

April 1, 2007

## The Way We Eat; New York Noodletown

By SAM SIFTON

Historians may quibble, but spend any time with the jokers and memory thieves who while away their days eating and talking about Chinese food in New York City, and you'll hear someone say it was Shorty Tang who cooked the best cold sesame noodles Manhattan ever tasted.

Tang was a tiny chef of the oldest school, who worked for the great David Keh at Szechuan on upper Broadway and then had a joint down in east Chinatown back when subways cost two dimes to ride. His sesame noodles were soft and luxurious, bathed in an emulsified mixture of sesame paste and peanut butter, rendered vivid and fiery by chili oil and sweetened by sugar, cut by vinegar, made fantastic by technique.

You could find them all over New York City in the 1970s and '80s, or ones like them: at Hwa Yuan on East Broadway, at the Empire Szechuan chain uptown, at Tang Tang's near Gramercy Park. Bright with flavor, slippery against the plastic chopsticks, they represented one of the great steps forward for Chinese food in the United States in the post-chop-suey era: away from bland monotony and toward real complexity of flavor.

It is Tang's recipe, legend has it, that so many of us remember when we order cold sesame noodles today, and why -- the recipe being lost to time -- we're so often disappointed when we do.

Here's the flickering-newsreel version: The Communists took over China in 1949. Tang and other great chefs began to slip and slide toward the United States soon after, riding to Taiwan with banquet crews loyal to Chiang Kai-shek -- and from there to Hong Kong, India, Brazil, East Broadway and the Upper West Side.

They arrived in New York in the years following the 1965 changes in American immigration law and set up restaurants that over time began to offer a new kind of Chinese food, one remodeled first to fit and then to mold American tastes. "Szechuan food," they called this new style of cooking, and it became as much a part of 1970s Manhattan as cocaine and disco. (The spelling would later shift to "Sichuan.")

And as New York went, so went the nation: a cold and fiery dish meant to combat the lazy, brutal humidity of a Chinese summer became a staple of takeout menus across the United States.

Now, of course, those cooks are dead and buried, their recipes butchered, their admonishments forgotten. Patterns of immigration have changed. Much takeout Chinese food in New York these days comes out of kitchens run by immigrants untrained in banquet arts.

A plate of cold sesame noodles today? It's often just pasta with peanut butter, fridge-flavored nostalgia not worth ordering, though many do.

Eddie Schoenfeld, the affable yarn-spinner and Chinese restaurateur who helped open Chinatown Brasserie in NoHo last year, can take you back to those glory days, though, in word and occasionally in deed. Schoenfeld worked for David Keh for years, as the maitre d'hotel at Uncle Tai's on the Upper East Side, before going on to open restaurants of his own. He is among the top brains on Chinese food in New York City and a phenomenal cook, prone to serving guests dumplings and sticky ribs the way some grandmothers dispense cake and tea.

Schoenfeld is large and friendly and sometimes loud. He wears slightly cartoonish eyeglass frames, and when he's surprised, he raises his eyebrows under them, and the glasses amplify the effect: he looks very surprised. Occasionally, he wears suspenders. In better thesauruses, you'll find him listed as an antonym for "Chinese guy."

But if you need a road map back to a certain era of Chinese cooking in New York, he is your man. A few lunches with Schoenfeld, followed by a fair amount of reading and a number of afternoons of kitchen adventures, lead us to the recipe that follows, which plays at least to my recollection of the original like a faithful cover of a favorite song: the Clash's "Police and Thieves," say, in place of the Junior Murvin original.

It combines sense memory (East Broadway, 1984!) with some of the plainspoken wisdom of the great New York Times cooking reporter Marian Burros, who declared flatly in these pages in 1995 that home cooks could prepare cold sesame noodles as easily as any restaurant chef, and the cheery hucksterism of the underrated television cook Martin Yan, who did much the same in his 2002 book "Chinatown Cooking."

But Burros adds broccoli to her recipe, thus rendering it weird and too healthful besides, and Yan puts shredded chicken on top of his finished dish, making it into something you'd take to a church dinner. Their sauces aren't quite New-York-centric enough. They don't taste like takeout.

Schoenfeld's version is fiery but uses too much sugar for my taste -- he adds so much, in fact, that he needs a measure of black tea in which to dissolve it. This is a common maneuver, but unnecessary. There's plenty of sugar in most commercial peanut

butters, and making the tea is too complicated for such a simple dish. (If you're using a natural peanut butter, you're already complicating matters. As Schoenfeld says, "It's all about the Skippy, baby.")

My own take is almost comically easy to prepare. Simply whisk together the ingredients and taste them. "The art is in the balance," Schoenfeld says, correctly, "between the salt and sweet, the sweet and the fire, and the fire and the acidity."

### Takeout-Style Sesame Noodles

1 pound Chinese egg noodles (1/8,-inch-thick), frozen or (preferably) fresh, available in Asian markets

2 tablespoons sesame oil, plus a splash

3 1/2 tablespoons soy sauce

2 tablespoons Chinese rice vinegar

2 tablespoons Chinese sesame paste

1 tablespoon smooth peanut butter

1 tablespoon sugar

1 tablespoon finely grated ginger

2 teaspoons minced garlic

2 teaspoons chili-garlic paste, or to taste

Half a cucumber, peeled, seeded, and cut into 1/8,-by- 1/8,-by-2-inch sticks

1/4 cup chopped roasted peanuts.

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add noodles and cook until barely tender, about 5 minutes; they should retain a hint of chewiness. Drain, rinse with cold water, drain again and toss with a splash of sesame oil.

2. In a medium bowl, whisk together the remaining 2 tablespoons sesame oil, the soy sauce, rice vinegar, sesame paste, peanut butter, sugar, ginger, garlic and chili-garlic paste.

3. Pour the sauce over the noodles and toss. Transfer to a serving bowl, and garnish with cucumber and peanuts. Serves 4.  
Adapted from Martin Yan, Marian Burros, and memory.

### Notes

1. The "Chinese sesame paste," above, is made of toasted sesame seeds; it is not the same as tahini, the Middle Eastern paste made of plain, untoasted sesame. But you could use tahini in a pinch. You need only add a little toasted sesame oil to compensate for flavor, and perhaps some peanut butter to keep the sauce emulsified.

2. On which subject, the whole point of cold sesame noodles is what's called in the food trade its "mouth feel," the velvety smooth feeling of perfectly combined ingredients. That's why you find so much peanut butter in preparations of cold sesame noodles. Peanut butter emulsifies better than sesame paste.

3. Hey, where are the Sichuan peppercorns? Sichuan food depends on their tingly numbing power! Perhaps, but the little fruits were banned from the United States from 1968 until 2005 by the Food and Drug Administration because they were feared to carry citrus canker, a bacterial disease. And while you could always find them in Chinatowns somewhere (sitting, dry and baleful, in a pile), there are few in the true cult of sesame noodles who use them in their recipes. By all means, add some if you like: toast a tablespoon's worth in a dry pan, crush lightly and whisk the resulting mess into your sauce.

Sam Sifton is the culture editor for The New York Times.