese. One of the most fascinating portions is when she seeks out the origins of **General Tso's Chicken**. It turns out there was a General Tso and Lee visits his home village where she learns about what the general liked to eat and even has the dish prepared for her

there, only to find it is not the same in the least. She shows the reader that nearly everything we think of as Chinese food and even Chinese traditions are American creations (in fact, she shares that most American Chinese restaurants have two menus – one for the American customers and one for the workers and other Chinese immigrants, “real” Chinese food Americans would like not take well to.)

I was fascinated also by her behind-the-scenes look at the workers in Chinese restaurants, who are part of an almost underground network and travel across the country on special buses. She also takes the reader on the journey of a Chinese immigrant who is coming to America to work. And **PF Chang's**? It's not Chinese at all and in fact Chinese people would never eat there because the huge warrior statues are traditional in graveyards and no one would ever eat near one.

Other fun stories unfold as she explores the origin of **chop suey** (which in Chinese literally means “odds and ends” and was never meant as an actual name of a dish, just as a description of something someone made) and also the history of Chinese take out as well as the **great kosher duck debacle** that deeply affected the Jewish community's relationship with Chinese restaurants.



Good Luck Cookie

When tackling the fortune cookie, Lee investigates its roots in California where Chinese immigrants landed and uncovers an actual court case over its origins. The conversations Lee has with the people with first hand memories of the story are transforming. She visits a **fortune cookie factory** in San Francisco (I've actually been there and it is as Lee describes, a closet of a room off a dark alley in Chinatown) and describes the way people use the fortunes in the cookies to pick lottery

tickets, which resulted in a statistical improbability.

Around the World with 8. Lee

As if all the globetrotting Lee did to explore Chinese food across America and its origins in China were not enough, she undertakes to find the best Chinese restaurant in the world (outside of China) and goes to Peru, France, Singapore, England, Japan, Australia, Dubai, Korea, Canada, Brazil, Jamaica, Iran, Maritus, and India (carefully sharing her experiences and impressions). Her conclusion will surprise you, but I'll let you take the journey with her yourself.

Brette Sember is a monthly contributor to A Traveler's Library, bringing together her love of travel and of food. See more about her and how to get in touch with her on the [Contributor's Page](#).

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Brette writes often about travel, food, and home arts and is the author of more than 40 books about food, law, health, family issues, business, finance and textbooks. She blogs at [Putting It All on the Table](#) and her personal web site is [Brette Sember](#).

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**Like It? Share!***About Brette Sember*

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12 thoughts on “Chinese Food Not So Chinese”

May 5, 2012 at 10:37 am

Mary

I've also been to a little fortune cookie making shop in San Francisco, wonder if it was the same one? We once went to what was supposed to be the best Szechuan restaurant in the International District, and our friend from Szechuan who dined with us told us it was not spicy at all compared to what he normally eats at home.



January 22, 2012 at 3:45 pm

This sounds like a fascinating book! I knew PF Chang's food wasn't very traditional, but I had no idea about those statues.

Kris



January 18, 2012 at 8:03 pm

I went to a talk by this author at Muse & the Marketplace, where she described the circus of promoting this book. Thanks for reminding me about it. It does sound great.

Alexandra



January 18, 2012 at 6:34 am

It's funny because in the Netherlands most 'chinese food' comes with satay sauce, however this is not chinese at all 😊

linda

That being said, I love 'chinese' food (without satay sauce of course 😊)



January 18, 2012 at 9:50 am

pen4hire

Note: I removed the Comment Luv link on this note because it is to a Dutch-language site with no English option, and because it is apparently a commercial site. Just wanted to inform all you folks that have been finding a way around all the various barriers, that I'm still not allowing advertising in the guise of comments.



January 17, 2012 at 3:33 pm

Wow what an interesting read! I LOVE Chinese food.

Andi



January 17, 2012 at 1:26 pm

I miss good Chinese food – lived in Hong Kong and traveled all over in China for a while and lived near San Francisco where the food was great. Hard to find in Maine!

Joni



January 17, 2012 at 10:45 am

ha ha- this confirms what I've been trying to tell everyone here!! Yes, I know there is a different menu for those with Western tastes and those who have the more traditional chinese taste. I know this because my hubby and I always ask for the OTHER menu 😊
ha ha!! Also, our indication that a Chinese restaurant is really good.....are there more Chinese eating there or 'other' people eating there....the more Chinese, the more authentic we know it is.
Of course, I rarely have to go out and eat Chinese food coz we eat it at home every day- but then again it is "Malaysian" Chinese food which is an ENTIRE different ball game altogether 😊 hee hee!!

Connie

January 17, 2012 at 12:22 pm



pen4hire

Yes, Connie, I was aware of the, too, because Ken had a Chinese friend who used to go in and talk to the head cook when we went to a Chinese restaurant. He warned to stay away from places that used basically the same sauce on everything!



Kerry Dexter

January 17, 2012 at 9:12 am

I'd like to read this book, all her approaches sound interesting.

another thing about Chinese food: seems to me that almost every town in Ireland, even the smallest, has a pub — and a Chinese takeaway, often run by Chinese (the restaurant that is, not the pub). makes for interesting combinations.

wandering
educators

January 17, 2012 at 7:27 am

oh!! i SO need to read this book. what interesting facts!



Linda Style

January 17, 2012 at 8:42 am

An excellent review!! The book sounds fascinating and now, I absolutely MUST know which Chinese restaurant she believes is the best in the world. 😊 Interesting tidbit about the statues in front of PF Changs. I love books that while being entertaining, also inform and educate.

Comments are closed.