

4-29-2021

Interview with Eric Li (Leo's Chinese Restaurant)

Eric Li

Braden Battaglia
California State University, Monterey Bay

Beatriz Cruz
California State University, Monterey Bay

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/asia-pacific-foodways_interviews

Recommended Citation

Li, Eric; Battaglia, Braden; and Cruz, Beatriz, "Interview with Eric Li (Leo's Chinese Restaurant)" (2021).
Pacific Food Empires. 6.
https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/asia-pacific-foodways_interviews/6

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Food for Thought: Oral Histories of California's Asia-Pacific Foodways at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pacific Food Empires by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csumb.edu.

California State University, Monterey Bay

Digital Commons @ CSUMB

Food for Thought: Oral Histories of the Central Coast's Asian-Pacific Foodways

4-29-2021

Leo's Chinese Restaurant (Danville CA)

Interviewee: Eric Li

Interviewers: Braden Battaglia, Beatriz Cruz

Date: April 29, 2021

Location: Zoom; 105 Town and Country Drive Danville, CA 94526

Collection: Food for Thought: Oral Histories of California's Asian-Pacific Foodways, JAPN 317: Pacific Food Empires, Spring 2021

Length: 00:21:00

Overseen by: Dr. Dustin Wright

Biography: Eric Li's parents have owned a restaurant called Leo's Chinese Restaurant for almost thirteen years. Eric frequently helps around the restaurant by taking orders. Assumes the manager role of Leo's Chinese restaurant. Eric's family lived in China and moved here 15 years ago. They started Leo's Chinese Restaurant shortly after.

Interview Transcript:

BB: Hi welcome this is an interview about leos- leos Chinese restaurant. Im braden Battaglia and im joined with beatrice cruz and were gonna interview Eric Li today. If you guys want to do a small introduction.

EL: mm sure might as well. Uh My name is Eric Li and my parents own a Chinese restaurant named Leo's Chinese Restaurant. It's located in Danville and we have been there for maybe... [pauses] give or take a few years from 13.

BB: Alright so the first question we have for you today is uh. Are you the ones who originally founded the restaurant?

EL: Ah yes I believe we are, we had a restaurant in Antioch before that.

BB: Okay... And I know you're from China did you have any restaurants in China? Your Family? Or were all your restaurants located in the US?

EL: Uh we only have 1 restaurant it's uh the one we have right now. Leos, But we did not have any in China.

[Pause]

BB: Ok Beatrice, do you want to ask the next question?

BC: Yes, When you first opened your restaurant, was it met well?

EL: uh I would say yes, because we replaced an old popular restaurant in the city. It was called I believe uncle something, but there was another Chinese restaurant and they were pretty popular. So i guess uh we had to uphold the reputation they had.

BB: Were people disappointed with the change at first or were they pretty open to it. I think they were pretty open to it. As a kid I uh remember we did have a good amount of take outs and dine ins yeah but. So I'd say it

BB: That's always good to hear

EL: So I'd say it pretty good

BB: So do people come to your restaurant as a hangout spot like is it very popular just come with their friends and family to enjoy with for large periods of time. And do they come over and over again?

EL: Yeah uh we actually get that a lot sometimes, I don't know if you are familiar with this, but we have the danville lions club. I believe its like a golfing club. They just come to the restaurant every sunday evening. So I'd say it can be taken as a gathering spot, I've seen customers who come in as a group every time.

BB: Well that's good to hear. I've definitely come in a few times when the pandemic is not open. Or happening. And uh sat down with friends but. Can't really do that nowadays.

EL: Yeah I mean were all vaccinated now so my friends still come around. And we kind of just take up a table for ourselves. Just Chat.

BC: Good to Hear And are the dishes you make home recipes?

EL: Uh yes all of them are actually home recipes. Uh we take variants of other recipes and then add our own i would say homemade style to it. Cus I know a few others, there's one Chinese restaurant that was next to san ramon valley. I believe it was called nanking uh nanking paradise I think. Something like that um, they actually I don't want to say copied our recipe. But they added water chestnuts to some of the foods after we added them.

BB: So it seems like you guys are a trendsetter then, among all the restaurants in the area.

EL: At least I'd like to believe.

BB: What are the demographic of your customers, like do you see people from all ages, all races, all backgrounds coming into your restaurant? Or is it primarily one type of people?

EL: I would say that it's pretty evenly scattered, we get some I guess, we get some old people, young people, we would have a few mexicans come in, then a few african american people coming in, wed have white people come in. I would say it's pretty balanced actually. But given to the state of danville where it's primarily white people we do get mainly white people. But that's already kind of a given I believe.

Beatriz Cruz 4:42

I think this applies to the food that you make. So were you self taught or went to culinary school to learn how to cook these?

Eric Li 4:51

I actually do not ever recall my dad saying he went to culinary school so I do believe he actually. He actually self taught himself how to cook

Braden Battaglia 5:01

Do you know if he's worked at any restaurants before owning them? Like as a chef Skill? Or was it just like self taught through experience and trying your own cooking for the family?

Eric Li 5:12

He did have one restaurant or not restaurant, he actually worked at a restaurant in Chinatown before he had this one. Can't remember what the name of it was. But it's not the same style of restaurant, it was more like this. Ours is mostly Chinese cuisine. There is more like a Chinese cafe where they serve like, I guess, Chinese style cafe foods, if that makes sense.

Braden Battaglia 5:36

That makes sense stuff like uh breads and desserts and stuff uh like that. And like, buns and stuff like that. All right, and then what is your most popular dish? And what dish did you want? You're like, do you want customers to try for the first time?

Eric Li 5:58

I'm sorry can you repeat that?

Braden Battaglia 5:59

What is your most popular dish? And what dish? Do you want customers to try for the first time when they're in?

Eric Li 6:06

Um, I would say our most popular dish is probably the Honeywell prawns, I'd say that's like, throw out any, I guess Chinese restaurants a pretty popular dish. But the dish that I would recommend to people and the first come would probably be the Mongolian beef. I find that a lot of people who try this for the first time say it's pretty good.

Braden Battaglia 6:28

I have had the Mongolian beef, and it is very good.

Eric Li 6:32

Oh, yeah, he gave it to you once I remember that. Yes.

Braden Battaglia 6:33

Thank you for delivering it. And what is your main role in the restaurant? Do you just mainly do deliveries and handouts at the restaurant? Or? Um,

Eric Li 6:47

I'm not sure if this is the right term to say but so both my parents they're the owners, I guess then be safe to say that I'm the manager because I do everything else that they don't do.

Braden Battaglia 6:58

Okay, so you have a lot of responsibilities on your plate.

Eric Li 7:01

Yeah, basically, I deliver I do. I do. I guess being a busboy. I wash the dishes every now and then pack stuff up. Just everything that they don't do, basically.

Braden Battaglia 7:14

Okay. And is it your dad cooking the food? Or do you have other chefs?

Eric Li 7:20

We have one other chef. He works? Pretty much I think everyday, but Tuesday. And other than the one shop, we do have one fryer who makes I guess like fried shrimp and stuff like that.

Braden Battaglia 7:41

Okay, so as it is a majority of your family then and just a couple of trusted employees.

Eric Li 7:48

Yes, most of the time. They're actually family members, though.

Braden Battaglia 7:51

Okay,

Eric Li 7:52

like the fryer right now? Is my grandmother, the only non family employee, I would say is just the chef besides my dad.

Braden Battaglia 8:02

And is there a reason your family tries to keep it in the family? Or is it just a coincidence?

Eric Li 8:08

I'd say it's just a coincidence. We do actually have a lot of looking for work ads are not looking for work ads, but like hiring ads. But they're mainly posted in Chinese newspapers. And they are usually I guess centered around San Leandro or Chinatown, which is quite a drive away from here. So we don't get many people coming out.

Braden Battaglia 8:26

Yeah. is speaking Chinese requirement in your restaurant?

Eric Li 8:31

I would say no, we actually have had a few non uh non Chinese speaking employees. But they did like I guess the jobs that don't require you to speak Chinese like delivery, washing the dishes. If you're going to work in the kitchen, my dad gives all the orders in Chinese. So I guess it's not a requirement, but it should be a big factor.

Braden Battaglia 8:58

That makes a lot of sense.

Beatriz Cruz 9:04

My next question is, what is traditional Chinese cuisine to you? What does that mean to you?

Eric Li 9:11

In your restaurant? I would say that's a hard question. Because growing up with it, you don't really you don't really know what it is when you're going up with it. Like I guess when you think Mexican cuisine you think of uh, you go out you get a taco or something like that. But if you grew up with it, I guess it's just kind of food to you. You know. I would like to say Chinese cuisine is more seafood, seafood oriented with spices. But not many Chinese restaurants have seafood so I'm not really too sure to answer the question or how to answer it.

Braden Battaglia 9:49

It makes sense because it's different for every person, like what it is to them and for you. It's seafood with a bunch of spices like the basic Chinese cuisine and I can't always say I've had much that myself. Yeah.

Beatriz Cruz 10:04

Yeah. It's what's familiar to you? I understand.

Braden Battaglia 10:10

Okay, and then a clip from your website said modern interpretation of Chinese dishes. What brings? What do you think brings the word modern into your dishes? Like, what makes them modern?

Eric Li 10:25

Let's see. Um, I would think that it's all about the presentation, if we're going to talk about, like, how we're going to make Chinese food look modern. If it's just, I guess, on every dish we have we tried like presented Well, if it's presented in like a scattered form that I feel like it would just be, it wouldn't really be modern, it'd be more be like, traditional, just get the food out as fast as we can. Modern is just sort of appealing to the taste of customers, I would say. So it's not really an adjustment of how we make the food. It's more of how we present it, I would say.

Braden Battaglia 11:04

Okay. And then. uh

Beatriz Cruz 11:14

So do you know what comfort food is?

Eric Li 11:22

I'm familiar with it. Yes. Something, like chicken noodle soup?

Beatriz Cruz 11:25

Yeah, it's a I'll just give you a definition real quick. It's often a simple dish to prepare that provides sentimental value. So is there a dish on your menu that can be described as comfort food?

Eric Li 11:38

I would actually say yes. A lot of a lot of times when uh we have some repeat customers who ordered the same things every time. Sometimes they'll deviate from what they usually order, they'll get like soup, maybe because they say, Oh, my daughter is sick, I'm going to get soup for her. So I would say that serves as a comfort food for them. For other customers, their comfort food, maybe something like fried rice, or maybe just some dumplings. Like, like, again, it depends on the type of person. But yes, I would say we do have comfort foods.

Braden Battaglia 12:15

Make sense? Because I feel like every culture has some type of food that they can come back to and have as a comfort food. And then how has the community around your restaurant changed throughout the years if there has been any change?

Eric Li 12:32

Um, I would say that the only really big change would be the whole pandemic occurring. When the pandemic started, we got little to no business. I don't want to say it's because of the possible racism, it's more associated with people who are just scared to go out. But other than that there, it's been pretty steady. Like, when we started when we started, we started slow, and then it's kind of rising up. And we're kind of like a steady peak right now.

Braden Battaglia 12:59

That's good to hear.

Beatriz Cruz 13:02

Yeah, it's good to hear that.

Braden Battaglia 13:04

Yeah, hopefully now that everyone's getting out and being vaccinated. It'll bring more business, and then indoor dining could be open because I know that's not opened in our areas yet.

Eric Li 13:18

The new dining area is already opened in the Contra Costa area.

Braden Battaglia 13:20

Is it Oh, do you have indoor dining at your restaurant right now?

Eric Li 13:27

Yeah, I think the other day when I was working, I saw about maybe four tables. So I would say within the span of three hours.

Braden Battaglia 13:36

That's not bad. Some people are willing to eat inside seems like all right, and then just going off the COVID questions. Have you made any like changes to how you prepare food or like, get out food? And COVID or for COVID?

Eric Li 14:00

I would say with COVID. We have not changed how we prepare the foods. But in terms of giving the foods we've added the option of you could pay through the phone and we just bring it to your car. What's the call them curbside pickup? I believe we so that's the only real change we've had. Just with the addition of curbside pickup.

Braden Battaglia 14:23

All right.

Beatriz Cruz 14:24

And I want to ask you, what was that transition like in the beginning of lockdown, like around March last year?

Eric Li 14:33

Um

Beatriz Cruz 14:35

like, What adjustments did you have to make? Sorry.

Eric Li 14:40

Um, I think the main adjustment was that because I didn't have school, I could actually go start working at the restaurant at 12 o'clock, which is what I did. Most of the workers were too scared to come to work. So it was just me, my mom, my dad. Um, I would say that seeing us adjusting was slightly difficult at first, I would say. But after we got like, the hang of it, my dad prepared some stuff before everyone showed up. Kind of getting the feel of how many customers would come in this day to this day, because I would say

they were about the same like you would get more customers on a Tuesday, you'd expect to get another four on Wednesday, maybe. So you prepare enough for enough for a rush, if possible. This early preparation is what my dad did.

Braden Battaglia 15:36

All right. And then what are some skills that you learned? Probably at a young age from being at the restaurant at a young age? What are skills that you learned that helped you in your business today?

Eric Li 15:50

See some skills I learned? You mean working at the restaurant?

Braden Battaglia 15:53

Yeah, just like what did you really gain from working at the restaurant?

Eric Li 15:57

Hmm, starting at a young age I've kind of gained to have to be sociable with people. Personality when I'm dealing with certain situations, like if a customer, if the customer gets mad, then you just don't really want to fight against it, just go with it. Even if it's annoying you as well just go with it, try to get it done as fast as possible. Because it doesn't really hurt you. It hurts your family as well, because my family is also the one that suffers from that. Bad people I would say, um, you also learn other guests responsibilities, like, how would I say this? If you mess up an order yourself, you don't really want to say Oh, the customer told me this wrong. They told me the wrong order you kind of just wanted, you can just take the responsibility for yourself. So nothing bad, you make sure nothing bad happens on your watch. Basically.

Braden Battaglia 16:51

That all makes sense.

Unknown Speaker 16:59

And I think, oh, let's go What is your favorite part about owning a business? There must be something special (giggles).

Eric Li 17:08

Let's see my favorite part about owning a business. Ah, I would say there, there are a lot of negative externalities with owning a business. But if there was a positive externality, I would say it's just a safe spot for me. I would say I actually. Like I wouldn't really. I would say that for my parents, as well. Actually after like, my mom spends time with her cousins, they just go back to the restaurant and eat a big dinner there. So I'd say that's a positive thing for us. We always have a place to fall back.

Beatriz Cruz 17:40

Yeah. Is it like a second home to you?

Eric Li 17:43

Yeah, I will say that. Sometimes I have not slept in my house but instead slept at the restaurant because I had something to get pretty early in the morning.

Braden Battaglia 17:53

Oh, really? That's intense. So it is really is home away from home. You're always working on something or

Eric Li 18:02

some people assume that. You know, you know, you have like a store downstairs and then you have your home upstairs. Yeah, people, some people assume that's the case with me where I just work downstairs and then we go upstairs and sleep.

Braden Battaglia 18:17

Oh, like sleep above the restaurant?

Eric Lee Yeah 18:19

Braden Battaglia 18:21

Yeah. All right. And then a question for you. Because I know you've lived in China, did you really notice a difference? In between the ingredients in China and the United States? Like could you notice that when you're eating Chinese food? That there's a significant difference in the quality?

Eric Li 18:39

Yes, I could actually say I do notice a significant difference in Chinese cuisines. I would say they focus more on I guess bringing out the flavor of it. While in American Americanized versions, it's more just more the spices themselves instead of the flavor of the actual food.

Braden Battaglia 19:00

Yeah, that makes sense. So it's, it's like more about the key ingredient like in focusing using other ingredients, like making it better?

Eric Li 19:11

Yes, correct.

Braden Battaglia 19:14

All right, do you have any other questions you can think of Beatrice

Beatriz Cruz 19:19

now that we're all getting our vaccines, are there any like small changes that you're making to your restaurant to like fully open one day,

Eric Li 19:28

um, I would technically say we are already fully opened. Um, but the small changes we have made before we actually. So I guess it's easy to say this, the doors here and then the counters here. We didn't allow anyone in the space between, we actually moved the counter to the door. So they would kind of order out the door and pick up the food out the door instead of walking inside the restaurant. Then suddenly we kind of push that back to where the counters are in the original position now.

Beatriz Cruz 19:57

Okay,

Braden Battaglia 20:01

thank you. And do the tables have to be spaced six feet apart? Or can you have them? How did you have them when you originally closed for it?

Eric Li 20:09

Um, right now, I think we actually aren't putting any regulations on that. But I think the customers just kind of have a self understanding, oh, there are customers sitting at this table. Let's sit one table over. Like, let's just skip the table and go to the one next to it. So it's not really us doing the regulations. It's the customer just kind of self realizing it.

Braden Battaglia 20:29

Okay, well, I think that's all we have to ask you today, or do you have any other questions? Beatrice they go.

Beatriz Cruz 20:40

No, I just want to say good luck with your restaurant and I hope to go there one day, if possible.

Braden Battaglia 20:47

Yep. You can come to the Great Bay Area and enjoy the best Chinese food in the Bay Area. All right. Thank you very much.

Beatriz Cruz 20:57

Thank you.

Eric Li 20:59

Thank you