

# What's So Bad About Chop Suey?

*Here's an attack by a respected anthropologist on Chop Suey (emphasis added):*

I will not eat it. I am sure that it is found delicious by many, and that I brand myself a food snob, but I get cultural indigestion at the thought of eating it. I think I understand why people complain that they get hungry again two hours after eating *so-called* 'Chinese food' – their stomach may actually still be full but their mind is unsatisfied: the fact is that they have eaten an illusion. *Chop suey is not a step down the path to understanding Chinese cuisine, it is a mischievous diversion, a mis-signposted path which leads away from Chinese cuisine.* Did you think that chop suey was a 'cultural interface' working as a medium of exchange between the West and China? .... It is not; it is an obstacle to exchange, a block, a buffer, a means by which the one culture denies access to the other; it is the Chinese equivalent of 'glass beads for the natives'; it is a relatively benign manifestation of Chinese cultural xenophobia....

Hugh D. R. Baker, **The Chop Suey Connection: Hong Kong** (An Inaugural Lecture Delivered on 8 December 1993; London: School of Oriental and African Studies University of London, 1994)

The website "Urban Legends" neatly summarizes the standing misconceptions about the origins and nature of Chop Suey. This excerpt will give you the flavor:

Not everything offered on a Chinese menu is authentically Chinese, but a presumption has grown that at least the major items of fare are. In the case of chop suey, this expectation is certainly misplaced. Chop suey is purely American, and most likely dates from the 1860s.

Chop suey is a bland mixture of overcooked vegetables. (Which right there should tell you this dish can't be authentically Chinese – the Chinese would never dishonor honest vegetables so.) This popular menu item traditionally incorporates celery, onion, and thin noodles in a starchy sauce barely touched by soy sauce. Different regions add in other ingredients, with bean sprouts made part of the offering in one area, and sliced water chestnut and bamboo shoots another. Whatever is added, the underlying integrity of the dish is never compromised – chop suey must always be bland.

Its origins are as mysterious as the dish itself is guileless. According to a favored bit of lore, an angered Chinese cook mixed together the day's garbage in a bit of broth and presented it to San Francisco restaurant patrons who'd earned his ire. Not knowing any better, those being insulted loved the dish, and much to the amused bewilderment of their tormentors, returned time and again to order it. Chop suey, therefore, is a mispronunciation of "chopped sewage."

[<http://www.snopes.com/food/origins/chopsuey.htm>]

Here is one of several recipes for chop suey from **Chinese-Japanese Cook Book** (Chicago: Rand McNally, c1914). It was published by “Sara Bosse,” a pseudonym for Winnifred Eaton (1879-1954). Eaton, whose mother was Chinese and father British, wrote popular novels under the name “Onoto Watanna.” Her sister, sister, Edith Maude Eaton wrote novels under the name Sui Sin Far. The two were known as the first Asian-American popular novelists.

The book is available online

*“Feeding America: The Historic American Cookbook Project”*

*The Michigan State University Library*

[http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/html/books/book\\_67.cfm](http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/html/books/book_67.cfm)

### **CHINESE RECIPES: CHOP SUEY (PLAIN)**

One and one half pounds of pork; one and one half pounds of veal; two onions; one dozen water chestnuts; one half can of bamboo shoots; two pounds of bean sprouts; three tablespoonfuls of syou; one half tablespoonful of salt.

Cut half a pound of pork in small pieces, and fry for three minutes. Cut up the veal and add it, frying for five minutes. Chop up two onions and half a bunch of celery into small pieces, slice thin a dozen water chestnuts and half a can of bamboo shoots, and turn into the pan with three tablespoonfuls of syou and half a tablespoonful of salt. Cook for ten minutes. Add the bean sprouts, and cook all together for five minutes. Serve with rice. [p. 46]

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Among recent leading cookbooks with recipes for Chop Suey is **Easy Family Recipes from a Chinese American Childhood** (Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), written by Ken Hom, who grew up in Chicago Chinatown, and Eileen Yin-Fei Lo, **The Chinese Kitchen: Recipes, Techniques and Ingredients, History, and Memories from America’s Leading Authority on Chinese Cooking** (William Morrow, 1999)