

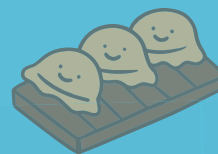
餐飲家

The Chinese Restaurateur

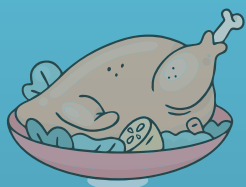
Feeding Those Who Feed Us

April/May 2025

40&41



# All Hail the Chinese Restaurant Moms



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## 第 3 届 餐饮家金像奖

# The Third Restaurateur Awards Nomination Announcement

On April 30, 2025, the third annual Restaurateur Awards, the most important Chinese cuisine awards in North America, announced its list of nominees.

## Outstanding Chef

The Outstanding Chef Award recognizes chefs who demonstrate exceptional understanding of ingredients and possess outstanding talent and creativity.

**梁继坚 (Kenny Leung)**

YAO 富瑶, New York, NY

**唐代灿 (Daichan Tang)**

Chang Chang, Washington, D.C.

**Franky Ho**

Four Kings 四大天王, San Francisco, CA

**赵健才 (John Zhao)**

Veggie House 聚缘斋, Chicago, IL

**黄维 (Wei Huang)**

Chef Huang, New York, NY

**蒋文涛 (Wentao Jiang)**

Peter Chang Group

## Emerging Chef

The Emerging Chef Award recognizes rising star chefs who are showing great promise and innovation in their culinary craft.

**周净媛 (Echo Zhou)**

Jun Bistro 云贵小馆, Milpitas, CA

**伍雅博 (Yabo Wu)**

YAO 富瑶, New York, NY

**Anthony Wang**

First Born, Los Angeles, CA

**Yong Zhu**

Sichuan Street Food 当代川菜, Pasadena, CA

**Franky Ho**

Four Kings 四大天王, San Francisco, CA

## Best New Restaurant

The Best New Restaurant Award recognizes recently opened, exceptional new restaurants.

**YAO 富瑶**

New York, NY

**BODAI Vegetarian 菩提**

New York, NY

**Four Kings 四大天王**

San Francisco, CA

**Beef Up by Uncle Huihui 老回回兰州牛肉面**

New York, NY

**Jun Bistro 云贵小馆**

Milpitas, CA

## Outstanding Restaurant

The Outstanding Restaurant Award recognizes restaurants that provide high-quality Chinese cuisine and have earned a strong reputation in the industry.

**Yingtao 樱桃**

New York, NY

**Masterpiece 名厨堂**

Duluth, GA

**August Gatherings 富瑶**

New York, NY

**Chef Huang**

New York, NY

**Hainan Chicken House 海南鸡记**

Brooklyn, NY

**素描湘 Sumiao Hunan Kitchen**

Cambridge, MA

## Outstanding Chain Brand

The Outstanding Chain Brand Award recognizes chain brands that demonstrate exceptional brand strength and industry influence in Chinese dining.

**Chubby Cattle 牛武士**

**Special Noodle 四姐**

**Uni Uni 攸攸茶**

**YAAAS TEA**

## Outstanding Restaurateur

The Outstanding Restaurateur Award recognizes owners and operators of renowned restaurants who demonstrate exceptional leadership in restaurant management and operations.

**汤鑫墀 (Thomas Tang)**

YAO Hospitality Corp 富瑶集团

**赵子平 & 蔡丽娟 (Ziping Zhao & Lijuan Cai)**

洞庭春

**周凯莉 (Kelly Zhou)**

YAAAS TEA

**丁懿辰 (Brandon Ting)**

Kizuki International LLC 辉月集团

**Harby Yang**

Chubby Group

**安秀杰 (Amy An)**

Special Noodle 四姐

## The Authority Award of Chinese Cuisine

The Restaurateur Awards are organized by The Restaurateur, the largest Chinese restaurant magazine publication in the U.S., in partnership with The U.S.-China Restaurant Alliance, one of the most influential associations in the American Chinese restaurant industry.

Since the first wave of Chinese immigration to the U.S. in the mid-19th century, Chinese cuisine has a history spanning more than a century in the country. Today, it has become an integral part of the American food landscape. Yet, due to the long-standing racial discrimination, Chinese cuisine in North America has often been stigmatized as cheap or even unsanitary, and it has been frequently overlooked by the top awards in the mainstream U.S. restaurant industry. The Restaurateur Awards represent a meaningful step toward changing that narrative.

In December 2022, The Restaurateur announced the launch of the First Restaurateur Awards. The inaugural awards included eight categories: the Lifetime Achievement Award, the Community Hero of the Year Award, the Chinese Classics Award, as well as five professional awards: Outstanding Chef Award, Emerging Chef Award, Outstanding Restaurant Award, Best New Restaurant Award, and Outstanding Restaurateur Award.

## Mission of the Restaurateur Awards

The mission of the Restaurateur Awards is to:

- Recognize the outstanding talents and achievements of Chinese Americans in the culinary industry.
- Promote dialogue and exchange between Chinese American cuisine and mainstream American society.
- Advocate for racial and gender equity.
- Encourage positive engagement between Chinese American culinary professionals and their communities.
- Foster sustainable and thriving community development.

The Third Annual Restaurateur Awards is proudly sponsored by MenuSifu, the leading all-in-one restaurant management software in the North American Asian restaurant industry. The awards ceremony will take place on May 17, 2025, at McCormick Place in Chicago, where the final winners will be announced.





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# All Hail the Chinese Restaurant Moms



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Thank you once more for considering Napa Technology. We eagerly anticipate the opportunity to serve you.

Best regards,  
Nick Moezidis  
CEO



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First Issue: January 2022 | Published: May 12, 2025

Vol. 4&5 Issue 40&41

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The Restaurateur is published monthly by LittleLaba Media LLC  
Printed in the United States



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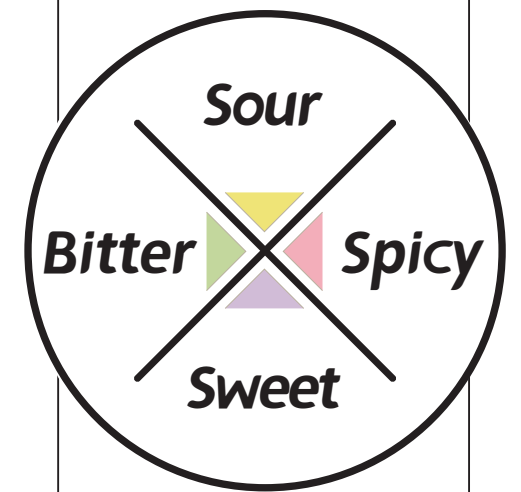
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### Share Your Journey

"Sour, Sweet, Bitter, Spicy" is a column by The Restaurateur, offering a space for Chinese restaurateurs to freely share their voices and stories.

We welcome your letters about the sweetness, bitterness, joys, and struggles of your life in the restaurant world. We are here to listen, and to share — because this is the spiritual home for all of us in the Chinese restaurant community.

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- Expansion & M&A: Legal counsel for a leading influencer company, providing strategic support.



## A Letter for Mother's Day

This Mother's Day, The Restaurateur received letters from five incredible mothers who run Chinese restaurants.

They come from New York, Texas, New Jersey, Oregon, and North Carolina — and from ramen to Sichuan cuisine, sushi to handmade dumplings, each of them has written a remarkable life story from the heart of their kitchen.

One left a high-paying job to spend more time with her children, trading the corporate world for the heat of the kitchen. Another started over in a foreign land, carrying her mother's teachings as she built her business from scratch. One recreates the flavors she learned as a child beside her mother, now serving the most heartwarming bowl of noodles. Another captures every dumpling she wraps and every drop of sweat shed for her dream on video, sending them across the miles to her own mother.

They are mothers, but also entrepreneurs. They are business owners, but also guardians of life's daily joys.

Between the lines of their letters, we feel the tenderness beside sizzling woks, the resilience under the weight of running a business, and the timeless story of generations of Chinese restaurateurs — finding balance, preserving tradition, and embracing innovation as they navigate family and work.



Mother's Day isn't just about flowers or promotional deals. For many Chinese restaurants, it's still one of the busiest days of the year — every hand on deck, every seat filled. Yet behind all that hustle, there's something deeper: mothers aren't just the heart of their families — many times, they're also the soul of their restaurants.

This Mother's Day, we don't just want to celebrate — we want to listen. Listen to how these women balance family and business, and how they carry forward a mother's love through their journey in food.

May every "Chinese Restaurant Mom" be seen and remembered.

May all of us walking this path of food find our own strength, courage, and tenderness in their stories.

And may you — who run between kitchen and table — continue to shine, with an unwavering spirit.

— Editorial Team, The Restaurateur





Share Your Journey

## Huizi

Nanuet, NY

Cho Cho San Sushi & Hibachi  
275 South Middletown Road

Cho Cho San Noodle House  
265 South Middletown Road



I'm Huizi, and I run two Cho Cho San restaurants in New York. I chose the path of the restaurant business because I wanted to become a better mother.

Before becoming a mom, I was what people called a 'career queen'—working hard and chasing success in the corporate world. But after my child was born, I made the decision to step away from my career so I could be there for every moment of his growth. For a few years, we were inseparable, and I thought life would always be this way.

But when he started school, I had no choice but to return to work, leaving him in the care of neighbors and friends. I'd leave early and come home late. Months went by, and one day I realized something had changed—he had grown quiet and distant. He no longer clung to me like before. There was a look of unfamiliarity in his eyes, and he even pulled away from my hugs.

In that moment, I realized—some things can't be made up for with money.

That's when I decided to open a restaurant of my own. The food industry is tough—long hours and high pressure—but at least my child could be with me. After the ramen shop opened, he would often come by after school, doing his homework while watching me work. Sometimes, he'd even help greet the customers. I was physically exhausted, but emotionally, I felt fulfilled.

Over the years, I've missed many moments of his childhood, but thankfully, we were never truly apart. Mother's Day, for me, is not only a day of gratitude but also a time for reflection.

This year, I want to tell myself: you've done a great job. And to all the mothers out there—I hope you find your own balance, and grow alongside your children. 🍵

## Coco Zhao

Portland, OR

Sushi Yummy & BBQ Noodle House  
1815 Southeast 82nd Avenue



I'm Coco Zhao, a restaurant owner based in Portland. It's been eight years since I came to the U.S. in 2018, and I haven't returned home once. Since starting my business in 2021, I've been swept up in the demands of entrepreneurship, unable to be by your side as often as I'd like.

Mom, I love you. No matter where I am, I hope your heart is always filled with light, peace, and warmth—just like before.

With Mother's Day around the corner, I want to say "I'm sorry" to my mother far away in China—for not being able to spend this special day with you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for always supporting and caring for me. I also want to express my gratitude to everyone who has helped me along the way—my customers, friends, mentors, and family.

— I bow to you all in deep respect.

Stay true to your original aspiration, and you will reach your destination.

Wishing all the amazing mothers a very Happy Mother's Day! 🍵





Share Your Journey

## Hanna Shen

Apex, NC

### Mr. Dumpling

5470 Apex Peakway



I originally ran a cosmetics wholesale business in the U.S., but I had always dreamed of opening a restaurant that everyone would love—a dream shaped by the influence of my parents. They’ve been running restaurants in China for over 30 years. Growing up, I loved spending time in the kitchen with my mom, experimenting with recipes and cooking all kinds of delicious dishes. Those moments left a lasting imprint on me.

So in 2021, I made the decision to open a Chinese restaurant in Apex, North Carolina. It was during the pandemic, and many customers were hesitant to dine in, which posed a big challenge. I chose to focus on building our takeout business first, while continuously developing new dishes in the kitchen and asking every customer for feedback.

At Mr. Dumpling, we specialize in handmade dumplings and traditional Sichuan cuisine, with a strong focus on quality ingredients and authentic flavor. We’re always striving to improve our service and provide the best experience possible. Thanks to the dedication of our entire team, Mr. Dumpling has grown into a well-loved restaurant in the local community. We’re truly grateful to every customer who walks through our doors.

As Mother’s Day approaches, we want to say to all the incredible moms out there: thank you for everything. Mom, thank you for giving me life and raising me. Wishing all mothers happiness and joy—today and always! 🍷

Since childhood, I’ve been deeply influenced by my mother—and that’s where my love for food and the restaurant world began. She ran a small cafeteria, and every day, students would line up for a taste of the dishes she prepared with quiet care. In that modest dining hall, I witnessed the warmth of food and felt my mother’s perseverance and dedication.

My mother always said, “Every woman should have a career she truly loves and is willing to dedicate herself to.” That sentence had a profound impact on me—it became my life motto. Today, I run a small Northwestern Chinese restaurant in the U.S., holding on to that original passion: using the most genuine ingredients to create the most authentic flavors. From hand-pulled knife-cut noodles to carefully braised traditional lamb stew, we strive to bring a taste of home to every Chinese person working hard far from home.

Without my mother’s influence, I wouldn’t be who I am today. She not only gave me a love for food but also showed me how a warm, comforting meal can carry the feeling of home.

This Mother’s Day, I want to say: thank you, mom, for teaching me persistence and passion. I wish you a lifetime of health and happiness! 🍷

## Lily

Princeton, NJ

### Xibei Cuisine

43 Witherspoon St







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## Li Yi

Watauga, TX

Hawaii Poke & Boba & Chinese Food  
8004 Denton Hwy #150, 76148



Ten years ago, I came to the United States with a simple goal: to accompany my children as they studied and grew up here. From the bustling streets of Los Angeles to the vibrant city of Dallas, the journey has been filled with challenges and changes. In this unfamiliar land, I often felt lost, unsure of where my future was headed. But with my mother's constant encouragement and support, I found a new direction—entrepreneurship.

My mother was an outstanding film actress. Not only did she achieve great success in her career, but she also taught me the importance of independence and building a life and career of my own. I'll never forget her words: "You can't live your life inside someone else's world. You need to find a stage that belongs to you." During my most uncertain moments, those words resonated deeply. They made me ask myself: What else can I do beyond just being there for my child?

As a passionate food lover, I've always felt a deep connection to cuisine. To me, food is more than nourishment—it's a reflection of culture and a vessel for emotion. During my years in the U.S., I've noticed a growing appreciation for authentic Chinese food among Chinese immigrants and local diners, particularly for handmade noodles and specialty drinks. That realization inspired me to open a fusion restaurant where customers could enjoy American-style Chinese dishes, handmade noodles, a variety of milk teas, and poke bowls—all in one place.

My restaurant is more than just a place to eat—it's a stage where the art of food-making comes to life. We want every customer who walks through our doors not only to enjoy delicious food but also to witness firsthand the craft behind them: the rhythm of the handmade noodles being pulled, the care poured into each dish. This immersive experience gives guests a deeper appreciation for the food and the effort that goes into every bite.

Starting a business—especially in a foreign country—is never easy. In the early days, every step was a hurdle: choosing the right location, designing a menu that resonated, sourcing quality ingredients, and building a reliable team of staff. I faced financial pressure, fierce competition, and the constant need to adapt to new customer preferences. But with each challenge, my determination only grew stronger.

The greatest reward has been seeing the satisfied smiles of our customers and hearing their kind words about our food. Whether it's an American customer trying Chinese noodles for the first time, or a Chinese guest finding comfort in the familiar flavors of home, every bit of recognition has been the fuel that keeps me going.

Today, the restaurant is on a steady path—but this is just the beginning. I plan to expand the menu with more creative, innovative dishes while embracing modern tools like the MenuSifu smart POS system and social media marketing to help more people discover and fall in love with our food. Ultimately, I hope to bring this unique dining experience to more places, so more people can feel the stories and warmth behind every dish. 🍵



## The Taste of Chinese Mothers Hidden in America's Small Cities

By Wentao Jiang

Over 2,300 years ago, the Han Dynasty official Dai Sheng compiled the *Book of Rites (Liji)*, in which he wrote: "Food and sex are basic desires of human nature." Since ancient times, mothers—often the ones preparing the household meals—have imbued their cooking with emotional and cultural significance. A simple bowl of soup, noodles, or pickles made by one's mother becomes a symbol of homesickness.

The phrase "the taste of mom's cooking" is not unique to Chinese culture. I've encountered similar sentiments around the world: in Japan, I've tasted "Haha No Aji" (母の味, meaning "Mom's Flavor"); in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, I dined at Cucina della

Mamma ("Mom's Kitchen"), an Italian-style restaurant; and in Virginia, USA, I visited "Mama Chang," a restaurant by celebrity chef Peter Chang that won the first The Restaurateur Awards of the Year. These restaurants are always packed. The warmth of a mother's cooking creates an unshakable sense of belonging.

Mom's flavor doesn't always appear in a restaurant's name. In several small and mid-sized American cities—Newport, Rhode Island; Rochester, New York; and Essex County, New Jersey—I've found Chinese restaurants that capture that maternal taste. Interestingly, they all happen to share the same name: "Qingdao."

Rhode Island is the smallest U.S.

state, roughly a third the size of Wuhan. When colonists first arrived over 300 years ago, they thought the coastal landscape resembled the Greek island of Rhodes—hence the name Rhode Island.

Despite its size, Rhode Island has 650 kilometers of coastline and is known as the "The Sailing Capital of the World." It's a popular vacation spot for East Coast elites, especially Newport, the state's second-largest city, which was once dubbed the "Summer White House."

America's industrial tycoons built their villas, estates, and mansions here. The Vanderbilt family's mansion in Newport even outshines the opulent homes

along Long Island's Gold Coast. With ornate designs and golden architecture, these seaside estates attract countless tourists—drawn by beauty and a glimpse into the lifestyles of the wealthy.

Nestled near the coast is a Chinese restaurant named "Qingdao," which has been open for over 30 years. The owner is from Taishan, Guangdong, and came to the U.S. in 1979. The dishes reflect authentic Cantonese flavors. As the owner's wife puts it: "We just cook our mom's recipes—and somehow we've been doing it for almost 40 years." The décor feels like a 1990s Chinese restaurant, and even the menu looks like it's from four decades ago.

Surprisingly, this restaurant ranks





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#1 in its area online. Reviewers rave about the fried chicken wings, calling them the crown jewel. Many tourists return annually just for them. I ordered some out of curiosity. Unlike typical American-style wings, these are generously portioned, golden-colored, and served without any batter or marinade—just natural, crispy goodness.

Fried chicken has a rich history. West Africans used palm oil for frying, and through the transatlantic slave trade, they brought their technique to the American South, where it blended with Scottish frying methods to create today’s Southern-style fried chicken.

Korean fried chicken, by contrast, emphasizes crispy skin and sweet-spicy sauces. It originated in the 1970s near U.S. military bases and is usually double-fried for extra crunch, then topped with garlic soy or spicy glaze. Thanks to Korean dramas like *My Love from the Star*, the “fried chicken and beer” combo swept across Asia.

Then there’s Buffalo wings, invented at Anchor Bar in Buffalo, New York, where Teresa Bellissimo cut wings into pieces, deep-fried them, and coated them in a hot sauce–butter mix. Buffalo wings are now inseparable from NFL football culture in the U.S.—a “wings + beer + sports” trifecta. In all these stories, sauce helped wings take flight.

Qingdao in Newport has also lasted thanks to its sauce—a sweet-and-sour plum dip inspired by traditional Cantonese roast goose plum sauce. Dipping wings into this tangy condiment is simply divine.

*Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People (Qimin Yaoshu)* from the Northern Wei Dynasty recorded Guangdong’s use of plum sauces. By the Ming Dynasty, locals were crushing preserved plums

with sugar and vinegar to create a balanced dip for rich meats. The owner says this is the exact flavor he remembers from his mom’s kitchen. Local patrons have been enjoying it for over 30 years—many of them are now moms or grandmas themselves. It has truly become a generational “mom’s flavor.”

Rochester, New York, was once known as “The World’s Image Center,” home to Kodak, Xerox, and Bausch + Lomb. When the Kodak Tower was built in 1914, its 94-meter height made it an icon of New York State. But with the rise

of digital technology, Rochester has faded into a shadow of its former glory.

The city’s Qingdao restaurant is an old-school spot. Upon entry, guests are greeted by a Chinese painting of peacocks and a portrait of Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang. The vintage décor and worn furniture give it the vibe of a 1990s state-run Chinese restaurant—just like the city itself, with hints of past brilliance.

Like its counterpart in Rhode Island, this Qingdao has a sense of timeworn charm. The bustling

owner and nostalgic ambiance feel almost identical. Perhaps that’s a common trait among “mom’s flavor” restaurants. The only major difference is that most customers here are Chinese, and the menu leans more toward central and western Chinese styles—braising, stir-frying, and stewing—unlike the lighter, more delicate Cantonese fare.

As soon as I sat down, the owner recommended the bamboo fungus chicken soup, claiming it’s the house specialty: “Every sip tastes like mom’s cooking.”

To me, this soup represents folk culinary wisdom. Bamboo fungus chicken soup has a long history of nourishing both body and soul across China—from banquet tables to home kitchens.

*The Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang (Youyang Zazu)* from the Tang Dynasty refers to bamboo fungus as “bamboo meat,” and by the Qing Dynasty, it was dubbed “sun,” becoming one of the eight rare herbs of China. Empress Dowager Cixi was said to be especially fond of bamboo fungus soup, often slow-cooked in chicken broth and dubbed “Bamboo Fungus and Phoenix Marrow Soup.”

Qingdao’s version respects the traditional techniques. Each spoonful carries the taste of home. As the saying goes, great ingredients only need simple preparation—what makes it “mom’s flavor” is sincerity.

Bamboo fungus symbolizes nature’s essence, while chicken broth represents domestic warmth. Together, they reflect harmony between home and the natural world. Because bamboo fungus is rich in natural guanlylate (a savory compound) and chicken contains glutamate, their combination delivers an amplified umami experience. This dish is beloved from the Greater Khingan Range



in the north to Shunde in the south, Yunnan and Guizhou in the west, and the Jiangnan region in the east. It’s a staple of moms’ home menus—easy to make and hard to forget.

The restaurant’s braised sea cucumber is also exquisite—tender, chewy, and richly flavored, fusing southern braising techniques with northern ocean delicacies. It even reminded me of Beijing’s famous braised sea cucumber with scallions from the Fengze hotel. One bite and I could almost see my mother by the stove.

In his *Compendium of Materia Medica (Bencao Gangmu)*, Ming physician Li Shizhen referred to sea cucumbers as “ginseng of the sea,”—a royal delicacy. The dish gained broader popularity when Premier Zhou Enlai served braised sea cucumber to Nixon during his 1972 visit to China. Master chefs from Fengze hotel prepared the dish using the rich, red-braised technique with thick soy-based sauce, pairing it with Qingdao scallions. American diners were so impressed that they couldn’t stop praising the dish. As Shandong chefs continued to refine the recipe, it gradually evolved into

the now–renowned dish “Braised Sea Cucumber with Scallions.”

Mom’s cooking always evokes memories. At “Tsing Tao Restaurant” in Essex County, New Jersey, I found a dish of spicy stir-fried pork intestines, Qingdao-style—it hit me right in the heart. My younger sister married into a family in Qingdao eighteen years ago, and I’ve been traveling to Shandong several times a year since then. Over time, I’ve developed my own understanding of Shandong cuisine. The way my sister’s mother-in-law stir-fries pork intestines is simply effortless and graceful—it’s become one of the reasons I look forward to visiting Qingdao. She once told me, “In the Qingdao dialect, pork intestines are nicknamed ‘money bags.’ That’s why this dish, symbolizing wealth and prosperity, is a must-have at every household’s Lunar New Year’s Eve dinner table. Over time, this has turned every Qingdao native into a master of stir-fried intestines—just like how people from Wuhan are experts at braised prawns.” I asked her for the secret to the dish. Without hesitation, she said, “Old-school Qingdao folks always scrub the intestines repeatedly with salt and cornmeal to remove the odor but

retain just the right amount of fat. That slight fattiness is what makes them so fragrant.”

So when I tasted the spicy stir-fried intestines at Tsing Tao Restaurant, it made perfect sense that the dish proudly carried the name “Qingdao-style.” For Qingdao locals, it wouldn’t be wrong to call it “Mom’s stir-fried intestines” either. Their version truly captured the taste of Qingdao—the fragrance was just right, never overpowering. Unlike the typical straight cuts used elsewhere, these intestines were sliced diagonally at a 45-degree angle—a signature of Qingdao knife skills. On New Year’s Eve in Shandong, it’s said that “no intestines, no fortune,” and this angled cut represents a smooth path to wealth. Each piece was plump and perfectly sized, ideal for dipping into the spicy sauce pooled at the bottom of the plate. One bite delivered a chewy, flavorful, spicy hit. Paired with a gulp of cold beer, the moment echoed the Qingdao saying: “A sip of beer, a bite of fat—no immortal could resist.”

That moment reminded me of something my mentor, Peter Chang, once told me: In the world

of cuisine, the most precious flavors aren’t found in the dazzling techniques of Michelin-star chefs or the rarest, most expensive ingredients. They lie in the warmth and nostalgia of “mom’s cooking.” A restaurant that can recreate that flavor holds the key to its soul. In the end, you realize that a truly successful restaurant doesn’t just serve food—it serves memories, culture, and emotion.

The memories we associate with food are deeply tied to emotion. A simple home-cooked dish can carry the weight of childhood, family, love, and even moments lost in time. If a restaurant can bring that flavor back to life, it can instantly strike a chord with diners. In today’s restaurant industry, where homogenization is the norm—with identical supply chains, similar menus, and copy-paste plating—the places that leave a lasting impression are often those with “non-standard” touches and a sense of humanity. I believe the best restaurants aren’t the ones that make you say, “This dish is exquisite,” but the ones that make you say, “This tastes like my mom used to make.” 🍲





# All Hail the Chinese Restaurant Moms

Chinese version written and photographed by Ivan Liu  
translated by Marty Zhu

—— Setting the Table ——

**W**hen people talk about the story of Nice Day—a rising star in the new wave of Chinese American restaurants—they usually start like this:

*"A young couple, both graduates of Peking University, reunite at Yale, launch a business in Connecticut, hustle in New York, and eventually open a string of restaurants across urban and suburban America. In just a decade, they've led a hundred-person team to carve out a space of their own in the East Coast food scene."*

*Like many immigrant couples who run mom-and-pop shops, they entrusted their young children to grandparents in China while shouldering the responsibility for dozens of employees and their families—working tirelessly, day in and day out.*

*Their goal is to build on—and expand—the legacy of previous generations of immigrant restaurateurs, using new technologies and management methods. And their mission? To make Chinese American cuisine more rewarding for workers, and more satisfying for customers of all backgrounds.*

*They've brought a fresh kind of experience to places like New Haven, Manhattan, Long Island, and Virginia—and the attention followed.*

*And like many stories in this industry, the spotlight tends to fall on the husband-wife duo—branded as “Yong and his wife, Wanting”—casting him as the face of the business, while she operates quietly behind the scenes.*

*But there's more to the story.*

*Behind the name Nice Day are stories still waiting to be told—mothers returning to the workforce, former restaurant owners starting over, and resilient women joining forces. Together, they've infused their empathy, ingenuity, and care into both the food and the seamless operations that keep each store running day after day.*

*When we stop viewing these stories through the lens of “the second sex,” a fuller picture emerges. The wives and mothers behind these restaurants—whether from the north or south—reveal a different kind of truth: the overlooked half of the entrepreneurial journey, and a glimpse into the quiet force reshaping an industry long defined by hardship and grind. This new energy is turning Chinese restaurants from grueling zones of survival into places where women—especially mothers—can take pride in their work and find a renewed sense of purpose.*





## ZHANG Wanting

# A Torchbearer's Vision

**ZHANG Wanting is determined to build a new kind of restaurant model—one that empowers Chinese restaurant moms to pursue their careers with flexibility and efficiency, while spending more time with their children, living fully, and no longer forced to choose between ambition and family.**

Not long ago, WEFOOD senior consultant HU Beichen made a bold claim: the American Chinese food industry—especially its takeout segment—is on the verge of a major reshuffle, driven by shifting social and economic tides. He sees it as an opportunity to uncover hidden gems and connect entrepreneurs, investors, and partners through his decade-plus of industry experience.

ZHANG Wanting, co-founder of the Nice Day chain, sees it too. She told the Restaurateur that she holds deep respect the earlier generation of Chinese immigrants who, against all odds, built the foundation of American Chinese cuisine with ingenuity and sheer perseverance—often at great personal cost. "They were like flowers blooming in the desert," she says.

But times have changed. This's not to say the old ways no longer work—it's that today's generation has more choices, and far less tolerance for burnout. Many traditional restaurants now face a quieter crisis: no one left to pass the torch to.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, countless

takeout restaurants across the U.S. shut down—only deepening Wanting's resolve to preserve and evolve American Chinese dining experience. In 2022, she took over a 25-year-old Chinese takeout in Huntington, Long Island, and transformed it into the very first Nice Day location. To oversee the month-long renovation, she moved into the basement of the former owner's house—just a five-minute drive from the shop.

Living under the same roof during that time, she witnessed, up close, the life arc of an earlier generation of Fujianese immigrants: leaving home to seek opportunity, waking before dawn to prep for the day's service, moving to better school districts for their kids, and eventually only after securing a future of the next generation. The restaurant wasn't just a job—it was their dream, and their bridge to belonging.

Wanting and her team want these restaurants to survive—but in ways that protect the people working inside them. She believes in freeing the managers from the grind of day-to-day firefighting through thoughtful structure, smart delegation, and technology that eases the physical burden—so they can focus on leading, not just enduring—and perhaps even be the first to taste what's next.

### *Making the Team Stronger*

Soon, another Nice Day location opened in Plainview, New York, followed by Brooklyn and Deer Park. Riding on its rising popularity, they returned to where it all began—a spot near Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut—sparking excitement in the local community and drawing crowds. From there, they expanded further into nearby West Haven. Each restaurant marked a story of transformation and renewal, with its history quite literally written on the walls. As more Nice Days arrived—both in name and in spirit—their team grew too, made up largely of locals from all walks of life and every background.

Wanting says she hopes to continue developing through a franchise model, while making each individual store as organized and self-sufficient as possible—laying the groundwork for a system that can be standardized and replicated with ease.

While building the business, Wanting got married and

had a child—but she never set out to be a supermom. She's grateful to her parents for helping raise her daughter, though she still regrets the many moments she missed. That too is part of her drive: to create a model where mothers in the restaurant world don't have to choose between ambition and presence. A model that allows them to grow their careers with flexibility and efficiency, while also spending time with their children, living fully, and enjoying life as it happens. For her, that's not just a personal value—it's the key to fostering long-term trust, balance, and sustainability within the team.

"I don't need to be center stage," she says. "But I want to be the one the team can count on—the person who makes us stronger."

In her pursuit to lighten the human workload, Wanting went the extra mile: visiting dozens of kitchen robotics companies in China and testing machines that might improve efficiency. She knows the technology isn't fully there yet—but she keeps pushing forward, willing to take a bite of what others won't touch. In her eyes, having robots cook may come with early flaws—just as trains once seemed unreliable when they first replaced horses. But she's certain: the robot age will come. And using machines, she insists, doesn't mean losing heart.

"Using a washing machine doesn't mean a mother loves her children any less," she says. "It just means she no longer has to carry a heavy basin of clothes to the river to scrub them by hand. This, too, is an act of love—making life less punishing so she can spend more time with her children. It's the same in the kitchen: when we free people from exhausting, repetitive labor, we give them space to focus on the things that truly require care and creativity." 📍





**XIE An**

***Back to Work,  
with  
Three Kids  
in Tow***

**XIE An had long been searching for a way to make a living without being held hostage by her work—a way to earn, live, and stay free. Now, she has finally found it.**

**I**n the traditional world of Chinese takeouts, work is intense, unforgiving, and often overwhelming—especially for women trying to balance business and family. But for XIE An, that’s beginning to change. Once a solo shop owner raising three kids, she’s now a key member of the Nice Day franchise team, managing store operations while still caring for her family.

"I used to do everything—run the front, manage the kitchen, take care of the kids. Looking back now, I don’t know how I made it through," she says.

XIE An immigrated to the U.S. in 2003 and got her start working in restaurants. Later, she stepped away to focus on raising her children. In 2019, she took over a takeout shop, hoping that being her own boss would bring more flexibility. Instead, it proved even more demanding.

"I thought hiring help would give me a little freedom—but I still had to do most things myself," she says. "On the busiest days, I was answering phones, dispatching deliveries, juggling staff schedules, and looking after the kids. By day’s end, I was completely drained." When the pandemic hit, her staff began quitting out of fear of infection. Part-timers regularly ghosted their shifts, leaving her to fill in the gaps—sometimes with the help of family, sometimes alone.

"One day, my delivery driver called and said he wasn’t coming. So I took the orders, scheduled the routes,

packed the food, and even had to ask the kitchen to slow down just so I could keep up." Looking back, she says, her only thought each day was: How do I survive until closing?

***Coming Up for Air,  
Just to Swim Again***

By mid-2023, An sold her shop, hoping to leave the stress behind and spend more time with her family. But instead of stepping away from food entirely, she joined Nice Day as a regional lead—quickly becoming a core member of Wanting’s team.

"At first, I just planned to help Wanting for a month," she says. "But she offered me flexible hours and let me focus on what I’m good at." This semi-remote setup gave her a kind of balance she had never experienced before—between work and family, contribution and rest.

Today, An oversees daily operations, staffing, and finances across three locations. The work is still busy, she says, "but it’s nothing like running my own shop."

"Before, I had to stress about everything. Now we have dedicated staff for sourcing, cooking, delivery, and hiring. I can focus on what I do best."

And what she does best is coordination, organization, and resource management—skills that shine in a cohesive, well-structured team. "I’m not great with physical work," she says, "but when it comes to managing staff, balancing the books, and reading operational numbers—I’m pretty good."

What impressed her most was how Nice Day’s systemized and standardized operations significantly improved efficiency while reducing personal workload. "Back then, when I hired a delivery driver, I still had to take the calls, schedule deliveries, and worry about missing orders. Now, we use a platform integrated with our own website. Delivery is faster, coverage is wider, and it takes fewer people to make it happen."

There’s another small but vital change, she adds: "In the past, sourcing always stressed me out. Now it’s automated. I don’t have to track when the chicken is arriving or whether we’re low on a certain brand of soy sauce—the system takes care of it."

For An, this isn’t just about working more efficiently. It’s a complete shift in identity. "In the past, I had to be everyone, all at once. Now, I’m a coordinator within a team. I have more time to think—and more energy to help others move forward."

***Ambitions Beyond the Home***

An’s oldest daughter recently graduated from MIT with a degree in chemical engineering. Her other two children are now entering critical school years. In the beginning, her dream was simple: to earn enough to pay for her children’s education. Now, she dreams of something more.

"I used to think raising good kids was enough," she says. "Now I want a career of my own, too."

She’s well aware of the challenges mothers face in their careers—but she’s also found strength in her children’s support.

"I think American society is quite friendly to working women. I asked my kids if they’d feel embarrassed about their mom running a restaurant, and they said no. They told me that in America, earning a living with your own hands is something to be proud of."

An says she had long been searching for a job that "lets you make a living without holding you hostage"—and she’s finally found it.

She laughs: "I used to stress over one store 24/7. Now I help manage three—and I’m less anxious." What changed, she says, wasn’t her ability—it was the structure. The team, the system, the trust: "It allows me to focus my energy and attention where it really counts."

She also understands the tradeoff. "Yes, mom-and-pop stores can make money—but the cost is time, health, and family. I might earn less now, but I have freedom, a schedule, and room to grow."

An’s story isn’t a fairy-tale success or a dramatic comeback. It’s a lived reality—a path many women walk as they pivot, adapt, and quietly reclaim their worth, one choice at a time. 🍵





## Joyce CHEN

# The Allstar Grace

**Over the years, Joyce Chen has never truly had time for herself. Now, for the first time, she enjoys regular weekends off. “I have more time to spend with my kids, and that makes me really happy.”**

In 2004, Joyce CHEN moved from a small town in Fujian to the United States. Like many immigrants from Fuzhou, she arrived with limited English and no clear career path. She got her start in the restaurant business through family connections, and by 2006, she and her husband—also a long-time Fujianese immigrant—took over her father-in-law’s Chinese takeout spot. That marked the beginning of a 16-year journey running a classic mom-and-pop shop.

“We had to do everything,” she laughs. “Cook, deep-fry, answer phones, take orders, pack deliveries—everything.” The shop was small but fully functional—what she called “a sparrow with all its organs.” Tiny as it was, it demanded full attention and care. Holidays and staff shortages often meant she was back in the kitchen, filling whatever role needed her, with barely a moment to rest.

At the same time, Joyce was raising three children—born in 2007, 2009, and 2011. With kids so close in age, those early years were a constant whirlwind of dentist visits, vaccinations, and school paperwork. “The hardest part,” she recalls, “was when the youngest was a newborn and the older two were just starting elementary school. My life was basically a shuttle between the kitchen, the clinic, and the classroom.”

Her mother-in-law initially helped with childcare, but as differences in parenting styles emerged, Joyce took on most of the responsibility herself. She believed in setting clear boundaries and staying hands-on in her children’s development—even if it meant shouldering more of the load alone.

### *From Back-End Hustle to Front-End Grace*

In 2022, Joyce’s father-in-law decided to retire and sell the family takeout business. She and her husband took it as a sign to step back from the daily grind—and relocated to Long Island to support their eldest son as he prepared for college.

“We just wanted a change of environment,” she says. “And our oldest was about to start his college applications—we wanted to make things a little easier for him.”

After selling the shop, Joyce joined Wanting’s team at Nice Day—but this time, not as an owner. Though she was a restaurant veteran, she chose a role that better fit her personality and gave her more room to breathe: working the front counter.

“Honestly, I love this job. I’ve dealt with every kind of customer over the years—I know how to read the room and keep things flowing.” Best of all, she no longer has to stress about inventory, payroll, or staff issues. “Everyone does what they’re best at. And when a problem comes up, there’s always someone there to help. That kind of support—it puts me at ease.”

### *From Giving It All to Holding Her Own*

Years of quiet dedication are beginning to bear fruit. Joyce’s oldest son was accepted to an Ivy League school this year—the first in their family to do so. But she keeps the celebration modest.

“We didn’t throw a party or even tell many people the school’s name,” she says. They didn’t want to pressure the younger siblings—or weigh her son down with others’ expectations. “If he doesn’t end up making a lot of money, people might say he wasted a good education.” Instead, she chooses to keep the joy private. “I just savor it quietly, right before I go to sleep.”

Her son grew up in the restaurant—helping pack food, manning the fryer, even taking orders. “He didn’t enjoy it,” she admits, “but I saw it as a way to teach him self-reliance.” Now, he’s level-headed and self-disciplined. “He told me he doesn’t need expensive sneakers to feel confident. He knows luck is external—but effort is his own,” Joyce says, her voice full of quiet pride.

Over the years, Joyce hasn’t had much time for herself. No overseas travel, no hobby groups, not even gatherings with friends—most of them are still working in their own restaurants. But she has no regrets. “I’ve never been materialistic or adventurous. I just wanted to raise my kids well, do my job right, and not have to hustle so hard.”

Now, for the first time, she has regular weekends off. “More time with my kids,” she says with a smile. “That makes me happy.” 🍵





**ZHANG Qiu believes American Chinese food is at a turning point. The influx of new international students and younger immigrants is changing the demand.**

## **ZHANG Qiu**

# **Ten Years in Service: From Student to Orchestrator**

**I**n 2014, fresh off earning her master's degree in the U.S., ZHANG Qiu joined Wanting's fledgling restaurant startup as its very first official hire. Ten years later, she's gone from a food-loving newcomer to head of procurement and supply chain—one of the core architects behind Nice Day's operational backbone.

"I've always loved food—especially the fast pace of quick-service restaurants," she says with a laugh. Today, she oversees everything from sourcing and purchasing to inventory management and supply chain coordination—building the systems that keep the entire brand running smoothly.

### ***From Chinese American Food to American Chinese Food***

Originally from northeast China, Qiu first discovered her love for fast food and team dynamics while working part-time at a local KFC during college. In 2011, she came to the U.S. to pursue a master's degree in international trade. After graduating, she briefly worked at a Chinese restaurant in Seattle—where she realized she didn't just want to work in restaurants—

she wanted to run one.

She joined Wanting's team soon after, through an introduction. But the transition wasn't easy.

"I didn't know what I was doing at first—language, culture, even basic communication with staff was tough," she says. "I once cried in a walk-in fridge after an argument with a local employee. It was just a misunderstanding. But that's when I realized—if I wanted to grow, I had to keep learning, adapt, and work on myself."

A self-described "picky foodie," Qiu turned that pickiness into an edge in sourcing and supply chain management. Today, she oversees vendor selection and sourcing for every ingredient used across Nice Day—from sauces and rice to meats and cold-chain items—with a focus on consistency and quality.

"A dish can taste great one day and terrible the next—not because the chef changed, but because the ingredients weren't fresh or the process wasn't well controlled. My job is to build systems that keep those variables to a minimum."

She and her team have built a full pipeline from sourcing to inventory—one that doesn't just ensure high-quality inputs, but also uses FIFO-based checks for freshness, cost control, and minimal waste. "People assume that choosing better ingredients means higher costs," she says. "But when you manage things precisely, it actually saves money—and guarantees that every customer gets the same taste, every time."

"Sourcing isn't about being cheap," she says. "It's about being effective."

### ***Finding Her Place —and Her Purpose***

Although the startup team is made up mostly of women, Qiu doesn't focus on gender. "What matters is responsibility and attention to detail," she says. "A lot of women naturally have a sense of aesthetics and precision—and that just happens to align with our brand."

Wanting describes her as one of the most reliable partners she's ever worked with: someone who follows through, takes ownership, and never passes the buck. Qiu puts it more simply: "I'm not ambitious, but I love what I do."

That steady focus earned her the team's trust early on. Over time, she transitioned from front-line operations to building backend systems. "I'm not about titles," she says. "I'm about creating systems that work—

systems that let dozens of stores run with minimal risk and maximum efficiency."

Asked what she thinks about the current state of American Chinese food, Qiu doesn't hesitate. "Some people think it tastes weird or inauthentic—but after working in procurement, I realized there's a logic to those flavors. It's shaped by culture and market realities."

And tastes are shifting, she adds. As more international students and younger immigrants enter the U.S., demand is changing. "When we couldn't find Chinese food we liked," she laughs, "we just started making it ourselves. That's one way we hope to bring change."

Thanks in part to her sourcing improvements, Nice Day's menu now appeals to both Chinese and American palates. "If we keep putting care into our ingredients—and keep refining the system—there's no reason Chinese fast food can't be the next KFC."

### ***Quiet Systems, Big Impact***

"Where do you want to be in ten years?" When asked, Qiu didn't paint a grand vision. Her answer was simple and clear: "I want to build a system that works—a system that can manage dozens of stores with fewer errors, lower risk, and greater efficiency."

She's less focused on how much money can be made, and more on how much can be saved while maintaining consistent quality. "If the system is solid," she says, "our team gets empowered. Line cooks can place orders, check quality, and uphold standards on their own. That's how we scale with consistency and control."

Asked about her co-founder Wanting, she says, "I really admire her persistence. Passion alone isn't enough—you also need vision and resilience. I don't want to be the top leader, but I do want to be a reliable teammate—the person who gets things done."

Qiu never set out to chase status or titles. "But I've always believed that if you take responsibility seriously and do things well—one task at a time—you can go far."

From part-time worker to head of procurement, from international student to a core pillar of a growing Chinese restaurant group, Qiu has spent ten steady years proving one thing: the so-called "power of food to change the world" often begins behind the kitchen door—with quiet, disciplined work most people never see. 🌱





## Heather Grebla

# A Jewish New Yorker's Passion for Chinese Food

**"We're writing a story here," says Heather Grebla. "I believe we can go further, and we're more likely to become the next Panda Express."**

**“W**e’re writing a story here.” That’s how Heather Grebla opens her interview. For her, the past seven years with Wanting’s team have been about more than launching a brand—it’s been about cultivating trust and building community, one location at a time.

As one of the core members of the Nice Day team, Heather manages store operations and has helped launch multiple locations across state lines. From pre-pandemic expansion, to holding the line through lockdowns, to today’s renewed growth—she’s been on the frontlines the entire way. Nice Day’s brand philosophy, she explains, is about creating a space where people come together—not just to eat, but through food as a shared connection.

Before joining Nice Day, Heather worked as a regional development lead at Subway, overseeing store launches throughout northern New Jersey. In just one year, her team of 11 business specialists opened 75 locations, coordinating closely with corporate leasing, construction, and administrative departments. “Everything ran by the book. Every action had an SOP. There was no room for deviation,” she recalls.

By contrast, Nice Day offered something she hadn’t had in years: freedom—and creativity. “We could

respond to customer feedback, tweak recipes, and roll out the hits across stores. That kind of agility doesn’t exist in big chains.”

Like many in the restaurant world, Heather carries vivid memories of the pandemic. During those uncertain times, she and her team kept three stores running—each with just two or three staff working seven days a week to minimize the risk of cross-infection.

“We set up contactless pickup, did daily health checks, extended safety protocols—anything to keep our team and our customers safe,” she says.

One store was lost during that time. But the founding team didn’t fold. Instead, they used the downtime to rethink and reimagine the brand.

“It was just a bump in the road,” Heather says. “We adjusted our rhythm—and now we’re back, ready for what’s next.”

## A Bridge Across Cultures

Heather grew up in a Jewish household near the New York–New Jersey border. “We love Chinese food,” she says. “Every birthday, every family gathering—it was almost always at a Chinese restaurant.”

She fondly remembers a place called Golden Phoenix, where her mother hosted family parties—and where her husband first met her mom. Chinese food, for her, has always been more than just a meal. It’s a bridge between cultures, a way to stretch the boundaries of family and community.

In Heather’s eyes, Nice Day carries that spirit forward. “In most American restaurants, the tables are spread apart—you don’t talk to strangers. But at Nice Day, people often end up sharing the same big table. And by the end of the meal, they’re no longer strangers.”

When asked about working with Chinese founders and team members, Heather speaks highly of Nice Day’s co-founder, Wanting. “She has a real passion for food—and a heart for sharing it,” she says. “She wants to bring people together and create a genuine sense of community through food.”

What has impressed Heather most is the care embedded in Nice Day’s management culture. “They treat employee well-being and work conditions as just as important as operational compliance,” she says. “That kind of human-centered leadership wasn’t something I saw in the fast-food world I came from.”

“They care about their employees. They listen, they respect, and they support. That’s a big part of why I’m still here.”

## Changing Minds About Chinese Food

Heather admits that the biggest challenge facing American Chinese food today is winning back the confidence of American diners. “A lot of people gave up on Chinese food,” she says. “They think it’s all the same—greasy, salty, inconsistent.”

“The real challenge isn’t keeping our regulars—it’s convincing those who’ve already lost faith to give Chinese food another chance.” She points to online reviews as proof that it’s possible. One customer wrote: “I’d lost hope in Chinese food—until I tried this.”

With fresh ingredients, consistent quality, and evolving flavors, Nice Day is helping bring disillusioned diners back to the table.

The brand now plans to open 10 to 15 stores per year, expanding beyond the New York tri-state area to cities across the country. “Our strategy is to take struggling restaurants, revitalize them, and reopen—not build from scratch,” Heather explains.

“We’re already building a structured onboarding process and standardized operations. That way, we can train efficiently and replicate quickly.”

So—can Nice Day be the next Subway or Chipotle?

Heather doesn’t hesitate. “Absolutely! As long as we keep our standards high, keep creating new dishes, and keep growing the team,” she says with a smile, “there’s no reason we can’t be the next Panda Express.” 🍜









# The Best Sichuan

By Lily Qin | Photo: The Best Sichuan

In recent years, Midtown Manhattan's food scene has quietly seen a rise in Sichuan cuisine. Chinese restaurants are everywhere, but Sichuan spots stand out like bold chili peppers—bright, fiery, and impossible to ignore. Under the neon lights, Chinese signs flicker on the streets, with each restaurant showcasing their special dishes like martial artists showing off their best moves. New restaurants proudly boast “authentic Sichuan flavors,” while older ones fade into memory. In New York, the food is the fiercest critic—if it can't win over customers, it won't survive.

Yet in this fiercely competitive world, The Best Sichuan has held its ground. Sophia, the owner and mother of two, is often seen moving between the dining area and the kitchen, working in sync with her husband, Chef Weimin Hong. Over the past six years, the couple has transformed their restaurant into a top name in New York's Chinese restaurant scene.

## *A Fiery Taste of Sichuan in Midtown Manhattan: The Story of “The Best Sichuan”*

When I first met Sophia, she was at the counter, checking the accounts. Her round face was framed by delicate eyebrows, her eyes bright and alert, and the silk scarf around her neck fluttered with every quick movement. She had that unique blend of confidence and gentleness that Sichuan women are known for. When she spoke, she often smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling—a sign of years spent working in the kitchen.

Her husband, Weimin Hong, is from Henan. He started as a cook in Shandong at the age of 16, and at 20, he went to the Chengdu military region. “Out of all the eight major Chinese cuisines, Sichuan is the best. I knew then I wanted to master it,” he says. After leaving the army, Chef Hong stayed in Chengdu to learn the craft, starting as a kitchen assistant and working his way up to a chef. Over the years, he honed his skills and eventually became a master of Sichuan cuisine. It was during this time that he met Sophia, who would become his wife. Though some questioned whether an outsider could truly make authentic Sichuan food, Chef Hong didn't argue. He just sharpened his knife and focused on mastering his craft in the kitchen.

The couple's dynamic is striking. Sophia is like a boiling pot of chili oil—fiery, passionate, and quick to recount their past, often finishing her husband's sentences. Chef Hong, by contrast, is more like a warm bowl of porridge—gentle, patient, and always ready to smile and add “My wife knows best.”

In 2009, Weimin Hong came to the U.S. alone to work, starting from the most basic restaurant tasks and slowly accumulating experience. He carried with him a dream: to one day open his own restaurant. Later, Sophia joined him in the U.S., and with the support of a local MIT professor, they managed to lease a restaurant space in Manhattan in 2018. They hung up the “Ba Shi Chengdu”—with pride. But just as their dream began to take shape, the challenges rolled in. First, came fierce competition from neighboring restaurant owners, followed by the bureaucratic struggles with permits that delayed their opening. And in 2019, just as they were finding their footing, a devastating fire destroyed everything they had built.

“Fires in the U.S. are a big deal,” Sophia recalls, tracing the rim of her tea cup. “The building department issues a ban and requires you to clear out, renovate, and rebuild, which means you can't open for a long time. The worst part was that the building's chimney extended from the first floor to the top of the 16th floor. The construction would take months, just for the permits.” She sighs, “Over 20 employees were waiting to start work, and I couldn't sleep at night.”

By coincidence, a nearby Asian restaurant was up for sale. Sophia saw an opportunity, but Weimin Hong, still reeling from the fire and exhausted from the constant running around, hesitated. “What if we just... gave up?” he asked quietly.

But Sophia didn't flinch. “No” she said. “We're going to keep going.”

In June 2019, just over a month after the fire, they reopened under the new name: “The Best Sichuan,” in a location not far from the original. All the old staff returned.

“This is what persistence means,” Sophia says. “When people stick together, they'll never be torn apart.”

“Honestly, if we had better options, we wouldn't have taken over this new restaurant,” Sophia says. “There was already a Sichuan restaurant just 50 meters away. Moving there would be directly competing for the same customers.” She speaks with a trace of regret—but also with conviction.

“If others are lacking something, we'll offer it. If a fellow restaurant owner is in trouble, we'll help however we can.” Weimin Hong adds, “People often say that in the U.S., if you want to upset someone, open a restaurant. But we believe that in this business, it's not about competing aggressively, but about building relationships. You have to exchange sincerity





for sincerity."

They eventually opened two more locations in Manhattan, staying true to their original model. Their business steadily grew stronger. Weimin Hong reflects, "If it weren't for my wife always keeping me on track, we wouldn't have 'The Best Sichuan' today."

### The Pandemic and Their Commitment

Just six months after opening, the pandemic hit. "That period was a nightmare for everyone..."

Sophia glances at Weimin Hong as she recalls the time. "But we only had one thought—no matter what, we had to keep this restaurant going." In March 2020, New York announced a full shutdown of indoor dining—only takeout and delivery were allowed. Sophia remembers that moment vividly: the once-bustling restaurant suddenly became eerily quiet, leaving just the two of them. She handled the orders, while Weimin Hong worked alone in the kitchen. Together, they took on every task.

"At first, we thought we could hang on for a month

or two," Sophia says with a laugh, shaking her head. "But we ended up holding on for nearly half a year."

During the hardest times, even their investors urged them to give up. But what they couldn't abandon were the employees waiting at home for work.

"Everyone was stuck at home, unable to find other jobs. If we gave up, what would they do?" Sophia says. "Everyone was waiting for the restaurant to reopen. We had to keep this 'home' open so they'd know they'd have a place to return to."

Thanks to orders piling up through delivery platforms, they miraculously pulled through. When outdoor dining was allowed again, they set up tables outside. Eventually, all their employees returned.

"These kids are amazing," Sophia says, her eyes glistening with tears. "Once, we both caught COVID, and without a second thought, the staff kept the restaurant running. For over a month, they never let the restaurant close."

Beside her, Weimin Hong nods. "Here, there's no difference between the boss and the employees.

We're all family."

It was this spirit of mutual support that helped them get through the darkest times. "What I'm most proud of in my life isn't how successful our restaurant is," Sophia says earnestly. "It's that during the hardest times, we all chose to bear it together—doing this business, you have to understand gratitude. When you help others, others will also help you when you need it."

### Adaptation in Tradition

On the same street in Midtown Manhattan where The Best Sichuan is located, there are four or five other Chinese restaurants within just a few hundred

meters. In such a competitive environment, Sophia and Weimin Hong had to face the same fundamental question that all overseas Chinese restaurateurs eventually encounter: should they stick to traditional flavors, or adapt to market demands?

At first, Sophia insisted on judging dishes by Sichuan standards, but she quickly realized a harsh truth: in Manhattan, out of a hundred people walking down the street, you'd be lucky to find one Sichuan person. "Most customers will just say 'good' or 'bad,' they won't care whether it's authentic or not." This realization came when her younger daughter innocently asked, "Mom, why do you hide peppercorns in the pork ribs?" This question from an "American palate" made Sophia reconsider the restaurant's positioning.

She began working with Weimin Hong to fine-tune the menu, retaining the essence of Sichuan cuisine while carefully considering American dining habits. They placed appetizers like dumplings and spring rolls at the beginning of the menu, followed by the main courses, and dessert at the end. This simple adjustment made the dining experience smoother for local customers.

When it comes to ingredient control, they've always insisted on being hands-on. Every morning, Master Hong heads to the local wholesale market to hand-pick the freshest ingredients—ensuring quality while cutting costs by nearly 10% compared to competitors.

Sophia also continued the traditional Sichuan practice of hand-making pickled vegetables. "Our homemade pickle doesn't have the 'technological' taste of industrial products," she explains. "It has a gentler taste, and the fish soup base is richer and more natural."

This dedication to craftsmanship and quality has earned The Best Sichuan's boiled fish with pickled cabbage a loyal following—and even media coverage from major outlets like NBC.

Sophia and Master Hong are like the classic mala of Sichuan cuisine—numb and spicy, contrasting yet inseparable. From the rebirth of Bashi Chengdu to the pandemic-era breakthrough of The Best Sichuan, the couple has woven a warm, resilient web of relationships through sincerity and care—fueling their growth in a foreign land.

Each night, as the restaurant doors open, the aroma spills out onto the street. In the kitchen, the chili and Sichuan peppercorns sizzle—not with the sharp, overwhelming heat of the past, but with the deeper flavor of wisdom and quiet strength. 🌶️







By Beichen Hu

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site selection, and operations.



## About WEFOOD

Founded in 2020 and headquartered in New York, WEFOOD is a restaurant consulting company specializing in data analytics and customized solutions for food and beverage businesses across North America. Leveraging in-depth market insights and a robust industry network, WEFOOD supports both restaurant brands and supply chain enterprises, and has quickly become the go-to partner for expanding into the North American market.

# Why Do Chinese Restaurants in the U.S. Look So “Strange”?

## *When Chinese Restaurants Don’t Feel “Chinese”*

Chinese restaurants in the U.S. can feel oddly unfamiliar—even bizarre—to many Chinese. Red lanterns, golden dragon carvings, calligraphy mixed with Japanese folding screens and Southeast Asian wooden décor; menus featuring General Tso’s Chicken, Sesame Chicken, Crab Rangoon, and combo platters of fried noodles. These places may not seem “authentic,” but business is booming.

The reason is simple: people love the familiar cultural experience they grew up with, not some lofty idea of authenticity.

## *“Chinese Food”: America’s Constructed Vision of China*

Popular Chinese food in the U.S. isn’t a faithful representation of Chinese culinary culture. Instead, it’s a cultural construct—an image of “China” shaped by American society. As Edward Said noted in *Orientalism*, the West often perceives the East through its own lens, which profoundly influences how Chinese food is presented in the U.S.

To Americans, “Chinese food” evokes kung fu, dragons, lanterns, and exotic mystique. It’s bold in flavor—sweet, oily, and instantly recognizable as “foreign.” This isn’t a

misunderstanding of Chinese culture; it’s a cultural shorthand—a familiar expression of what feels “Chinese” to them.

## *Authenticity Doesn’t Sell—Familiarity and Flavor Do*

The evolution of Chinese food in America is a story of ongoing localization. Early Chinese immigrants brought Cantonese and Sichuan dishes with them, but quickly realized that American palates favored sweet, fried, and tangy flavors. To survive, chefs adapted—eventually creating the now-iconic dishes like General Tso’s Chicken and Sweet and Sour Pork.

Restaurant décor followed a similar logic. Traditional Chinese aesthetics are often subtle and restrained, which to American diners can feel cold or unfamiliar. Instead, it’s the stereotypical symbols reinforced by media—red lanterns, kung fu-style calligraphy, dragon motifs—that signal, unmistakably, “This is a Chinese restaurant.”

## *Chinese-Inspired Design: Inspired by China, Not Exactly Like China*

Today’s trendiest Chinese restaurants in the U.S. often move away from the traditional



The layout of Duck Duck Goat in Chicago taps into Americans’ cultural memory of ‘Chinatown’—their version of a Chinese setting.

Image courtesy of Duck Duck Goat.



red-and-gold aesthetic. Instead, they favor black tones, metal textures, and modern industrial designs with subtle Chinese elements. This aligns with contemporary American preferences for “high-end,” “stylish,” and “sophisticated” spaces, while still offering a fresh yet familiar “Asian vibe.”

Take Chinese Tuxedo in New York City as an example. Located in a historic Chinese opera house in Chinatown, it retains the original high ceilings and exposed brick walls, while incorporating calligraphy art and lantern silhouettes. The result is a space that feels both vintage and modern—not an authentic Chinese restaurant, but a space that feels cultured to American diners.

Duck Duck Goat in Chicago applies the same principle. It features red wallpaper, hanging lanterns, and retro photos that evoke a nostalgic Chinatown feel. Yet the layout,

furniture, and lighting are unmistakably trendy and American. The goal isn’t to recreate China, but to tap into Americans’ cultural memory of “Chinatown”—their version of a Chinese setting.

## *Restaurants Sell More Than Food—They Sell Cultural Experience*

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu once proposed the concept of “cultural capital”—the idea that culture itself can be consumed as a resource. Chinese restaurants often use recognizable symbols not to convey historical accuracy, but to ensure immediate visual recognition—something that can be quickly understood, Instagrammed, and shared.

This is especially true in the age of social media. What diners want is an aesthetic, slightly exotic atmosphere that looks good

in photos. A red lantern is far more “Instagram-worthy” than a dish of traditional braised pork with preserved vegetables.

## *Conclusion*

Chinese restaurants in the U.S. look “strange” not because of cultural misunderstanding or prejudice, but because of market forces and cultural adaptation. People gravitate toward symbols they grew up with, not unfamiliar foreign systems, no matter how “authentic.”

Rather than lamenting the lack of “authenticity,” it’s more helpful to see this as a new cultural form: Chinese cuisine taking root in foreign soil. It’s a product of cultural flow, market logic, and aesthetic evolution—and a version of “China” that has been embraced and loved by local diners. 📸





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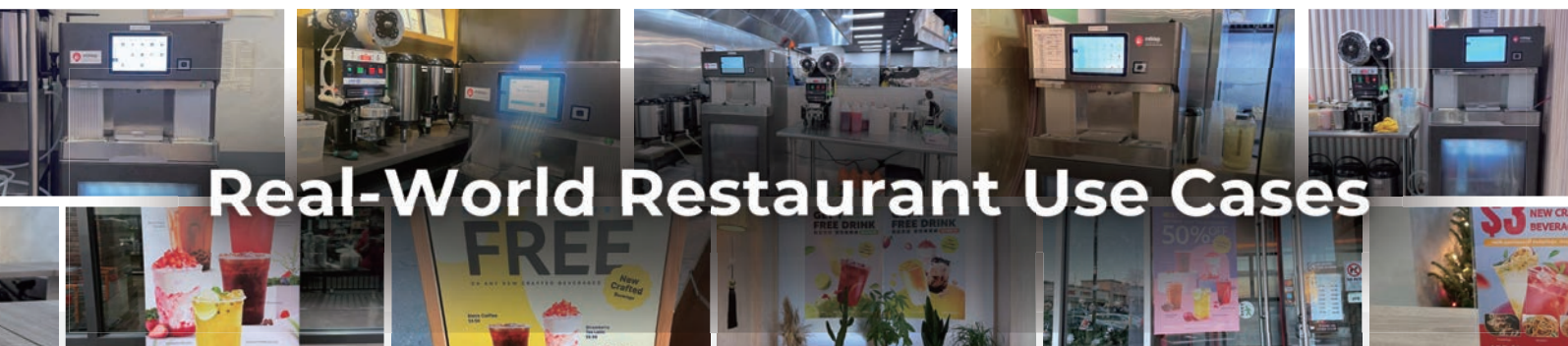


### Marketing Material Support

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## Real-World Restaurant Use Cases



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BY | Xiqiao Yin WEFOOD Consulting Platform Data Specialist

**B**etween flavor, service, and cultural identity, American Chinese cuisine has always occupied a unique and complex space. It is neither “authentic Chinese food” in the traditional sense, nor is it merely the stereotype of takeout boxes and sweet sauce chicken. As a local culinary form constantly reinventing itself through cultural fusion, American Chinese cuisine often reveals its evolution in subtle ways: a change in a dish's name, the tone of a service comment, or a casual complaint about prices.

Over the past decade, the restaurant industry has experienced platform shifts, consumption stratification, and the shock of the pandemic. In the meantime, American Chinese food has also quietly changed. We chose to focus on the most authentic source of documentation—customer reviews. By analyzing thousands of Yelp reviews, we sought to trace how consumer perceptions have evolved: What are people saying? What do they care about? What brings satisfaction—or disappointment?

This study selected ten American Chinese restaurants from different U.S. states, all of which have been in operation for over ten years. We systematically collected and analyzed Yelp reviews from the past decade, applying methods such as keyword frequency, sentiment analysis, and topic modeling to uncover how this “localized Chinese cuisine” has evolved in customers’ minds. From “food” to “fresh,” from “cheap” to “worth it,” the answers may lie in every sentence left behind by diners.

Our findings reveal that while the overall number of reviews has decreased, the content has become more specific and emotionally rich. Customer expression has shifted from whether to leave a review to what they choose to talk about. Since the pandemic, overall satisfaction has significantly increased. Service, experience, and health-related qualities have become core concerns. The language of younger generations, especially Gen Z, has also started appearing more frequently, indicating both increased participation and the normalization of Chinese food in everyday life. Meanwhile, customers in different states show distinct priorities—quality in California, service in New Jersey, and value in Texas.

Overall, the future growth of American Chinese cuisine may not lie in simply opening more locations, but in more precisely responding to the emotional needs,

# Beyond the Stars

## Mapping the Flavors and Feelings of American Chinese Food

expectations, and cultural identities of different customer groups.

To illustrate changes in consumer focus over time, this report divides Yelp reviews into three time periods:

**Pre-Pandemic ("Old Years")** – 2019 and earlier: A stable period before the outbreak.

**Pandemic Period** – 2020 to 2021: Reflecting the immediate impact of the pandemic on dining behavior.

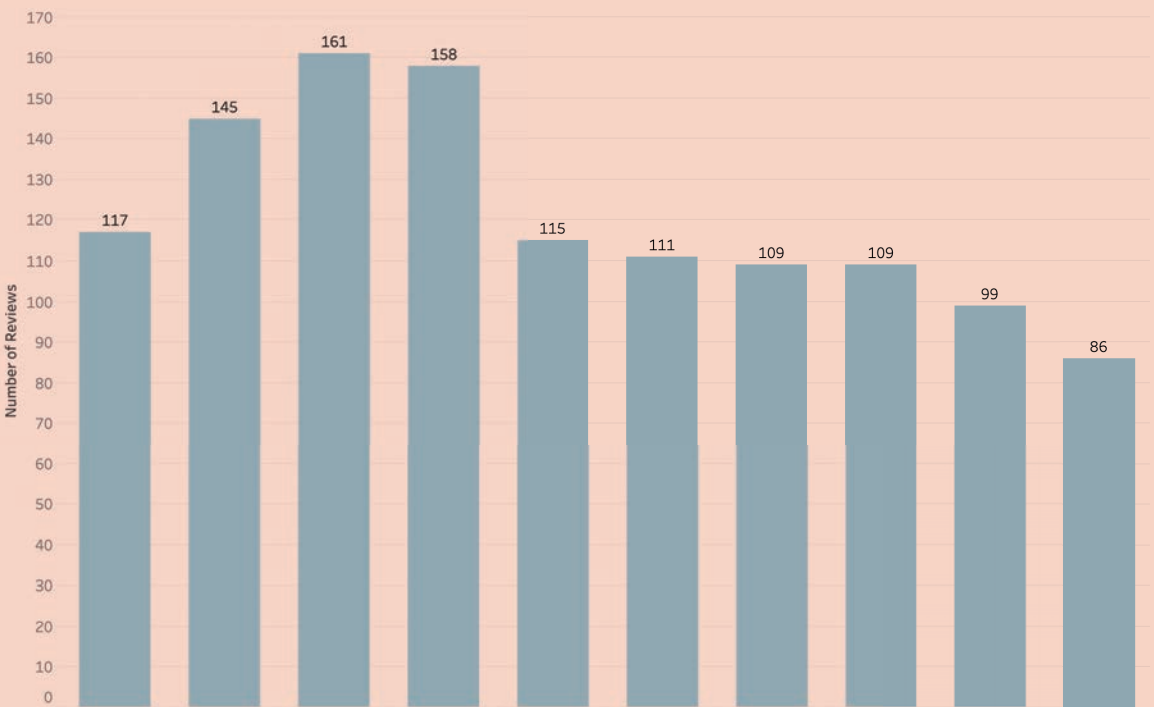
**Post-Pandemic ("New Years")** – 2022 to 2025: Representing the recovery and shift into a new normal.





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# Beyond the Stars: Mapping the Flavors and Feelings of American Chinese Food



Yearly Review Volume Chart

## Fewer Reviews, Higher Satisfaction:

"What is said" becomes more important than "whether it's said"

Let's first look at the annual overview of reviews.

From 2015 to 2019, the total number of reviews for the sampled

restaurants remained relatively stable, ranging from 115 to 161 reviews annually. 2017 saw a small peak (161 reviews), followed by a slight decline. During the pandemic period (2020–2021), review numbers dropped to 111 and 109 respectively, indicating that under stay-at-home orders and reduced in-person dining, customer expression was impacted.

Notably, review numbers did not rebound quickly after the pandemic. Between 2022 and 2024, annual review counts remained low (109, 99, and 86 reviews respectively). However, our further analysis shows that review content density and emotional richness increased over time. Customers increasingly leave detailed, emotionally charged feedback only when they've had a strong experience. This shift—

from 'whether to say something' to 'what and how to say it—lays the groundwork for deeper keyword analysis, topic trends, and sentiment evolution.

We also tracked the annual average star ratings to observe long-term satisfaction trends.

From 2015 to 2019, ratings were relatively low and fluctuated

significantly: 3.52 in 2015, a brief rise to 3.90 in 2016, followed by a steady decline, reaching a low of 3.23 in 2019. This period may reflect sustained operational challenges in standardizing dishes, service, or overall customer experience.

During the pandemic (2020–2021), ratings stabilized and began to rebound: rising to 3.37 in 2020 and 3.61 in 2021. Despite the impact on dine-in experiences,

improvements in delivery efficiency and streamlined operations helped prevent further decline—and even contributed to a mild increase in customer satisfaction.

A more noticeable change occurred after 2022. In the “New Years” period, ratings reached higher levels: 3.85 in 2022 and peaking at 3.92 in 2023—the highest in the past decade. This improvement, despite the lower volume of reviews, suggests that customer satisfaction

is recovering. New-generation Chinese restaurants are increasingly recognized for improvements in food quality, service experience, and digital operations.

Combining this trend with review volume, one notable pattern emerges: although fewer people are leaving reviews, those who do are more positive. The quality of reviews is improving—what and how customers say something is becoming more important than

whether they say anything at all.

## Keyword Evolution:

From Functional Descriptions to Experience-Oriented Language

To better understand changes in customer focus over time, we extracted and analyzed keywords across the three time periods. We



Yearly Average Rating Chart









# Beyond the Stars: Mapping the Flavors and Feelings of American Chinese Food



Radar Chart of Emerging Keywords

### Emotion + Trust Risk Signals: Negative Words With Sharper Impact

New terms like fraud, claimed, and losing also appeared during this period. Though infrequent, these words carry clear emotional weight and vivid imagery, making them more likely to spark community resonance or viral sharing than vague terms like “bad.” They may serve as early indicators of trust-related risks and should be taken seriously by restaurants.

### “Thriving” and “Staples”: Chinese Food Becomes a Daily Staple

Words like thriving and staples signal that American Chinese food is shifting from being seen as “an occasional exotic treat” to “a regular part of daily life.” This change in consumer mindset indicates a growing mainstream status for Chinese cuisine in the U.S.

### Fusion and Menu Diversity: Culinary Boundaries Are Blurring

Some newer keywords like taco (from Mexican cuisine) and others suggest a growing trend of cross-cultural fusion. Menus are becoming more diverse, and the boundary of what counts as “Chinese food” is becoming increasingly flexible.

### What Do Customers Really Care About?

#### An Overview of the Seven Core Themes

To better understand what customers focus on in reviews, we built a core topic dictionary using word frequency analysis. High-frequency keywords were semantically grouped into seven

major categories: taste, service, price, health, portion size, speed, and environment.

Taste includes words like taste, flavor, delicious, spicy, sweet, salty, bland, tasty, savory, flavorful, yummy, etc.

Service includes service, staff, friendly, attentive, waitress, server, rude, waiter, slow, welcoming, greeted, courteous, etc.

Price includes price, expensive, cheap, affordable, cost, value, overpriced, worth, deal, etc.

Health includes fresh, clean, healthy, greasy, oily, light, steamed, vegetables, tofu, salad, vegan, etc.

Portion includes portion, portions, enough, big, small, large, shareable, plenty, sized, etc.

Speed includes fast, quick, prompt, slow, waited, delayed, etc.

Environment includes clean, ambiance, atmosphere, decor, quiet, crowded, seating, comfortable, etc.

We calculated the total appearances of these keywords across each time period to determine the topic heatmap, which serves as a proxy for changes in customer focus.

Taste has consistently been the most frequently mentioned topic in reviews. Although its mention rate dipped sharply during the pandemic (from 834 to 156), it has since rebounded to 195 as dine-in returned and customer engagement recovered. This suggests that diners are once again refocusing on the food itself. Brands can capitalize on this shift by investing in menu

innovations that create memorable flavor profiles.

### Service: A Strong Post-Pandemic Comeback

Mentions of service dropped significantly during the pandemic (from 1127 to 173) but rebounded to 275—marking the strongest recovery among all topics. This reflects renewed customer interest in service quality, human interaction, and emotional connection. We recommend restaurants invest in front-of-house training, warm service, and friendly greetings to enhance the guest experience.

### Price: A Modest Increase in Mentions, with Softened Sentiment

Price-related terms have never been dominant in reviews (257 → 26 → 56), though they saw a modest increase post-pandemic. Sentiment analysis (see below) shows that emotional tone around pricing remained neutral to slightly positive (0.205 → 0.178 → 0.223). While customers do notice price changes, “high prices” are not a primary complaint.

Insight: As long as the pricing structure is clear and the value proposition remains strong, customers tend to accept high prices. Brands can enhance perceived value through set menus, affordable bundles, and transparent pricing—while reinforcing a sense of “worth it” in communications.

### Health: A Growing Focus

Health-related terms have steadily increased post-pandemic (70 →





# Beyond the Stars: Mapping the Flavors and Feelings of American Chinese Food

98), with keywords like fresh, clean, and healthy gaining prominence. This reflects rising concern about fresh ingredients and light preparation methods. Restaurants should highlight health attributes through visual cues—like transparent kitchens or “healthy choice” labels—to improve brand perception.

## Portion Size: Stable, But Slightly Less Buzz

Mentions of portion size remained relatively steady (338 → 70 → 74), suggesting that customers still care about value-for-money and feeling full—but it’s no longer a primary focus. In today’s more health-conscious climate, there’s

less need to overemphasize “large portions”.

## Speed: Gaining Relevance Again

Mentions of food speed hit a low during the pandemic (34), but rebounded to 55 post-pandemic. This suggests that even after getting used to fast delivery, dine-

in guests still value fast service. Restaurants should streamline kitchen workflows to minimize wait times during peak hours.

## Environment: The Most Rapidly Growing "Hidden Value"

Although the environment topic started with low frequency,

it jumped from 25 during the pandemic to 63 post-pandemic—a 152% increase, the highest among all topics. This suggests that customers are placing greater value on cleanliness, comfort, and atmosphere. Restaurants should consider upgrades to lighting, music, and decor to create a space that encourages guests to linger.

## Sentiment Rebound:

### Customers Care About More Than Just Taste

While frequency tells us what people talk about, sentiment analysis reveals how they feel when discussing it. Are they expressing joy or complaints?

For example, when customers mention price, are they saying it’s “overpriced and not worth it,” or “expensive but justified”? We used sentiment analysis tools (TextBlob) to score individual sentences containing keywords from each of the seven core topics:

- **Score>0:** Positive (e.g., “delicious”)
- **Score=0:** Neutral (e.g., “taste”, “spicy”)
- **Score<0:** Negative (e.g., “rude”, “overpriced”)

We then calculated the average sentiment score per topic across the three time periods (pre-pandemic, during pandemic, post-pandemic) to trace the emotional trendlines of customer satisfaction.

### Price: Stable Sentiment

### with a Positive Tilt

The emotional tone around price has gradually warmed—from 0.205 (pre-pandemic), to 0.178 (pandemic), and up to 0.223 (post-pandemic). Customers are increasingly embracing the idea that something can be “worth the price”, rather than simply focusing on cost.

### Service: A Clear Sentiment Boost

From 0.199 (pre-pandemic) to 0.264 (post-pandemic), service saw the biggest sentiment improvement. Words like friendly, attentive, and welcoming contributed to this positivity—suggesting that staff performance is now a key source of praise.

### Health: Pandemic-Era Favorite, Slight Dip Afterward

Health sentiment peaked during the pandemic at 0.232, thanks to words like fresh and clean, but later fell slightly to 0.202. While still important, health is no longer the dominant focus.

### Portion: Steady Improvement in Satisfaction

Sentiment around portion size has gradually improved, rising from 0.175 to 0.213. This suggests that restaurants have better aligned portion offerings with customer expectations.

### Taste: Stable Sentiment as a “Baseline Expectation”

Scores have consistently stayed between 0.18–0.22. Taste remains a foundational topic—it rarely disappoints, but also rarely surprises. It’s the “default lens” through which

Chinese food is evaluated.

### Environment: A Post-Pandemic Hidden Bonus

Sentiment around environment surged during the pandemic (0.298) and slightly dipped to 0.252 post-pandemic—still well above the pre-pandemic score of 0.219. Customers continue to place high value on cleanliness and comfort, especially in the wake of heightened hygiene awareness.

### Speed: The Only Declining Sentiment Post-Pandemic

Speed was the only topic to decline in sentiment—dropping from 0.238 (during pandemic) to 0.180 (post-pandemic). Why? Possibly because fast delivery raised expectations, and some dine-in experiences couldn’t keep up, leading to disappointment.

## Regional Analysis:

### Public Perception of Chinese Cuisine from a Geographical Perspective

#### 1.How popular is American Chinese food across different U.S. states?

Is American Chinese food equally well-received across the United States? Are customer reviews shaped by regional culture, demographics, or dining habits? To answer these questions, we first examine the most straightforward indicator—average Yelp ratings—to understand how satisfaction levels vary across states.

**California (CA)** tops the list with

an average rating of 4.20, indicating strong popularity and recognition of Chinese cuisine in the state. With its large Asian population and long history of Chinese food development, California tends to show higher acceptance of American Chinese cuisine, and consumers are more likely to leave positive reviews after a satisfying experience.

**Florida (FL), New York (NY),** and **Texas (TX)** sit around the mid-range with average ratings of 3.3, suggesting relatively neutral customer sentiments. In these areas, the performance of Chinese cuisine may rely more heavily on individual restaurants’ food quality and service. While regional brand loyalty may not be particularly strong, these markets still maintain a stable customer base.

**New Jersey (NJ)** has a slightly lower average rating of 2.90, but this should not be quickly interpreted as broad customer dissatisfaction. In fact, further analysis reveals that NJ reviewers frequently mention “service”, suggesting they might be more detail-oriented and expressive about their dining experiences.

#### 2.How do customer attitudes vary by region?

Sentiment analysis reveals “who’s more satisfied.” Star ratings alone often fail to capture the emotional tone of reviews. To better understand how consumers in different states feel about American Chinese food, we conducted Sentiment Polarity Analysis using TextBlob, assigning each Yelp review a sentiment score ranging from –1 to +1:

Keyword Table by Topic

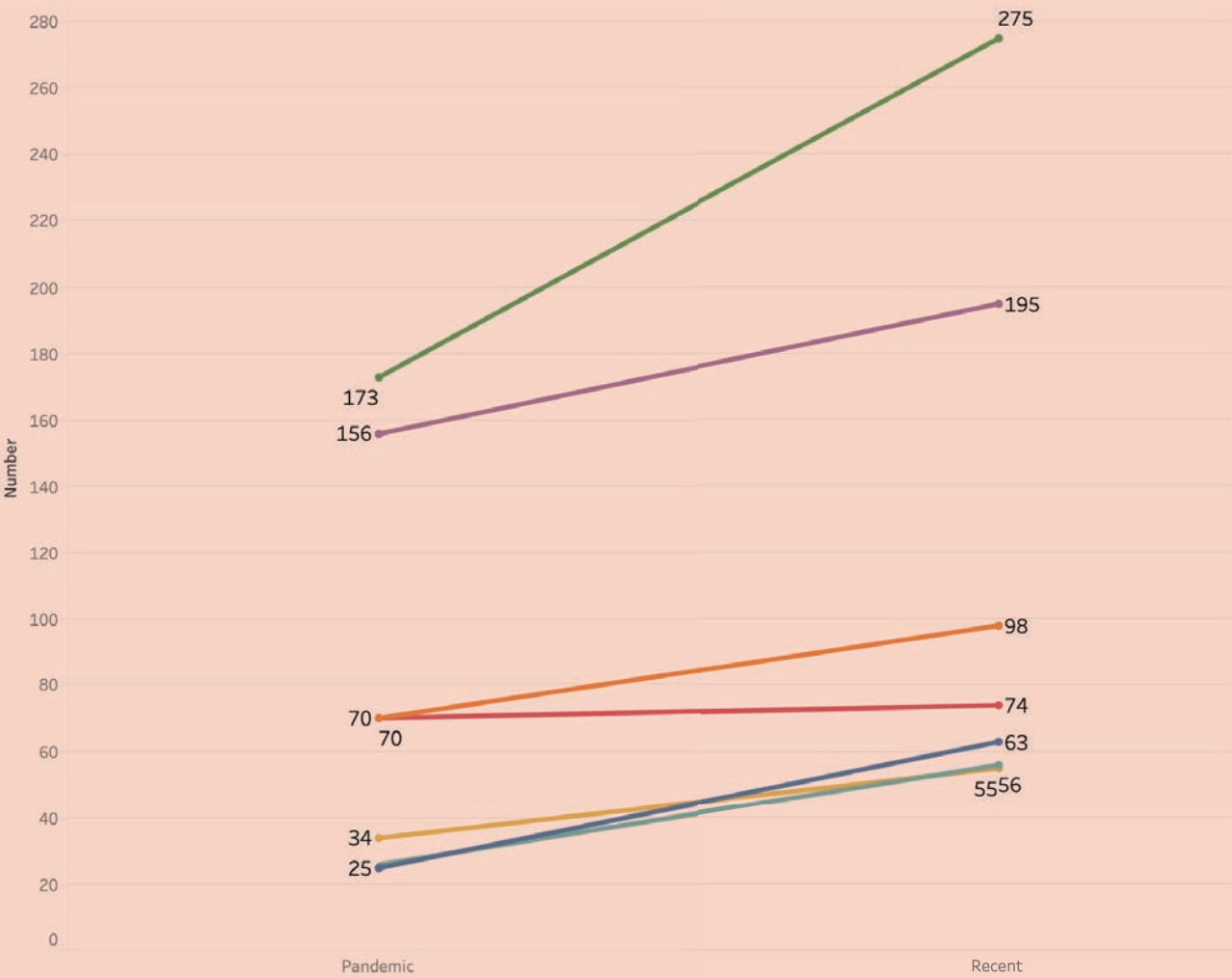
Main Topics	Keywords
Taste	"taste", "flavor", "delicious", "spicy", "sweet", "salty", "bland", "tasty", "savory", "flavorful", "yummy"
Service	"service", "staff", "friendly", "attentive", "waitress", "server", "rude", "waiter", "slow", "welcoming", "greeted", "courteous"
Price	"price", "expensive", "cheap", "affordable", "cost", "value", "overpriced", "worth", "deal"
Health	"fresh", "clean", "healthy", "greasy", "oily", "light", "steamed", "vegetables", "tofu", "salad", "vegan"
Portion Size	"portion", "portions", "enough", "big", "small", "large", "shareable", "plenty", "sized"
Service Speed	"fast", "quick", "prompt", "slow", "waited", "delayed"
Environment	"clean", "ambiance", "atmosphere", "decor", "quiet", "crowded", "seating", "comfortable"



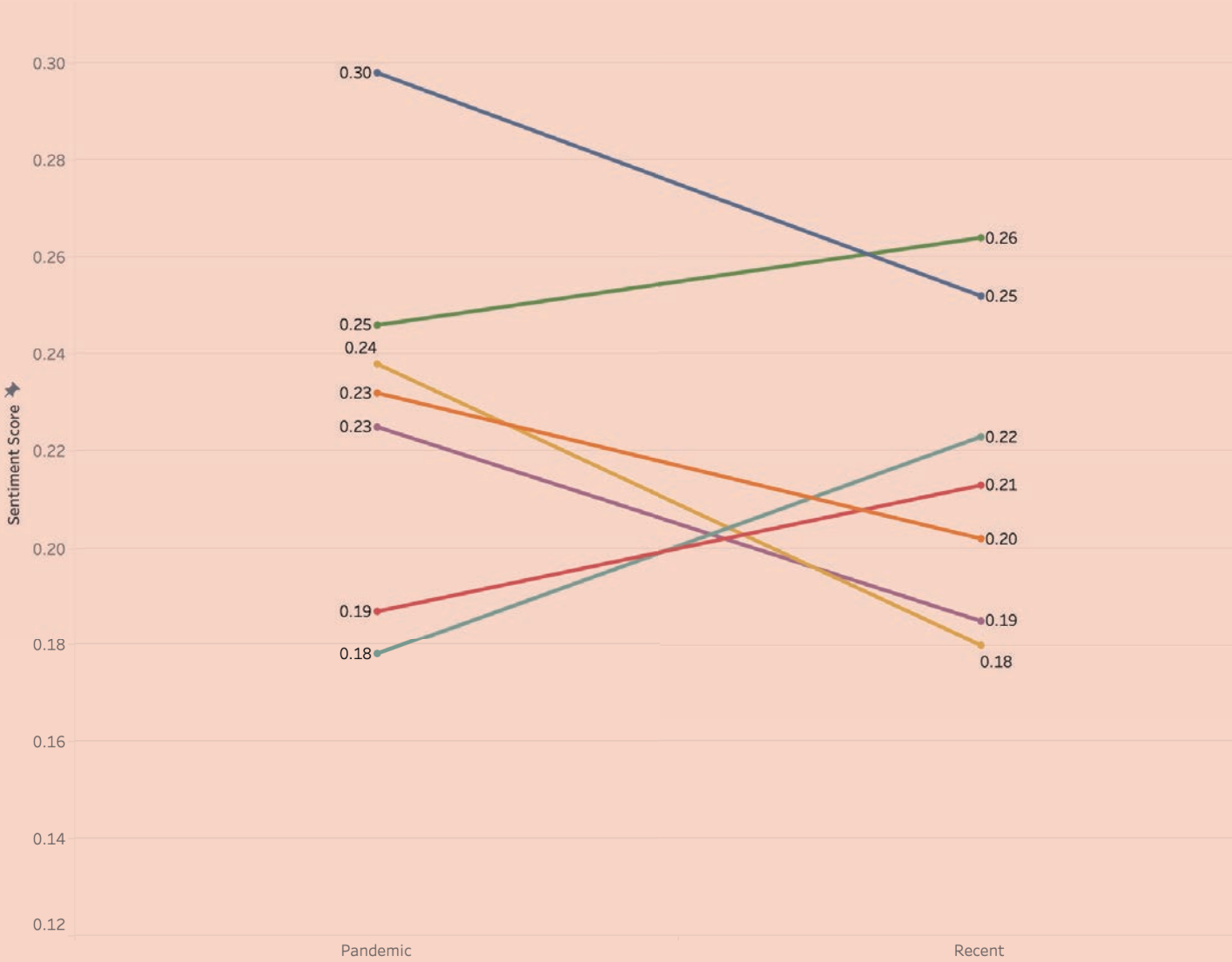


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# Beyond the Stars: Mapping the Flavors and Feelings of American Chinese Food



Line Chart of Topic Frequency Across Time Periods

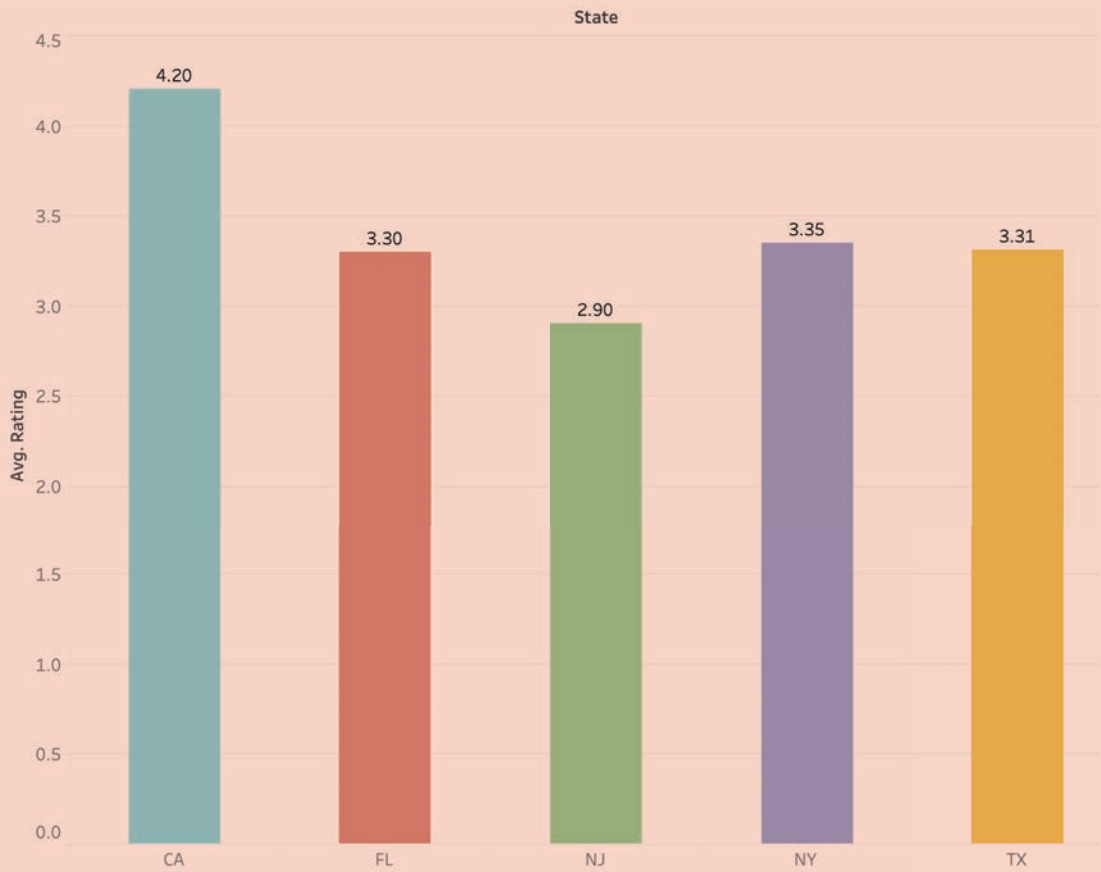


Line Chart of Sentiment Scores by Topic

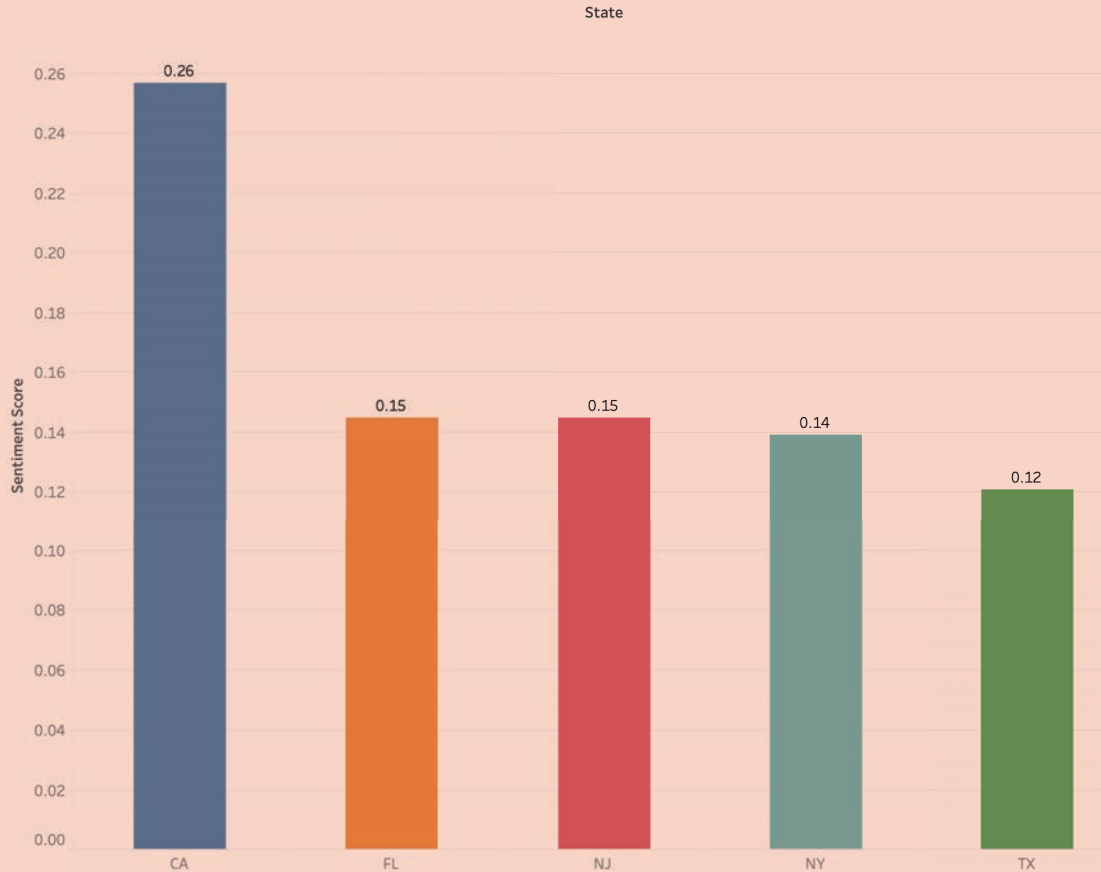




# Beyond the Stars: Mapping the Flavors and Feelings of American Chinese Food



Average Yelp Ratings by State



Sentiment Scores by State

- Close to +1 indicates positive sentiment
- Close to 0 indicates neutral sentiment
- Close to -1 indicates negative sentiment

*California (CA)* again leads with the highest average sentiment

score of 0.257, showing that most reviews carry a positive tone. Combined with the earlier rating data, this suggests that consumers in CA are not only more generous with their ratings but also more emotionally favorable toward Chinese cuisine.

*Florida (FL), Texas (TX), New York (NY), and New Jersey (NJ)*

all fall within a sentiment range of 0.12–0.15, indicating a moderately positive tone. Notably, NY and NJ share an identical sentiment score of 0.145, which means that despite NJ’s lower average rating, customer sentiment remains relatively friendly.

*Texas (TX)* scores slightly lower at 0.121, but still well above

the negative range, indicating a manageable public perception.

### 3.Regional Differences in Review Focus: Flavor or Service?

While sentiment helps us understand overall satisfaction, the next question is: What do people

in different regions actually care about? Are they more concerned with taste, or do they place more emphasis on service, ambiance, or portion sizes? To answer this, we conducted a structured topic analysis of Yelp reviews, categorizing mentions into seven key themes: flavor, service, price, healthiness, portion size, speed, and environment.

We then calculated the frequency of keywords for each topic and normalized them by total review count to create a review focus profile for each state. The results show significant regional differences in review focus:

• *California (CA): Emphasis on food quality*  
The state ranked among the top

in all three dimensions—taste, health, and service—with taste-related keywords accounting for as much as 53.2%, indicating that customers place strong emphasis on food quality and flavor. Health-related terms made up 29.9%, reflecting high expectations around ingredient quality among local consumers.

• *New Jersey (NJ): Service-oriented, experience-focused*  
NJ reviewers mention service keywords in 66.9% of reviews—much higher than any other state. This highlights a strong emphasis on the human interaction and the hospitality aspect of dining. It may also explain why NJ’s emotional tone remains positive despite lower overall ratings.





# Beyond the Stars: Mapping the Flavors and Feelings of American Chinese Food

• *New York (NY): Balanced and rational*

NY reviews show mid-to-high attention across flavor (43.2%), service (40.8%), and healthiness (26.8%). Rather than fixating on a single aspect, New Yorkers appear to evaluate food more holistically. This balanced review pattern suggests a discerning consumer base that values quality experiences but doesn't give high scores lightly.

• *Texas (TX): Value-focused on price and portion size*

TX reviews show significantly higher mentions of price (37.1%) and portion size (30.3%), highlighting a preference for value-for-money and hearty portions as key factors for customer satisfaction.

• *Florida (FL): Short and flavor-focused*

FL reviewers heavily emphasize flavor (42.3%), while mentions of other topics are minimal. Notably, environment is only mentioned in 4.8% of reviews. Floridians tend to write brief, straightforward, taste-driven reviews.

## Conclusion


By shifting our lens from menus to customer feedback, from star ratings to sentiment, and from word counts to topic structures, the story of American Chinese food over the past decade comes alive—not as a broad narrative, but as a rich micro-landscape shaped by authentic voices, subtle emotions, and everyday experiences.

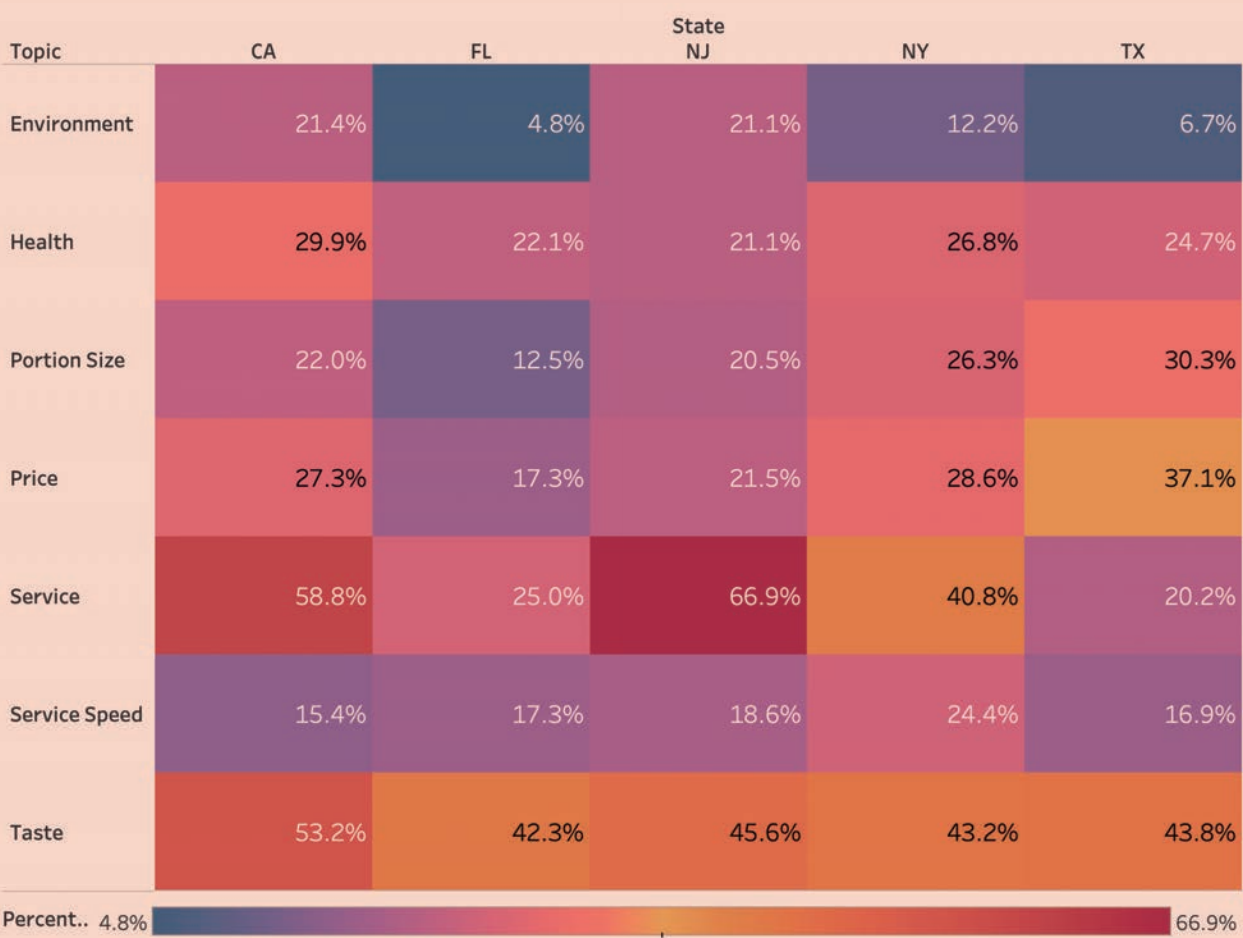
Here's what stands out: Service is once again taking center stage in customer expectations. Post-pandemic, health-consciousness has become the new norm. Price sensitivity still exists, but it no longer carries the same weight. Younger diners are showing their love with words like “bussin,” while older patrons continue to ask the classic question—“Is it worth it?”

Different states care about different things. Different types of restaurants attract different reviewing styles. Yet whether it's a chain or a mom-and-pop shop, in California or Texas, dine-in or delivery—these reviews quietly map the evolution of

American Chinese cuisine.

Perhaps the next growth phase of American Chinese food won't come from “opening more stores,” but from better understanding who's eating, who's talking, and what they're hoping for.

Data isn't cold. It simply translates what customers have already been saying. And we hope to keep amplifying those voices—for everyone striving forward in this industry. 

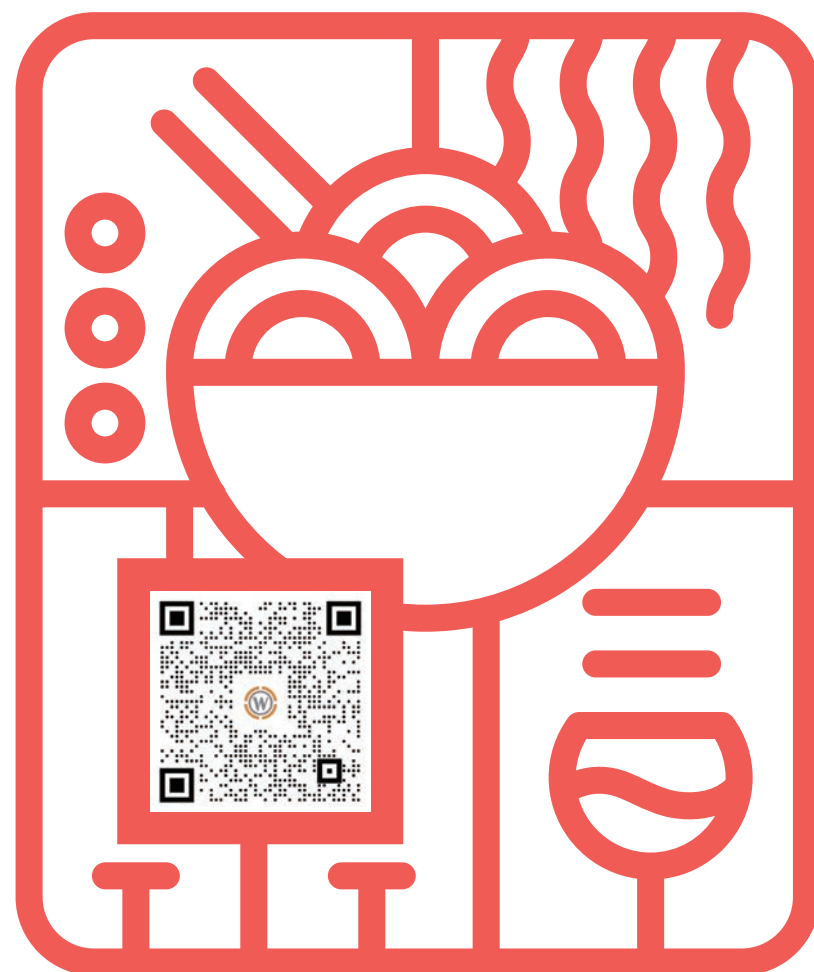


Topic Proportions by State



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## ABOUT US

"The Restaurateur", a magazine under Littlelaba Media LLC, was launched in January 2022 and has the largest circulation in the United States for offline dining media.

The magazine covers more than 100,000 Chinese restaurants and millions of Chinese dining practitioners across the United States.

Every Chinese restaurant has a copy of "The Restaurateur", and it has become an advantageous platform for the promotion of both upstream and downstream enterprises within the American Chinese dining industry.

Littlelaba Media LLC was founded in December of 2021 and is committed to serving global Chinese restaurateurs, spreading Chinese food culture to the world and helping Chinese catering break through cultural boundaries, be inclusive, expand their horizons, and present all the wonderful things they have to offer to the world.

Currently, Littlelaba Media LLC has developed into a multi-media company offering print, digital and social media. In the future, Littlelaba Media is aiming to build a communication platform for the Chinese dining industry in order to exchange knowledge, share experiences and grow and develop together.



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