

## **U.S. Marines and Melbourne's Chinese restaurants: New perspectives on the home front, 1939-1945.**

**By Barbara Nichol**

The history of Chinese settlement in Australia tends to record the war years as culminating a period of isolation and decline after which post-war socio-cultural change, the gradual dismantling of discriminatory immigration legislation and widespread economic prosperity changed the community's business and personal circumstances. Yet the home front stories of many Chinese and non-Chinese Australians have constructed a more complex narrative.

Wartime disruption to people's normal routines brought thousands of civilians into the city to work in war-related industries and, of course, for relaxation, creating significant challenges and opportunities for all restaurants in coping with the sudden rise in patronage. Demand for dining services peaked over 1942 and 1943 when the city was transformed by the presence of thousands of allied servicemen, predominantly American GIs and later the First Marine Division who spent nine months recuperating in and around the city and regional centres after the horrors of the Guadalcanal campaign.

The Americans were living proof of a world of modernity which had found its way into the nation's collective consciousness at the cinema and in magazines, and they were feted accordingly. Social relationships quickly developed between the community and the visitors, particularly between Australian women and American men. It would appear from contemporary newspaper reports that their every move was recorded. Stories of courting and sexual sophistication tend to dominate these stories, yet many of the men were very young and away from home for the first time. They took pleasure in being invited into people's homes for a meal or a weekend stay and clearly some became very close to their adoptive families. In published memoirs of American servicemen, it is also noticeable how often food dominates their memories of Melbourne. For the exhausted Marines, in particular, it is strikingly apparent that food, real or

imagined, enabled them to maintain a link with home and normality.

Marine Sergeant, Jeremiah O'Leary, writing many years later made the point that:

We were farmers, bank clerks, or boys just out of high school with letters of permission stained with [our] mothers' tears. We were green kids, thrust into manhood. Melbourne was more than lovely. It was the symbolic civilian environment we had left behind.<sup>1</sup>

Marine Lieutenant Colonel Kerry Lane, had similar memories of Melbourne:

Compared to the little isolated part of the world I was born in, Australia was the most advanced nation on earth. Another thing I remember was the delicious food. Most Marines ate steak and eggs, or, as the Aussies would say 'styke 'n ayggs'. Melbourne steaks were large, tender, and delicious, and the Marines consumed them by the thousands.<sup>2</sup>

While steak meals dominate their memories, many also chose to eat in Melbourne's Chinese restaurants, such as the Chung Wah Cafe in Heffernan Lane, the Tientsin Cafe in Acland Street, St Kilda, the Taiping Cafe on St Kilda Junction, and the Eastern and Hong Kong Cafes in Russell Street. While American patronage of Chinese restaurants has not been recorded as part of Melbourne's civilian wartime history, many older Chinese Australians remember the servicemen for their friendliness, courteousness and generous tipping, and these stories have endured across the generations. While Americans were not immune from their own brand of cultural discrimination, their wartime presence is still regarded as a significant milestone in the process of widespread acceptance of Chinese restaurants and cuisine in this country.

Some American servicemen were clearly familiar with Chinese food, particularly those coming from culturally diverse cities such as New York and San Francisco with their well established Chinese communities. However Chinese restaurants were chosen for several reasons. By comparison with the Australian diet at the time, Americans ate more fresh

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy O'Leary, "The Marines of Melbourne" *Sun News-Pictorial*, 25 April 1981, p.25.

<sup>2</sup> Kerry Lane, *Guadalcanal Marine* (Jackson, Ms: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 280.

fruit and vegetables, and significantly more pork and poultry - a feature of Chinese cooking. American war correspondent John Lardner, for instance, commented on the 'dozens of Chinese restaurants' in Melbourne and made a point of mentioning dim sims which he regarded as the local substitute for the hamburger, to 'take out'.<sup>3</sup> Chinese restaurant families recall that the American servicemen ate off the normal menu of Chinese dishes modified for the Western palate such as chop sueys and chow meins, although steak and eggs was also available in some restaurants.

Chinese restaurants were also popular with the Americans because they tended to open late into the evening and on Sundays, when many other eating places were shut. These restaurants offered more than mere sustenance and were a relatively inexpensive place for American servicemen to take out an Australian woman for her first Chinese meal. American servicemen were culturally diverse, and for those of Chinese and similar backgrounds, Chinese restaurants were a source of familiar food and company.

The majority of Americans were in Australia during the Second World War for a period of less than three years. Yet their long-term influence on Australia's culture is still generating academic debate. Some argue that the American impact was significant, while others regard their influence as overstated. To ascribe socio-cultural change so positively to any one group, time or place always denies a more complex beginning and so it was with restaurant growth which was already increasing before the war. Between 1939 and 1945, restaurant numbers in the city of Melbourne recorded a rise of 29% to a total of 300 establishments. Chinese restaurants increased from twenty to twenty-eight (40%). While this increase does not necessarily mean that the wider community was becoming more accepting of culinary difference, dining out in Melbourne was never quite the same after the war and American servicemen, especially the First Marine Division, were active agents in encouraging

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<sup>3</sup> John Lardner, *Southwest Passage: the Yanks in the Pacific* (Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1943),48.

many Australians to take a first tentative step towards cross-cultural contact in the post-war years.

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