Exhibit Review

Chow: Making the Chinese American Restaurant. Produced by the Museum of Food and Drink (MOFAD). Brooklyn, NY. This exhibit opened on November 6, 2016, and the closing date has not yet been announced.

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Food and its objects have long been a focus of museums across Europe and North America. Folklife and living history museums in particular include foodways as a central component of their interpretative offerings. Yet there has arguably been a recent turn in museum scholarship and practice toward more diverse examinations of food. Museums are increasingly recognizing the growing interest in culinary tourism and weighing in on contemporary discourses surrounding the cultural, political, and environmental significance of consuming food in today’s globalized world. As Nina Levent and Irina D. Mihalache observe in their edited collection Food and Museums (Bloomsbury, 2017:3), “museums are responding to the current public fascination with food by integrating food displays, programming, and eating in their practices. These new museum practices are convincing more and more audiences that food is worthy of serious attention.”

The Museum of Food and Drink (MOFAD) is one museum that reveals the curatorial potential and complexity of food by creating new critical dialogues around the intersection of food, culture, labor, immigration, power, authenticity, and identity. Founded in 2015, the museum is still very much developing. The curator of MOFAD, Catherine Piccoli, explains that the goal of the museum is to educate people about food and drink, using food “as a lens to understand ourselves and the world around us” (interview with Meghann E. Jack).

The museum space currently constitutes a small “lab” in a former industrial unit overlooking Brooklyn’s McCarren Park. Chow: Making the Chinese American Restaurant, MOFAD’s second exhibit, explores 170 years of Chinese presence in America through the origins and evolution of Chinese American restaurant food. As Piccoli relates, the compact exhibit intends to tell “the story of the Chinese American restaurant and the cuisine created in those spaces. But it’s also a story about immigration, exclusion, and what it means to be an American” (interview with Meghann E. Jack).

The impacts of racial discrimination on Chinese people and the ways that immigrant cuisines are exoticized and othered certainly underlie the exhibit, but perhaps the most significant theme explored is the fluidity of ethnic foodways. Chow begins by broaching the idea of invented tradition in the creation of chop suey. Indeed, much of the exhibit implicitly asks visitors to question what matters more in understanding Chinese American food: authenticity or cultural meaning. Initial panels explore the nebulous origin of chop suey, which the museum suggests is the earliest Chinese American dish, if not the most iconic. They go on to explain how chop suey likely originated in the Guangdong province and was made with offal. In the American context, more mainstream cuts of meat were utilized in order to satisfy local taste preferences. The dish was first served in New York’s Chinatown in the late 1800s, and, by the 1920s, it was popular all across America. “Chop Suey Palaces” thus emerged as one of the few business opportunities that Chinese newcomers, who faced racist and exclusionary immigration policies, could pursue.

The exhibit considers the origins of other popular Chinese American foods. The fortune cookie largely emerged from a Japanese food tradition adopted by Chinese restaurateurs. The Taiwanese origins of General Tso’s chicken are also discussed. Another text panel plots Chinese American cuisine after World War II,
when upscale restaurants emerged that offered more “authentic” and nuanced Chinese dishes. Chefs like Joyce Chen, through her popular cookbooks and Americanized wok, also began to change the way Americans experienced Chinese cuisine, offering an avenue for preparing and consuming it in a domestic setting. The most exciting component of the exhibit, and the one that best reveals the dynamic nature of ethnic foodways, is the extensive display of restaurant menus ranging from 1910 to 2016. In reading menu offerings, visitors can trace how food practices and preferences continued and evolved in Chinese American restaurants. The design of the menus is equally revealing, suggesting the ways restaurants conveyed ideas of Chineseness through selected motifs: fiery dragons, golden phoenixes, and towering pagodas.

Visitors to MOFAD are encouraged to explore the sensory realms of food. Chow offers multiple opportunities through which visitors can interactively and experientially engage with Chinese American cuisine. In the fortune cookie section, visitors view an actual cookie-making machine and then sample cookies that have unique fortunes inside, compiled from a social media invitation to the public to submit fortunes. A wok station encourages visitors to develop their wok technique. This common kitchen tool, used in conjunction with a sauce ladle, requires strength and dexterity, and the activity helps visitors better understand the skillful labor that wok cooking demands. An accompanying text panel explains how wok stations require a spatial organization that facilitates efficient access to a variety of staple ingredients—soy sauce, black bean paste, garlic, chili—that form the building blocks of traditional Chinese American restaurant cookery.

While food is framed in cultural and historical contexts at MOFAD, this approach does not preclude the inherently experiential, sensory, and aesthetic nature of the subject matter. The most intensely sensory component of Chow is the Culinary Studio, a unique programming offering at the end of the museum tour (though visitors smell the sautéing garlic as soon as they enter the museum’s doors). All general admission tickets give visitors the opportunity to sample dishes showcasing the tastes and textures of Chinese American restaurant cuisine. An upgraded ticket features a larger tasting menu (a typical offering might include a fresh orange, fried wontons with mouth-numbing pepper, chop suey with steamed rice and brown sauce, and creamy coconut rice pudding). What is most engaging is the opportunity to sit and interact with the museum’s in-house chef John Hutt, who explains wok shape, the science of taste, and traditional flavor palettes. He also answers visitor questions as he prepares the dishes, but it is important to note that the chefs and dishes both frequently rotate.

Chow is generally well-researched. The text panels are engaging, readable, and illustrative, and the design of the exhibit is creative (a touchable installation of over 7,000 Chinese takeout containers adds an element of play to the visit). However, there are few objects on display. According to Piccoli, MOFAD was founded without a collection, although staff are actively working to acquire more artifacts. (One recent acquisition includes the EBONY magazine test kitchen for an upcoming exhibit on African American food culture.) The curator suggests that there can be challenges in generating a well-researched collection on a topic as ephemeral as food and drink. Piccoli explains:

Collecting and displaying artifacts for a food museum is not an easy process. The materiality of food and drink, the seeming invisibility of objects related to food and drink, means that those items are less likely to be seen as special objects to keep and preserve. Or they are too special, hold too much meaning to give away—culinary objects with a lot of family history and meaning are held on to and, oftentimes, still in use in people’s homes. Not only do we have to work hard to find food and drink artifacts, but we also have to convince people that they are inherently important, worthy of study, and can be used to convey something meaningful beyond their everyday use. (interview with Meghann E. Jack)

Nevertheless, food-related objects—especially glass and ceramic—do tend to be enduring and culturally indicative. Objects that are on display in Chow appear to be minimally researched. The creation dates for artifacts are frequently listed as “unknown”
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on accompanying labels. At times, labels do not directly reference material dimensions, uses, or potential sociocultural meanings. Take, for example, the ceramic place setting from the Pekin Noodle Parlor. Consisting of a teapot, bowl, small plate, soup spoon, and small sauce or spoon plate, the label simply reads:

Place setting from the Pekin Noodle Parlor, year unknown

When the Pekin opened in 1911, it catered to a diverse clientele of miners, theater-goers, and wealthy citizens. Then, as now, the menu featured Chinese American classics like chow mein, chop suey, and egg foo young.

This disregard for a more material culture approach to museum curation, at times, relegates objects to mere illustrations or afterthoughts. While visitors certainly learn about Chinese American food throughout the exhibit, they mainly do so through reading and eating; learning is not object-driven. The Museum of Food and Drink appears to be focused on exhibitionary and programming strategies that speak to current issues, historical contexts, and gustatory experiences surrounding food culture more so than its materiality. This is not wrong per se, and indeed multiple experiences and approaches to exhibiting are important for engaging today’s diversity of museumgoers. But MOFAD’s Chow brings to mind the troubles inherent in historian Steven Conn’s provocative question posed in his 2010 book’s title: Do Museums Still Need Objects? (University of Pennsylvania Press). As MOFAD moves forward in generating a collection, will exhibitionary approaches recognize the rich potential of object-based interpretation and learning? Or does object-based learning even matter anymore?

Chinese restaurants are among the most ubiquitous and beloved eateries in America. Chow: Making the Chinese American Restaurant encourages visitors to reflect more seriously on a cuisine many have consumed, but perhaps few have ever really thought about from multiple perspectives.