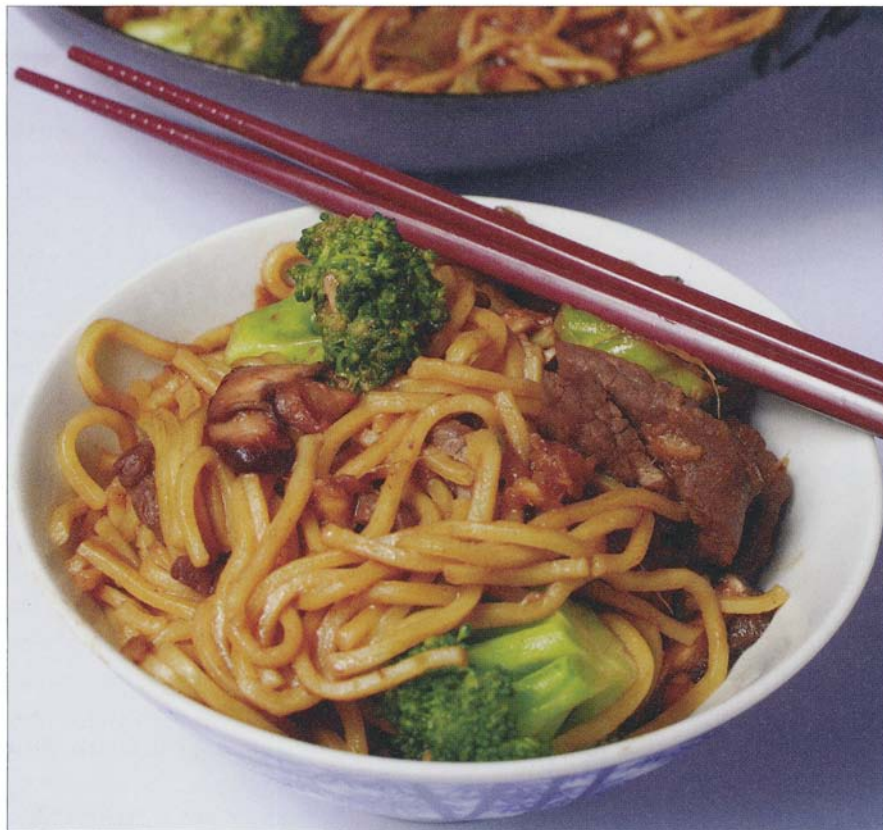


Jews & Chinese Food: A Love Story

Senior Editor Nonna Gorilovskaya interviews food writer Andrew Coe, author of *Chop Suey: A Cultural History of Chinese Food in the United States*



*’Twas the night before Christmas
and there was hardly a sound,
As Jews jumped in their cars
and drove to Chinatown.
Their orders were given
to waiters with care,
In hopes that wonton soup
soon would be there.*

*The children finished their noodles
and nestled in their beds,
While visions of fortune cookies
danced in their heads.
Now, Moment takes an inquiring look,
At how this love affair
with Chinese food took.—NG*

When and where did the first Chinese restaurants in the United States open?

The first Chinese restaurants appeared in San Francisco at the very beginning of the Gold Rush in 1849. They were owned by

Chinese from ports like Shanghai who had a history of dealing with Americans and knew what they liked. On one side of the menu, there were Western dishes like steak and potatoes, and on the other, Chinese dishes that Americans called “the curries, hashes and fricassees.”

When did Chinese restaurants migrate to New York City?

The Chinese came to New York City in the 1870s and 1880s because of the violence and discriminatory laws against them in the American West. At the same time, New York was in the midst of much larger waves of immigration of Irish, Germans, Italians and East European, German and Russian Jews and was just teeming with all these strange people. There was a group of early American foodies who called themselves “bohemians” and searched out exotic experiences in the immigrant quarters

in the Lower Manhattan tenement districts. These writers and artists became interested in the tiny little Chinatown that was opening up at the base of Mott Street in Manhattan. There, they fell in love with chop suey, which became the great crossover food that initiated Americans into Chinese food.

What is chop suey?

Chop suey is a cross between a stew and a stir fry. There’s a meat in it, usually chicken or roast pork, or shrimp, but the principal flavoring ingredients are bean sprouts, onions, celery, maybe water chestnuts and bamboo shoots. It’s all cooked in a thick sauce and served over rice. Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries loved it, and it was up there with hot dogs and apple pie as one of the most commonly eaten dishes across the country.

Was chop suey an American invention?

I believe that chop suey is a real Chinese dish. It’s a farm-country stir fry that was cooked around the town of Taishan in the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong province. In the 19th century, the vast majority of the Chinese immigrants to the United States were from Taishan, and this was a local specialty that they had. People from the rest of China would have called it a really low-class country peasant food and not even recognized it as Chinese. But the Taishanese brought it to the United States, and as more New Yorkers began to eat it, the Chinese restaurant owners realized that if they got rid of black bean sauce, pieces of dried seafood and other ingredients about which the Americans were squeamish, it would be more to American taste. They Americanized it.

When did large numbers of American Jews begin eating Chinese food?

When Jews first came to the United States, they kept close to their Jewish Eastern European traditions. The tenement districts of the Lower East Side were their world.

They did not leave that world either physically or culturally. Observant East

European Jews did not go out to restaurants because they did not know if the restaurant owners who claimed they kept kosher *really* kept kosher. But the sons and daughters of those immigrants, the first generation to be born in the United States, were a different story. They decided to become Americans and began to do things that Americans did. And one of the things that Americans did at that time was eat Chinese food. Eating Chinese in the 1920s and the 1930s was a very urban, sophisticated thing to do. It was cool, but it was also cheap, so they could afford it.

Were there other reasons why Jews preferred Chinese restaurants to, let's say, American or Italian restaurants?

Chinese restaurant owners, unlike any other restaurant owners, did not discriminate. They did not care whether they served blacks, Jews or space aliens. They treated all their customers the same. This was unique at a time when a Jewish person could be turned away at the door of a restaurant. Imagine Groucho Marx showing up at Delmonico's! But the Chinese restaurant owners didn't care, and they were open 365 days a year. This included Christmas and Easter and all the Christian holidays and on Sundays, so you could get the food any time you wanted.

How did Chinese food become "safe *treyf*"?

One hurdle for Jews to get over was that Chinese food was filled with non-kosher ingredients like pork and shellfish. Some just held their nose and ate it, and I think after World War II, maybe in the late 1950s, there evolved this humorous concept of "safe *treyf*." Obviously, *treyf* is forbidden but "safe *treyf*" means it's forbidden but OK. If you can't see the pork in the wonton soup stock, well, it's OK. Or if the shrimp in the shrimp chop suey is chopped up into little tiny pieces so that you really can't recognize what it is, then it's OK.

When did kosher Chinese food come on the scene?

The growth of kosher Chinese food began in the 1950s when canny restaurant owners saw a market of observant Jews who did not want the short cuts of "safe *treyf*." Restaurants like Bernstein-on-Essex in New York's Lower East Side began to offer chop suey and chow mein without the roast pork and the shellfish.

Chinese restaurants were initially an urban phenomenon. When did they spread to the suburbs?

This happened after World War II. As Jews moved out of the Lower East Side into Brooklyn, Queens and then out into the suburbs, Chinese restaurants followed them. The Chinese restaurant became the family dinner place, the place for Sunday night dinner. The food was exotic, but it was also comfort food.

When did the tradition of Jews eating Chinese food on Christmas begin?

Today, on December 25th, the United States is pretty much closed down, but 80 years ago, things were really closed down. There was nothing going on in the streets. It was either church or family at home. So Jews had nothing to do until they discovered Chinese restaurants were open.

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It's hard to find chop suey on the menu these days. What happened?

By the 1960s, the whole chop suey and chow mein thing was getting tired, and people were beginning to drift away from Chinese food. But after the 1965 Immigration Act, Chinese chefs from Taiwan and Hong Kong and from all over Southeast Asia started to open new kinds of Chinese and Vietnamese restaurants, especially in New York City and San Francisco. It became chic to go into Chinatown and ferret out the latest and most exotic Chinese restaurant. American Jews were at the forefront of popularizing these new places, especially the Szechuan restaurants with their really spicy food.

Do you have a favorite cultural reference to Jews and Chinese food?

My favorite is Herman Wouk's novel *Marjorie Morningstar*. It's a story of a young Jewish New York woman who becomes a theater actress and is trying to make it in the non-Jewish arts world, yet still feels the pull of the Jewish tradition. Wouk uses Chinese food as a metaphor for her efforts to cross over into the non-Jewish world. There's a great scene early in the novel where she visits a Chinese restaurant for the first time and is confronted by slices of roast pork. The smell nauseates her. She puts a piece in her mouth and chews it but just can't bring herself to swallow it. Much later in the novel, she's with her playwright boyfriend, and they have a big party with Chinese food at his apartment. She's a couple of years older now, much more sophisticated, and she sees the Chinese food and thinks: "What's the fuss about roast pork?" She puts some in her mouth, chews and swallows it and that's that. The episode shows that she has made the leap into larger society and away from Jewish tradition. Of course, at the end of the book, she actually goes back to the Jewish tradition and, one assumes, doesn't eat Chinese food anymore.

What does the fortune cookie say about the relationship between Jews and Chinese food?

Jews have moved on. They've discovered sushi, and now you have kosher sushi parlors and sushi stations at Jewish weddings. But even sushi is a little bit past its peak. With a little more exploration, Jews will find a lot more to discover in Chinese food.

What's the latest in Chinese food in the United States?

This is a very good time to eat Chinese food, particularly if you live near an active Chinatown with new immigrants coming into it. There are restaurants opening up now in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and other cities that are not the familiar old Cantonese, Szechuan and Hunan ones. A new favorite of mine now is the cuisine of Dongbei, which is the northeasternmost region of China [once known as Manchuria]. It resembles Korean food in some of its pickled dishes and is delicious. There's more variety in Chinese food today than we have ever seen before.

Jews. I had never heard of the paper before, and I was shocked.”

Like me, she’s curious as to why a successful educational institution like MAUP would have decided to take on a campaign of hate. When I asked various Jewish community leaders, they responded with a range of answers, all of them speculative, since paper trails are generally nonexistent in Ukraine.

Money is one theory. Mikhail Frenkel says MAUP charges \$2,000 to \$3,000 per year for tuition for its five-year undergraduate course of study, and reaps additional profits from its graduate, long distance learning and continuing education programs. The school’s large international student body has an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 students from the Middle East alone. “MAUP is a rich academy and Shchokin is very rich,” says Frenkel.

The general belief is that when the Palestinian Authority opened its embassy in Kiev in 2001, Russian diplomats introduced the Palestinians to MAUP, and an agreement of cooperation was signed in which MAUP received \$5 million. There is also suspicion that MAUP received funds from Syria, Libya, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran. “A lot of Arab students and Middle Eastern counties paid a lot for the tuition and propaganda,” says Frenkel, adding that little can be proved. There also may have been discussions of opening an Arab cultural center at MAUP and branches of MAUP in Damascus and the West Bank.

For Shchokin, “this was business, nothing personal,” adds Frenkel. Although there are ideological anti-Semites at MAUP, Frenkel doesn’t believe Shchokin is one of them. “I have met him and spoken with him,” he says. “His wife Rima Brodskaya’s father was Jewish, and their son attended Jewish school for two years.”

Many Ukrainian Jews are convinced that Russia was the real culprit behind the MAUP campaign. Zissels believes that the campaign was a way for Russia

to embarrass and discredit Yushchenko, who was daring to take on the old Soviet political establishment. Leonid Finberg, the director of Jewish Studies Institute, which encourages Jewish intellectual life and publishes Jewish-themed books, believes the conspiracy against Ukraine is much bigger and includes the FSB, Russia’s successor to the KGB.

“MAUP is a special political project of forces around Ukraine, Arab countries and in my opinion, Russian influence,” he tells me in his office at the prestigious National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. “Russia is a big country with big influence. And Ukraine is a middle [size] country without a strong mass media. My opinion is that 90 percent of the information about the Ukrainian people in the U.S. comes from the Russian media.” Anti-Semitism, he says, is “an element of contemporary Russian propaganda.”

Finberg points to the history of Russian dominance over Ukraine and the recent dispute between Russia and Ukraine over the price of gas flowing through former Soviet pipelines in Ukraine. One goal of the Russians, he says, is to make it more difficult for Ukraine to be accepted into NATO, the European Union and other Western political structures.

In October 2007, MAUP’s campaign appeared to end rather suddenly, stoking more speculation. Zissels sees the cessation of activities as a response to increased government pressure and changing public opinion. “It became clear to MAUP that it wasn’t profitable any more because they started to lose students who didn’t want to be associated with such a despicable place.”

Nearly everyone else I spoke with believed that a Russia emissary had ordered a stop to the campaign at a meeting at MAUP in October 2007. I talked with Rabbi Yankel Bleich in his beautiful wood-paneled study at the old synagogue in Podol, a Jewish

neighborhood in Kiev. He is convinced that MAUP was a pawn of Muslims, extremists or Russian nationalists. “The main thing is that it was not indigenous,” he insists. “The meeting shows us that the FSB was involved and that there was an order to stop.” If there was an order, Ukraine’s Jewish community still doesn’t understand who and what was behind it. “To an extent that is more frightening. It shows us that there is someone who can turn anti-Semitism on and turn it off.”

MAUP’S CAMPAIGN would not have been possible without what Per Rudling calls a deep-seated social acceptance of anti-Semitism in Ukraine. In September, he attended a conference during which a leader of a government agency, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, who is also a former deputy prime minister, equated Holocaust victims with perpetrators. “He stood up and said, ‘The Jewish scum were no different from Ukrainian collaborators.’” Rudling was shocked not just by the comment but by the lack of reaction on the part of Ukrainians in the audience. “In the West, there is an awareness that doesn’t exist in Ukraine. There, everyone just sits and listens as if this kind of talk were normal.”

Ukrainians have a tendency to conveniently mention the Jewish ancestry of others. Several times while in Ukraine, I heard innuendo that Prime Minister Tymoshenko was one-quarter or one-eighth Jewish on her mother’s side, although she denies it. “This is gossip used by people who don’t like her,” says Frenkel. More recently, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, a former parliament speaker and potential presidential candidate, has been accused of having Jewish roots. He also denies it, despite the fact that being Jewish today is no longer a political liability. “There’s a lot of anti-Semitic talk in Ukraine,” says Zissels, “but it doesn’t affect the composition of the parliament. You have to understand that

we have a large degree of freedom of the press but there is no concept of political correctness in our society.”

Mikhail Frenkel is less sanguine. Ukraine, he warns, has entered yet another period of instability. The country was hit hard by the economic recession and corruption is rampant: On a scale of corruption, Ukraine is a low-ranked 134th out of 180 nations surveyed by Berlin-based Transparency International. In addition, presidential elections are scheduled for 2010. All this worries Frenkel. “Anti-Semitism always increases in periods of instability,” he says.

MAUP is no longer considered to represent the threat it did to Jews between 2002 and 2007. But the next president will face the same threat from the right, be it from MAUP or another group and will have to remain vigilant about anti-Semitism. “The challenge will be to encourage the government to be proactive,” says NCSJ’s Mark Levin. “Government officials need to speak out, to utilize the laws that exist to deal with hate crimes, to create new laws, to expand teaching of tolerance in the educational system and get the right messages across to the broader public,” he says. “Some of this is being done but there’s far more to do.”

THERE’S AN EPILOGUE to this story. Since 2008, *Personnel* and *Personnel Plus* have, for the most part, lost interest in Jews. Past anti-Semitic writings from the periodicals, however, remain on the MAUP website. In addition, the Ukrainian Conservative Party website is no longer directly linked to the MAUP website. The party’s site has not been updated since 2008.

MAUP continues to publish 50 percent of all hate literature in Ukraine, according to Zissels. He estimates that MAUP’s anti-Semitic titles have dwindled to about 25 a year, and expects the downward spiral to continue.

Although MAUP’s anti-Semitic presses are winding down, their merchandise

remains readily available. On a September shopping expedition to MAUP’s main campus bookstore, Per Rudling found at least 70 anti-Semitic books for sale and spotted a display rack featuring *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Meanwhile, David Duke has been

banned from Ukraine since 2006. The former MAUP student’s latest anti-Semitic rants can be found on “The Official Website of Representative David Duke, PhD.” He lives in a village near Salzburg, Austria, where he runs a small business photographing birds. ☪

