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Winter Fancy Faire*

Made in Chinatown: San Francisco's Enduring Specialty Food Legacy

Walk through San Francisco's Chinatown hungry and there is no shortage of delicious bites on offer: dim sum, roast duck, hand-pulled noodles, bakeries fragrant with egg tarts. It is one of America's great dining destinations.

Looking between the restaurants—at the tea shops and grocers, the jars of fermented sauces, the stacks of dried ingredients—reveals another story beyond sit-down dining. For nearly as long as Chinese immigrants have lived in San Francisco, Chinatown has been a place where food traditions were preserved, adapted, and shared. The businesses that grew there created an ecosystem that helped Chinese ingredients and culinary knowledge travel well beyond the neighborhood and into the wider American food culture.

That history also makes Chinatown a particularly rich place to look for what comes next. For the specialty food world, it remains a living laboratory for food tradition evolution: how unfamiliar ingredients find new audiences, old flavors take new forms, and entrepreneurs balance history with invention.



A Food Economy from the Beginning

Food was central to San Francisco's Chinatown almost from its earliest days.

Yong Chen, historian and author of [Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America](#), points out that Chinese immigrants arrived in California facing language barriers, discrimination, and limited economic opportunities. Food offered both a connection to home and a means of making a living.

San Francisco's Chinese community developed alongside the Gold Rush city itself, serving miners traveling through the region with provisions, lodging, and meals. In the early 1850s, Chen identified 88 businesses in the emerging community. Roughly 33 were grocery stores selling Chinese food, alongside five Chinese restaurants. "It is basically a very diverse ethnic economy," Chen says, "and it's an economy that's centered on food and on service."

Those businesses were initially serving Chinese immigrants themselves, not trying to introduce an American audience to what we might now call specialty foods. That distinction matters. The ingredients on Chinatown shelves weren't exotic or novel to the people buying them; they were dinner.

Over time, though, the infrastructure built to feed Chinatown became a way for Chinese food to travel much farther.

As Chinese restaurateurs opened businesses outside Chinese neighborhoods in the early 20th century, Chen says, "they relied on Chinatown as a supply center, and also as a knowledge center." Wholesale businesses supplied ingredients to restaurants around the country while Chinatown offered culinary expertise and a connection to a larger food community.

In other words, the restaurant meal and the pantry behind it have long been intertwined.



From Chinatown Shelves to American Pantries

That ecosystem helped ingredients and products once encountered primarily in Chinese communities become familiar to generations of American eaters.

Current San Francisco businesses offer plenty of examples. Wing Nien Soy Sauce Manufacturing Company, founded in 1942, produced traditionally fermented soy sauce and other sauces, eventually growing beyond its Chinatown roots into larger-scale manufacturing. At the Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Factory, operating in Chinatown since 1962, visitors can still watch small-scale food production in action.

Products coming out of today's Chinatown also exemplify a key feature of modern specialty food: the power of provenance, craftsmanship, education, and storytelling to attract consumers.

That influence can be across San Francisco today, including from Specialty Food Association (SFA) members [KACE Tea](#), whose focus on tea reflects the category's growing emphasis on origin, quality, and ritual, and [TWRL Milk Tea](#), which brings the flavors and format of milk tea into a contemporary packaged beverage context. Specialty makers like these and many others show that products rooted in Asian foodways can reach new consumers without being separated from the culture and traditions that shaped them.



Tradition, Made New

At [China Live](#), a renowned San Francisco restaurant, co-founder Cindy Wong-Chen is carrying that same idea forward in a distinctly contemporary way: introducing Chinese ingredients, flavors, and traditions to new audiences while keeping them grounded in their cultural roots.

Wong-Chen and her husband and co-founder, George Chen, have spent years shopping Chinatown's small specialty stores for deeply traditional ingredients. China Live brings those flavors into its restaurant and products, creating an entry point without stripping away their history.

"We take some of the traditional ingredients and fold it into our house-made products like condiments, Asian granola, snacks, etc.," Wong-Chen says. "These flavors have hundreds of years of history, culture and development, so we perhaps modernize these exotic ingredients to make them more approachable."

A plate of Sichuan blistered green beans, for instance, incorporates Yunnan olive and salted plum. Wong-Chen also points to a house-made kaya-and-pineapple jam as an example of China Live bringing traditional flavors into new formats. And the restaurant's three-bean chili sauce proved so popular that it made the leap from the restaurant table to retail; China Live now sells hundreds of jars a week, Wong-Chen says.

That movement from restaurant table to retail shelf is part of what makes China Live such an interesting model for contemporary specialty food. Tasting can be education. A dish can introduce an ingredient; a condiment can give someone a way to bring that flavor home.

China Live, which will serve as a host restaurant for [SFA's Winter FancyFaire* Campus Tasting Trail](#) in January 2027, is one of many contemporary businesses thinking about how Chinese food traditions can speak to a new generation.



Consider SFA member [Funky Beans](#): founder Wei Wei grew up in Sichuan eating and making a mala-style condiment built around fermented black beans, a staple in her family kitchen. Today, she packages those flavors in California as Funky Beans, combining fermented black beans with shiitake mushrooms, garlic, ginger, chili, and numbing pepper. It's a deeply personal food tradition recast for a contemporary specialty-food shelf—and another example of Chinese regional flavors finding new forms and new audiences in the Bay Area.

For Wong-Chen, evolution and preservation belong together. “We do hold on to tradition in everything we do,” she says, “and will continue to evolve with local terroir and innovation, as we’re in one of the most innovative places on earth.”

She is careful, though, with the word authentic. “All great recipes are interpretive,” she says. “That’s the evolution.”

That may be Chinatown’s most useful lesson for the specialty food industry today. Its food culture has never stood still. For generations, businesses here have preserved knowledge while responding to new ingredients, new customers, new economic realities, and new ideas about what Chinese American food can be.

And that process is still unfolding. Wong-Chen sees a new generation of talented chefs and entrepreneurs bringing their own ideas to the neighborhood. “The more the merrier,” she says, “as competition breeds more creation.”



For chefs, makers, retailers, and anyone else in the business of figuring out what people will want to eat next, San Francisco’s Chinatown deserves to be explored with that history in mind. Come hungry, certainly. And pay special attention to the shelves, the jars, the ingredients, the stories, and the businesses behind the meals, too. ●



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