

MEIN ROADS



Corbo Eng tours the South Coast of Massachusetts on the hunt for America's most unusual sandwich

It's dreary outside. The sky is as wet as the ocean and the grayness reinforces Fall River's image as a city whose textile industry abandoned it long ago. In the South End, the weather has pushed pedestrians out of sight.

The sidewalks look sparse; the streets are lonely. The buildings, built with undistinguished wood or vinyl siding, are teary in the daylight. I don't know what to expect as I approach Mee Sum in the rain. It seems an unlikely place to find a regional specialty.

The interior of the restaurant is a time capsule lined with dark wood paneling and booths covered in vinyl upholstery. The walls host perfunctory Chinese artwork and a framed Boston Bruins jersey that must surely have a potent backstory. The gloomy pall of the day is cut by a few ceiling lights overhead. But Regina Mark, who runs Mee Sum with her husband Kenny, is happy. Her words are cheerful and bright, as might be expected of a woman who has spent 42 years greeting customers and who finds sharing rather than withdrawing more to her liking – even if I weren't asking her about her favorite menu item. “We specialize in chow mein,” Mark tells me proudly.

Chow mein, a fixture of Chinese cuisine, means different things to different people. In areas that boast a sizable Chinese community, a Hong Kong-style chow mein tends to predominate. A crispy bed of pan-fried egg noodles is topped with meats or seafood, garnished with gailan (Chinese broccoli) and sauced with a light gravy. At dim sum brunch, it's common to see Chinese families enjoying this noodle dish alongside shrimp dumplings, chicken feet, and egg tarts.

Chinese-American chow mein, however, is built upon deep-fried inch-long noodles (the kind popularized by Chun King and La Choy, two longstanding manufacturers of canned and prepackaged Chinese food). The crunchy, wheat-based noodles are coated in light gravy and a mix of vegetables (typically celery, onions, and bean sprouts) and topped with chicken, beef, pork, or shrimp. Chow mein of this ilk has been a mainstay of Chinese-American restaurants ever since Toisanese immigrants from Guangdong Province introduced Chinese food to this country in the late

19th century. Although diminished in standing by time and shifting trends, this chow mein is still a mainstay of Chinese restaurant menus across the nation.

In Fall River, located on the South Coast of Massachusetts, the Americanized version is the only kind available. In fact, this city of roughly 90,000 residents – where the Asian population is 2.5 percent – boasts its very own style of chow mein. It has a characteristically thin, dark brown gravy and is defined by a flatter, rather than round, noodle that's crisp instead of crunchy. Here, the current trend favoring authenticity and the emergence of regional Chinese cuisines seems to have never happened. Here, Fall River-style chow mein, humble and unpretentious, is served as a sandwich if one wants it.

First, the bottom half of a hamburger bun is placed on a plate. Next, a generous helping of fried noodles and a wok's worth of vegetables and meat is poured on top. Finally, the superfluous top bun rests atop the entire mound. Being drenched in gravy makes it something of an open-faced sandwich. It's akin to the Kentucky Hot Brown of Louisville (with its single slice of bread, turkey, bacon, and Mornay sauce) and the Beef Manhattan sandwich of Indiana (a roast beef sandwich smothered with gravy and served with mashed potatoes). But the chow mein sandwich stands alone in inserting noodles between two slices of bread – an odd starch-on-starch pairing if there ever were one.

Digging into my very first chow mein sandwich, I find that the noodles, smothered in that thin, dark gravy but jaggedly protruding at random angles, dominate every bite. Some are unmistakably crisp. Some, as the minutes pass, have softened under the warm gravy. But they are there as I negotiate each savory forkful.

As she watches me eat, Regina Mark describes the typical chow mein noodle – the Chun King and La Choy style – as “almost like pretzel sticks” that stay crunchy. “Our noodles are different,” she says. “When you pour the gravy in, it turns back to pasta.”

Digging in further, I understand. The noodles, having absorbed the gravy, are now al dente. That's apparently the desired effect. Fall Riverites,

many of whom are of Portuguese descent, enjoy the softer texture, which reminds them of how noodles are rendered in their own cuisine.

"How is it?" Mark asks me.

"Very good," I mutter with my mouth full.

Given Mark's long association with chow mein, she's undoubtedly heard that response many times. "Mee Sum opened in 1950," she says. "You see, Kenny's father started the restaurant. Kenny and I, we got married in Hong Kong and moved over here."

She's more matter of fact than nostalgic. But Marsha and Grace, two loyal customers who dine at Mee Sum four times a week, now chime in. As a little girl, Marsha recalls, she used to buy a chow mein sandwich and a Coke in downtown Fall River for 25 cents.

Mark goes back even further. "A chow mein sandwich used to be five cents. Today, when you order a chow mein sandwich, you get it in a Styrofoam container. But back then ... you'd get it wrapped." She gestures with her hands to show the shape of the bulky sandwich.

"Some people prefer soft noodles," she explains, "So they like it wrapped up. When they open it up, the gravy, it kind of gels the noodles together and makes it look like 'joong.' You know, with the green leaves used to wrap the sticky rice inside?"

The "joong" that she's referring to is something I've eaten since childhood – a tetrahedral mass of glutinous rice that contains mung beans, salted egg yolks, and Chinese sausage, all wrapped up in bamboo leaves and tied up with string. I wonder at the comparison.

At that moment, a waitress walks out with a wrapped chow mein sandwich. I don't know if one was prepared for my benefit or if a customer had actually ordered one, but there it is. It looks like a massive, lumpy Christmas present that someone, not wanting to splurge on proper gift-wrap, enveloped with wax paper out of thrift and convenience. I can make out the golden-brown top of the hamburger bun and the dark gravy with noodles pressing against the translucent sides.

The gravy soaks those noodles. The ambient heat and the wax paper compresses all of it into a solid mass. The result will surely be too big and bulky to pick up. "I would eat that with my hands?"

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I wonder. Mark offers a resolute "yes."

To drive the point home, Mark tells me the origin of the chow mein sandwich – a story that involves a man in New Bedford, located 20 miles to the southeast of Fall River.

"You see, one day, this person went into a Chinese restaurant. He wanted a couple of slices of bread to go with his chow mein. The owner was too busy and gave him a hamburger bun instead. So that customer invented it by accident."



Fall River's distinctive chow mein noodles are made by the Oriental Chow Mein Company, located near downtown in an unassuming one-story brick building. They not only supply local Chinese restaurants but also ship boxes of chow mein noodles to area supermarkets to be sold under the "Hoo-Mee" brand.

When I arrive at the facility, I encounter a clean, brightly lit space. Cardboard boxes are stacked five feet high on my left; there are many more beyond me past the front counter. Bags upon bags of freshly fried chow mein noodles – one, two, three, and five pounds each – lie out in the open.

The factory's newness belies the company's long history, dating back to the 1920s when Frederick Wong, an immigrant from Guangdong Province, started the business. Then again, this is not the original interior. They had to gut the place and rebuild after a devastating fire in 2009 that nearly burnt the building to the ground. But, as a testament to the determination of the Wong family and to the love affair that Fall River has with its chow mein, the Oriental Chow Mein Company

The Sandwich South Coast

Where you'll find the lesser-spotted breaded chow mein



CHINA KITCHEN
Taunton, Massachusetts



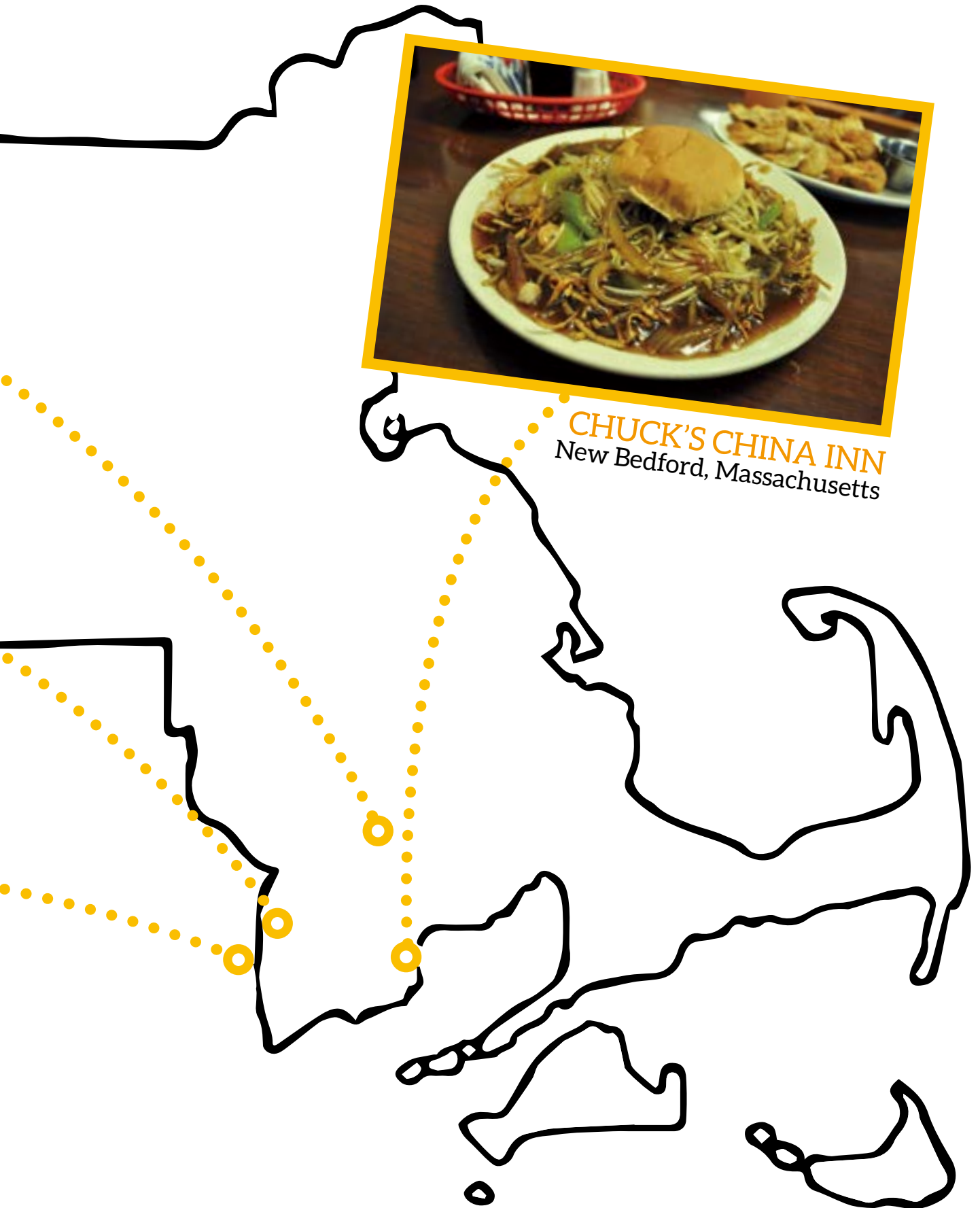
MEE SUM
Fall River, Massachusetts



CHINA GOURMET
Portsmouth, Rhode Island



CHUCK'S CHINA INN
New Bedford, Massachusetts



emerged like a phoenix, stronger than ever.

"I've been working here my whole life basically," says Alfred Wong, the proprietor – and son of the original owner. "This is my life." A stout octogenarian, he stands behind the counter, as he does every day – knowing nothing about retirement. As he greets me, he fidgets with a machine that applies glue to the prefabricated boxes that hold the eight-ounce retail product. The design, with its bright yellow stylized script for the brand name "Hoo-Mee" (which means "good tasting" in Wong's native Toisanese dialect), is a remnant of a previous age. Wong confirms this: "The design is from the late 1950s." He's in a reflective mood, reaching back to find memories.

When I ask him about the origin of the chow mein sandwich, he merely says that it dates back to at least the 1930s because he remembers the sandwich being sold when he was a boy. "Many Portuguese immigrants, being Catholic, fasted on Fridays," he says. They favored a "strained" version of chow mein, without meat, to keep with religious observance. Because they received their paychecks on Thursdays, Wong notes, there was always a spike in chow mein sales on Fridays.

"Chow mein was more popular than pizza after World War II. It cost 50 cents, and you'd get seven or eight ounces of gravy and noodles. You could easily feed two or three people. People were poor, and chow mein was a meal, something a family could eat together." As the decades passed, however, the popularity of chow mein crested and then dipped. "It's not like it used to be. Now, in the new carryout places, the chow mein is not as good."

He shakes his head. He laments the closure of the many Chinese restaurants that put Fall

River-style chow mein on the map. I mention Mee Sum. "They're the only remaining place where you can get a wrapped chow mein sandwich anymore," he says approvingly.

Wong takes me back behind the front counter into the main part of the building, where his machines are set up. It's late in the workday, and production is shutting down. Still, there's the buzz of workers cleaning up and the nondescript hum of machinery.

He walks me over to the fryer. It's an immense rectangular contraption with many moving parts. The aroma of the oil, still hot from a recent batch, is reminiscent of freshly fried donuts.

Like the fryer, the work tables beside it are pristine. "For decades, we had wooden tables." There's a look in Wong's eye, a force in his voice. I can tell that he misses the personality and the work-worn feel of that original space. "But all of that was lost in the fire," he says with regret. New regulations, forbidding the use of wood, now has Wong's men working on cold, impenetrable stainless steel.

Back at the retail counter, as I look at the many bags of chow mein noodles, I feel a sudden urge to buy some. "I'm going to make a chow mein sandwich when I get home," I announce. Wong hands me a bag of fried noodles and a few packets of the gravy mix. The latter is white powder with a few indistinguishable black flecks. "It's mostly corn starch," he says. "There's caramel color in there and spices. It's the caramel color, you know, like Coca-Cola, that gives the gravy its dark brown color."

Just then, a woman enthusiastically darts in from the street. She explains that she lives on Hog Island, a tiny patch of land off the tip of Rhode Island out in Narragansett Bay that's only accessible by boat – or, in her case, by kayak. She's on a grocery run, stocking up on provisions – chow mein included – before driving back to Rhode Island and kayaking out to her house on the island.

Shortly thereafter, a couple enters the building. "We live in Taunton," the wife says, referring to a city about 20 miles northeast of Fall River. "The chow mein in Taunton, the Chinese restaurants, they aren't like they used to be." Wong commiserates with her. The couple has stopped

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by the Oriental Chow Mein Company because they've read reviews online and are interested in making chow mein at home. Wong doesn't miss a beat. He grabs a big bag of noodles and instructs them on what to do.

"Get some celery and onions and dice them up into pieces. Throw them into a saucepan. If you have some chicken lying around, you can add that or some pork. I like ground pork myself. It adds a bit more flavor. Make the gravy. Follow the directions on the packet. You want a thin, watery gravy. Okay? And you don't just want to coat the noodles. You want the noodles to absorb the gravy. Add a dash of vinegar if you'd like. I prefer it that way myself."



Traveling out of Fall River is facilitated by Interstate 195, which roughly bisects the city from east to west, and Route 24, which runs through it longitudinally. Fall River, Taunton, and New Bedford form something of a triangle along these highways. Within this swath – and in a few disparate spots in neighboring Rhode Island – the chow mein sandwich takes up its mantle as a regional specialty. While I'm in the area, I decide to try a few more versions of this dish.

However, once you leave Fall River or get some distance from the old-school establishments, the quality of the chow mein sandwich can greatly fluctuate, particularly when patronizing takeout shops, as Alfred Wong had warned me. Whereas the Toisanese immigrants from Guangdong – the original stewards of the chow mein sandwich – proudly served it, the takeout shops of recent vintage are the purview of immigrants who arrived a half-century later from other areas of China. They have no direct lineage to that tradition.

In Portsmouth, Rhode Island, for example – located on Aquidneck Island, the largest island in Narragansett Bay – I encounter one such takeout shop, China Gourmet, in a tiny strip mall

One orders at the counter – after gazing up at the grease-stained stock photos of the most popular menu items. There's an open kitchen where customers can peer at the chef as he stands at his wok station, spatula in hand as the burner

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underneath emits the sound of a jet engine taking off. The owner takes dine-in orders as he stands at attention behind the register. A few tables, propped up into proper balance by wadded up napkins set strategically underneath, are placed in rote formation in the dining area. The owner's sons run about the shop or else sit occasionally at unoccupied tables to tap away at handheld video games.

Here, the chow mein sandwich is a soupy mix of ingredients – served in a plastic bowl, no less. Its contents, including the roast pork, are presented in strips and shreds; it's a mush of unappealing textures. I get the feeling that the chow mein sandwich is on the menu because it has to be there – because of geographic circumstance and not because it means anything to the owner.

Half an hour away, in Taunton, I visit another restaurant: China Kitchen. With a spartan interior featuring five contour-style booths, it serves mostly takeout and is run by a husband-and-wife team who don't speak much English. It's divey and short on charm. Handwritten notes on paper taped haphazardly to the wall announce the specials.

Here, my chicken chow mein sandwich is light on vegetables and meat. For better or worse, it showcases the noodles and gravy. The noodles are

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unmistakably Fall River-style and are already soft as I start eating. The gravy has a brownish tint to it that is consistent with drab oyster sauce. Overall, it’s a bland experience that doesn’t really resonate.

I have better luck in New Bedford – where Regina Mark had said the chow mein sandwich was invented. On the north side of town, at Chuck’s China Inn, I’m greeted warmly and seated at a booth in a renovated back room of the restaurant. It’s a weeknight, and it’s just stopped raining. Chuck’s – simple and unfussy – is empty. But Shannon, my waitress, hospitably answers my questions about the menu and takes my order.

I’ve chosen an appetizer of Portuguese wontons – fried wontons stuffed with mozzarella cheese and *linguiça*, a popular Portuguese sausage. It’s served with a ginger dipping sauce that makes for a winning combination

Before I’m done with the wontons, my shrimp chow mein sandwich arrives at the table. Shannon brings it out along with a squeeze bottle of duck sauce. I’m a bit confused. Duck sauce – that sweet, orangey goo of a condiment – is usually paired with soy sauce in the condiment packets that accompany most takeout orders. Frankly, I associate it with egg rolls. Because the Portuguese wontons are similarly deep-fried, I assume the duck sauce is intended for them. But Shannon reassures me that it’s for both dishes. The idea of putting it on a chow mein sandwich – already

swimming in gravy – just strikes me as odd. Shannon swirls her hand around to demonstrate how it’s normally applied. “That’s what people do. They just like lots of duck sauce.”

Well, when in Rome

I squeeze just enough to coat a corner of my plate.

The chow mein sandwich itself is huge, much like the one at Mee Sum, but this one has a lot of bean sprouts as well, which only adds to its heft. The duck sauce, mixed into the salty dark brown gravy, creates a slurry of flavors that’s not quite umami, not quite distinct, and a bit foreign to my out-of-town taste buds.

It’s at that moment that Tony Luk (pronounced “Luke”), the owner, greets me at my table. He’s a youthful-looking thirtysomething with an amiable, low-key personality. We strike up a conversation – about the restaurant, about the Patriots and Red Sox, and, naturally, about chow mein sandwiches.

“What are the most popular items on your menu?” I ask Luk.

“General Tso’s chicken and crab rangoon,” Luk replies. “Chicken fingers and, yeah, chow mein probably after that. It’s definitely up there. People in this area know what this kind of chow mein is. I mean, recently, I had a customer who lives in Maine come through and order five chow mein sandwiches to take home because she couldn’t get it up there.”

Luk tells me that he inherited the restaurant’s name from the previous owner, Chuck Wu, when he bought the place from him in 2003. The restaurant has a long history in New Bedford that connects with that nostalgic era of which Alfred Wong spoke so fondly.

After my meal, Shannon, with an eagerness in her step, takes me over to an adjoining room, a dimly lit space. “You have to see the Dragon Room,” she says. It’s dark and hard to make out at first. Then, as I look carefully – with the faint light aiding me – I see a spectacular interior.

The walls are covered with elaborate wood paneling, perhaps teak, that give way to stately Chinese calligraphy, majestic carvings that are too intricate to decipher, and a tableau of ornate,

courtly figures acting out a scene from Chinese history or lore. Overhead, a fantastic dragon emerges in coiled force from the ceiling with its mouth fiercely ajar. Archaic lamps, saturated red tablecloths, and period dining furniture provide the finishing touches. The overall ambiance conjures up the mystique of the Orient – something Hollywood in its golden age would have embraced.

“This is kind of our banquet room now,” Shannon explains. “The community rents it out for parties and things like that. Everything in here was imported from China.” Chuck Wu had apparently secured the wood, the artwork, and materials more than 50 years ago and had the room constructed.

In my mind, the room belongs to an era when Chinese food in America was still exotic and won new devotees with chow mein – and, here in southeastern Massachusetts, with the chow mein sandwich as well. The Dragon Room, so visceral and alluring, would have helped seal the deal.



A few weeks later, having secured all the necessary ingredients, I take out the chow mein noodles and gravy mix that I purchased at the Oriental Chow Mein Company. With the trip still fresh in my memory, there’s a sense of anticipation that I don’t usually have when I cook dinner on a random Wednesday night.

I stir the gravy mix into my pot of boiling water and watch the powder release that now-familiar dark color. After I’ve added in the chicken, celery, and onions, the whole concoction begins to take on the look of what I remember eating.

I set down the bottom of the bun on my plate, lay down a base of those distinctive fried noodles, pour out the contents of my pot, and crown

the dish with the top of the bun.

Not bad. But there’s not enough gravy. I must not have added enough water. My fried noodles stay mostly crisp; they don’t soften into the “pasta” that Fall Riverites know so well. Frankly, I don’t mind the mistake. I like the snap of the noodles. “This is pretty good,” I say to myself. And yet, something’s missing.

I’m sitting at my kitchen table. It’s early evening. My window is open, and the sun is shining through some cumulus clouds – a bird is actually chirping nearby.

It’s not what I want. I’m not sitting in a vintage booth at Mee Sum or the Dragon Room at Chuck’s. There’s no sense of place, history, and unswerving tradition.

As I sit and scan my souvenir box of Hoo-Mee chow mein, I think of Alfred Wong. He would no doubt be happy that I whipped up a chow mein sandwich according to his instructions. But I’ve only been exercising a curiosity. I’m not like Regina and Kenny Mark, who, because they see a part of themselves in the chow mein sandwich, make it with love and serve it with pride and a smile.

Thinking of them, it dawns on me that a sandwich which has been enjoyed by so many thousands, built businesses and supported families was started by a shadowy, nameless man who just wanted some bread to eat with his order of chow mein. 🍴

