

Southwestern In Focus
CHINA NATIVE EP
RESTAURATEUR; SAYS CHOP SUEY
REAL CHINESE DISH

By Art Leibson
EPT Sundial 5/30/71

In the unlikely event that Moon Pon had read and been influenced by the book, "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying," a best-seller a while back, he would never have built his Moon Garden Restaurant into one of the most popular Chinese eating places in the Southwest.

It took considerable trying for Moon to become successful, a daily stint of 12 to 14 hours that has changed little through the years. He still puts in a dozen hours a day running the restaurant at 4675 Montana, seven days a week, without a day off in the last 10 years.

What does he do with his spare time? A little family life with his wife and those of his six children still at home, a little TV, and the start of a new business day. Those who agitate for ever shorter work weeks could never get any support from Moon. If you love what you're doing, the hours mean nothing.

Moon was born in Canton, China, in 1909, educated for the banking business. As with so many other familiar in China, the father had come to America to work and provide better for those in China, returning occasionally for visits during which more children were sired. That was the case with Moon, and in 1933 he followed a younger brother to America, a citizen by birth since his father had been naturalized.

The year was the worst of the depression and Moon went to work as a cook's helper. He at least had a place to eat and sleep, and

a chance to learn a trade, as the dollar-a-day he was supposed to receive as pay was often not forthcoming for as much as three months. But he was a good student and had a sharp taste for Cantonese cooking when he came to El Paso in 1939, looking for a job where the pay might be more steady. He found work in the kitchen of Union Cafe on San Francisco Street, but a few years later came a shift in employment over which he had no control.



MOON PON

LANGUAGE PROBLEM

Moon spoke no English when he arrived in California and picked up little of the language working with fellow Chinese in kitchens. But when World War II broke out he found that Uncle Sam was more than anxious to get good cooks into uniform. He cooked in the Army for four and a half years, including two years overseas, testing some of his Chinese recipes on officers' messes.

Then, when the military reluctantly parted company with their happy cook, Corporal Moon went back to the Union Cafe.

Now he was ready to strike out on his own. He had married an El Paso girl and they had started raising their family, now all-grown. Two of the four girls are attending the University of Texas at El Paso and the two boys, Peter and Robert Pon, were both regulars on the Austin High School football team during the past season. Peter got his diploma last week and will decide soon on a college.

In 1946 Moon opened his first restaurant, the Camp Grande Cafe on Alameda, a difficult time as El Pasoans did little eating out and restaurants were having a hard go. Then he was ready for something better and with two partners he opened the Moon Garden in 1960. After he bought out his partners he was on his own and the business grew rapidly. For the last nine years the Five Points Lions have been holding their regular luncheon meetings there. Other organizations also use the restaurant as their meeting place. And Moon is especially proud of a citation from the National Restaurant Association, the Menu Idea Exchange Award, for his menu originality.

The restaurant has been twice enlarged and redecorated and may be in for another change very soon. El Paso voted for liquor by the drink and Moon may find it necessary to install a bar to make drinks available for his clientele. But he hopes that alcohol will not dull the fine taste necessary to appreciate Cantonese cooking.

We asked Moon what the difference is between Cantonese cooking and any other Chinese dishes. Canton is in South China and there is a big difference in the appetites of the north and south Chinese. In the north they like their strong seasoning, including chili, but the south—or Cantonese—Chinese prefer the delicate natural flavors, including

under-cooking of vegetables so as to retain as much of their own flavor as possible.

SERVES SAME TEA

The restaurant still serves the same Oolong tea it used when it first opened. The tea, along with other Chinese items, has always come from Hong Kong, so Moon doesn't have to be concerned with the delicate problem of international politics. In addition, he gets some supplies from the nationalistic Chinese or Taiwan, called Formosa in years back.

Today Moon has 20 employes, including a pair of Chinese cooks—who also came from Hong Kong—but there is no question as to who runs the business. He is always in and out of the kitchen, supervising the cooking.

He scoffs at the belief held by many that dishes served in American-Chinese restaurants are alien to China. There is not a Chinese dish served in his restaurant that was not available in Canton when Moon lived there until he decided banking was not his cup of tea. Those who believe chop suey to be an American concoction are all wrong. It is a sort of hash, in China, and there may be some individual changes in the recipe, but basically it is the same dish that had been prepared in China for centuries. The same goes for chow mein. Moon says he may make a few subtle changes in the recipes from time to time, but few things are more standard than the popular oriental dishes.

Hundreds of El Pasoans are familiar with Moon's cheerful welcoming grin, the friendly atmosphere of his restaurant that takes up at least half his life even though his success has long been assured. His success has had some interruptions, as in 1963 when a carload of bandits held him up on his way to his home a block away from the restaurant, at 4705 La Luz, and got more than \$5,000. He learned not to carry any large sums with him. Another time they broke into his safe and took another hard-earned \$3,000.

He only shrugs off such troubles. Moon Pon is a happy man. * * *

Southwesterner In Focus

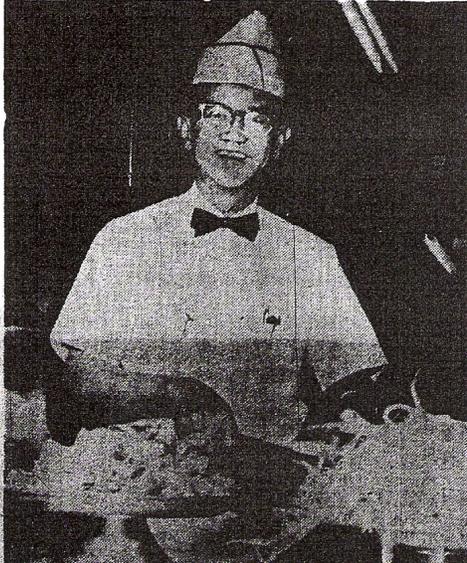
China Native EP Restaurateur; Says Chop Suey Real Chinese Dish

By ART LEIBSON

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