150 years of Chinese food in Britain

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But how much do we actually know about Chinese food? When did it first arrive in Britain? How did it look and taste then? Do Chinese people really eat chop suey and sweet and sour chicken? Over the next year, the London educational institute Ming-Ai will be looking for the answers to these questions and more, in an exciting new project on the British Chinese food culture with a £49,500 grant awarded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

The British Chinese Food Culture project was launched in the Ming-Ai (London) Institute to a full house eager to try out the vegetarian crispy bean curd rolls prepared and cooked before their eyes by TV chef Ching-He Huang and Ben Cheng, the executive chef of the Good Earth Group.

Before sampling the vegetarian buffet, Chungwen Li, Dean of Ming-Ai (London) Institute told the guests about the first Chinese menu introduced to the UK in 1884 during the International Health Exhibition. She explained: "Food, is international as well as very cultural, it reaches our hearts through the stomachs and gets our attentions by its tastes, quality and presentations. Overseas Chinese always carry their Chinese stomachs wherever they go, and bring the Chinese food to every corner of the world. This project will explore the stories behind different factors and present a unique British Chinese food culture to the audiences."

The Head of Heritage Lottery Fund, London, Sue Bowers, said: “Britain’s love of Chinese food dates back to the nineteenth century and this project will trace how this cuisine adapted to UK tastes providing a wealth of information for educational purposes and wider consumption through exhibitions, a roadshow and a dedicated website.”

The Chinese menus in Britain are different from those in Asia, as many British travellers quickly spot. Ming-Ai will be sifting through menus from the early Chinese restaurants and takeaways to see how the ingredients, the seasoning and equipment adapted to what were available in Britain before imports became viable for traditional methods to be used again. Meanwhile new strands of fusion food were developed by Chinese chefs to appeal to the British appetite, and also the British chefs’ interpretation of Chinese cooking.

Ming-Ai will be compiling a database of food dictionary and idioms in both English and Chinese. These, along with a timeline and research to show how Chinese food has evolved in Britain over the years, are animated by stories told by the chefs who shaped Chinese food to what it is today. All the findings will be presented in an exhibition at St Martin-in-the-Fields Church on 3 December, followed by roadshows for the general public and visits to local schools to promote the educational resources between January and March 2012.

All the materials will be updated on the Ming-Ai website throughout the year and stories and contributions are welcome. Activities will be mainly in London and everywhere where Chinese food reaches the stomach – after all, Chinese food has made its way into most corners of the world, into our stomachs and our hearts.

Further information

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British Chinese Food Culture