

MADAME WOK'S CHINESE RESTAURANT

A TV Musical in 12 Songs

Book by David S. Harris

"Two women. One restaurant. Thirty years of love served one dish at a time."

CHARACTERS

MADAME WOK

Owner and chef. Chinese immigrant. Has run this restaurant for thirty years. Warm, wise, unstoppable. Her wok is her instrument. Her kitchen is her stage.

JENNI LI

The waitress. Second generation Chinese American. Mid twenties. Born in America, raised in this restaurant. Caught between two worlds. Her relationship with Madame Wok is the emotional heart of the show.

SONGS

1. Egg Roll (Roll with Delight)
2. Fried Rice (Fried Rice Melodies)
3. Fortune Cookie

4. Dim Sum
5. Chinese Buffet
6. Spicy or No Spicy
7. Wonton Soup
8. Jenni Li — The Waitress
9. Madame Wok — The Chef
10. The Story of General Tso's Chicken
11. Duck Sauce Please
12. Thank You Come Again

SCENE 1 — EGG ROLL

Morning. Madame Wok is in the kitchen wrapping egg rolls. Jenni Li sets the tables.

JENNI LI

Madame Wok — why do they call it an egg roll if there is no egg in it?

MADAME WOK

Nobody knows for certain. Some say the wrapper once contained egg. Some say the Chinese word for egg sounded like the word for spring. Some say a chef in New York in 1917 wrapped meat and vegetables inside a fried egg and called it dan gun — egg roll.

JENNI LI

So it might be a New York invention?

MADAME WOK

Most likely invented here in America in the 1930s. Henry Low at Port Arthur restaurant in New York. Or Lung Fong at his restaurant. Both claimed credit. Nobody can prove it.

JENNI LI

So it is not really Chinese?

MADAME WOK

It grew from Chinese tradition. The spring roll is ancient — Tang Dynasty. Thin rice wrapper. Steamed or lightly fried. Vegetables. Delicate. The egg roll is its American cousin. Thick wheat wrapper. Deep fried. Cabbage and pork. Bigger. Crunchier. More everything — just like America.

JENNI LI

And in Latin America they call it loompia.

MADAME WOK

Chinese immigrants went everywhere. Philippines. Indonesia. Netherlands. Latin America. They brought the same idea and each place made it their own. Loompia. Lumpia. Cha gio in Vietnam. The egg roll traveled the whole world and became something different everywhere it landed.

JENNI LI

Just like us.

MADAME WOK

(smiles) Just like us.

Song 1 — EGG ROLL — Roll with Delight — Madame Wok

SCENE 2 — FRIED RICE

Madame Wok is behind the wok. Jenni Li watches.

JENNI LI

Why do you always use leftover rice?

MADAME WOK

Fresh rice is too wet. It sticks. Clumps. Day old rice fries properly. Stays separate. This is how it has always been done.

JENNI LI

Since when?

MADAME WOK

Sui Dynasty. Almost 1400 years ago. A peasant family in southern China. End of a long day in the fields. Leftover rice. A few vegetable scraps. Some soy sauce. Lard. Garlic. Everything into the wok. Ten minutes later — dinner.

JENNI LI

So fried rice was invented by accident?

MADAME WOK

The best dishes always are. Necessity is the mother of invention. The peasant could not waste food. So she created something extraordinary from almost nothing.

JENNI LI

And now the whole world eats it.

MADAME WOK

Thailand has khao phat. Indonesia has nasi goreng. Japan has chahan. The Philippines has sinangag. Ecuador has chaulafan. Peru has arroz chaufa. Every culture took the same simple idea and made it their own.

JENNI LI

Just like the egg roll.

MADAME WOK

(laughs) Everything travels. Everything changes. Everything stays the same.

Song 2 — FRIED RICE — Fried Rice Melodies — Duet

SCENE 3 — FORTUNE COOKIE

End of dinner service. Jenni Li brings fortune cookies to the last table. She pauses and looks at one.

JENNI LI

Madame Wok — did fortune cookies come from China?

MADAME WOK

No. They did not.

JENNI LI

Then where?

MADAME WOK

Japan. A cookie called tsujiura senbei. Made near Kyoto since the 1870s. Darker. Larger. Sesame and miso. A fortune tucked into the fold.

JENNI LI

So how did they end up in Chinese restaurants?

MADAME WOK

Japanese immigrants brought them to California. Makoto Hagiwara served them at the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park in the early 1900s. Then World War II happened. Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps. Their businesses closed. Chinese entrepreneurs took over production. And the fortune cookie became Chinese.

JENNI LI

That is a sad story.

MADAME WOK

It is an American story. In 1983 a San Francisco judge officially ruled the fortune cookie originated with Hagiwara. Los Angeles immediately condemned the decision. Even the court ruling is disputed.

JENNI LI

Nobody agrees on anything.

MADAME WOK

Three billion fortune cookies made every year. Served in Chinese restaurants from Australia to Brazil to Canada. Virtually unknown in China itself. Wonton Food in Brooklyn makes four million every single day.

JENNI LI

(opens one) Mine says — a new adventure awaits you.

MADAME WOK

(smiles) Maybe it is right.

Song 3 — FORTUNE COOKIE — Madame Wok

SCENE 4 — DIM SUM

Sunday morning. The restaurant is full. Jenni Li wheels a cart through the tables. Steam rising from bamboo baskets.

CUSTOMER

What is dim sum exactly?

JENNI LI

Touch the heart. That is what it means in Cantonese.

MADAME WOK

(calling from kitchen) Tell them the real story Jenni!!

JENNI LI

(smiles) Over a thousand years ago travelers on the Silk Road needed places to rest. Teahouses opened along the routes through southern China. Tea was served. Then someone discovered tea aids digestion. So small snacks were added. Bite sized. Just enough to touch the heart not fill the stomach.

CUSTOMER

Just snacks?

JENNI LI

At first. But during the Ming and Qing dynasties Cantonese chefs refined everything. Har gow. Siu mai. Char siu bao. Cheung fun. An art form. By the 19th century Chinese immigrants brought it everywhere. San Francisco. New York. Sydney. London.

CUSTOMER

And the tea tapping?

JENNI LI

A Qing Dynasty emperor was traveling in disguise. His companions could not bow without revealing his identity. So they tapped two fingers on the table to show gratitude instead. The gesture stuck.

JENNI LI

(sets down a steaming basket) Har gow. Fresh shrimp. Still hot.

SCENE 5 — CHINESE BUFFET

Sunday lunch rush. The buffet line is full. Jenni Li refills trays. Madame Wok watches from the kitchen doorway.

JENNI LI

Madame Wok why don't we do a buffet?

MADAME WOK

We cook to order. Every dish fresh. A buffet sits under heat lamps. Food gets tired.

JENNI LI

But people love buffets.

MADAME WOK

They did. The 1990s were the golden age. Fujianese immigrants figured out the business model — lower labor costs, less English required, all you can eat for fifteen dollars. Brilliant really.

JENNI LI

Where did the idea come from?

MADAME WOK

A man named Peter Chang. Los Angeles. 1949. Chang's Restaurant on Sunset Strip. Former bank president. Fled China when the Communists came. Lost everything. Started over with a restaurant and a chef named Ah Woo. Advertised over twenty delicious selections. First Chinese buffet in America.

JENNI LI

From banker to buffet owner.

MADAME WOK

The immigrant story. You arrive with everything. You lose everything. You rebuild with whatever skill you have. Peter Chang had a chef. We have a wok.

JENNI LI

Are buffets dying?

MADAME WOK

Many closed during the pandemic. The ones that survived are struggling. People want fresher. Healthier. Made to order.

JENNI LI

So we were right not to do one.

MADAME WOK

(smiles) We were always right.

Song 5 — CHINESE BUFFET — Madame Wok

SCENE 6 — SPICY OR NO SPICY

A new customer sits down. Jenni Li approaches with a menu.

JENNI LI

Spicy or no spicy?

CUSTOMER

What?

JENNI LI

Some dishes come spicy. Some mild. Your preference?

CUSTOMER

I thought all Chinese food was spicy.

JENNI LI

Common misconception. Most Chinese food is not spicy at all. Cantonese cuisine — which is what most American Chinese restaurants serve — emphasizes fresh ingredients, delicate flavors, subtle seasoning. Peking Duck. Dim sum. Shanghai red braised pork. None of it is hot.

CUSTOMER

Then where does the spice come from?

JENNI LI

Sichuan and Hunan provinces. But even there spice arrived late. Chili peppers came from the Americas via Portuguese traders in the late 1500s. Before that Chinese cooks used Sichuan peppercorn — which creates a numbing sensation unlike anything else — plus ginger, garlic and mustard for heat.

CUSTOMER

So spicy or no spicy is a recent question?

JENNI LI

Relatively. A courtesy question for diverse palates. The real question is always — what flavor are you looking for? Aromatic. Savory. Sweet. Sour. Tender. Fresh.

CUSTOMER

What do you recommend?

JENNI LI

(smiles) Whatever Madame Wok is making today.

Song 6 — SPICY OR NO SPICY — Jenni Li

SCENE 7 — WONTON SOUP

A cold rainy evening. A regular customer comes in looking tired. Jenni Li seats him.

REGULAR

Just soup tonight Jenni. Long day.

JENNI LI

Madame Wok's wonton soup. Coming right now.

JENNI LI

(goes to kitchen) Mr. Chen looks tired.

MADAME WOK

He always comes when he is tired. Soup is medicine.

JENNI LI

Where does wonton soup come from?

MADAME WOK

The name comes from Cantonese. Wonton means swallowing clouds. Look at them floating in the broth. You see it?

JENNI LI

They do look like clouds.

MADAME WOK

In Sichuan they call them chao shou. Crossed hands. Because of how you fold the wrapper — two corners brought together. In the north they call them hundun. Chaos. From a Daoist legend — the clear broth represents the universe before creation. The dumpling is the first thing that emerged from chaos.

JENNI LI

So wonton soup is a creation story.

MADAME WOK

Every good soup is a creation story. My grandmother's recipe goes back four generations. Pork and shrimp. Ginger and shallots. The broth simmered for six hours. Nothing instant. Nothing from a packet.

JENNI LI

And the medicinal ingredients?

MADAME WOK

An old tradition. When someone could not take their medicine — too bitter, too strong — a physician would hide the herbs inside a wonton. The patient ate the soup and felt better without knowing why.

JENNI LI

You never put medicine in yours.

MADAME WOK

(smiles) I put love in mine. Same effect.

MADAME WOK

(hands Jenni Li the bowl) Tell Mr. Chen tomorrow will be better.

Song 7 — WONTON SOUP — Madame Wok

SCENE 8 — JENNI LI — THE WAITRESS

After the lunch rush. Jenni Li is wiping tables. Madame Wok sits with tea.

MADAME WOK

You know why there are so many Chinese restaurants in America?

JENNI LI

Because Chinese people like to cook?

MADAME WOK

Because of a law. The Chinese Exclusion Act. 1882. The United States barred Chinese laborers from entering. Miners. Railroad workers. Cooks. All banned.

JENNI LI

But restaurants kept opening.

MADAME WOK

Because of a loophole. Merchants could still enter. A restaurant owner was a merchant. So Chinese immigrants pooled their money. One person became the owner on paper. Brought his family over. Then rotated to the next person. The next year a different owner. The next year another. Always legal. Always moving.

JENNI LI

They built the whole industry around a loophole.

MADAME WOK

Between 1910 and 1920 Chinese restaurants in New York City nearly quadrupled. Then doubled again the next decade. By 1930 restaurants had replaced laundries as the largest employer of Chinese workers in America. All because of a racist law that tried to keep them out.

JENNI LI

My grandfather did exactly that.

MADAME WOK

Most of our grandfathers did. They worked for wages one third below the national average. Sent money home to families in China. Wrote letters across the Pacific explaining why they had no free time and earned too little.

JENNI LI

And built this.

MADAME WOK

41,000 Chinese restaurants in America today. Three times the number of McDonald's. Every one of them built on that same foundation — family, sacrifice and a loophole in a law designed to exclude us.

JENNI LI

That is not just a restaurant story.

MADAME WOK

No. It is an American story.

Song 8 — JENNI LI — THE WAITRESS — Jenni Li

SCENE 9 — MADAME WOK — THE CHEF

Early morning. Before the restaurant opens. Madame Wok alone in the kitchen. Just her and the wok.

JENNI LI

(arriving) You are here before sunrise again.

MADAME WOK

I am always here before sunrise.

JENNI LI

Did you ever want to do something else?

MADAME WOK

(pause) When I was young I wanted to be a teacher. But my family had this restaurant. And I had these hands. And the hands knew what to do before I did.

JENNI LI

Do you regret it?

MADAME WOK

I have fed thousands of people. I have watched children grow up and bring their own children. I have cooked through grief and celebration and ordinary Tuesday nights when nothing special happened at all. The ordinary Tuesday nights are the ones I remember most.

JENNI LI

Why?

MADAME WOK

Because someone was hungry and I fed them. That is the whole job. Simple as that.

Song 9 — MADAME WOK — THE CHEF — Madame Wok

SCENE 10 — THE STORY OF GENERAL TSO'S CHICKEN

A customer points at the menu. Madame Wok comes out of the kitchen — something she almost never does.

CUSTOMER

What is General Tso's Chicken?

JENNI LI

Our most popular dish. Sweet. Crispy. Slightly spicy.

CUSTOMER

Is it from China?

JENNI LI

No. Taiwan. Then New York.

MADAME WOK

(sits down across from the customer) Let me tell this one.

MADAME WOK

1949. The Chinese Civil War ends. The Nationalists lose to the Communists. They flee to Taiwan. Among them — a young chef from Hunan named Peng Chang-kuei. Apprenticed at fourteen. Cooked for government banquets. Now starting over with nothing.

CUSTOMER

And he invented the dish?

MADAME WOK

In the 1950s. A Hunanese dish. Heavy. Sour. Hot. Salty. Named after General Zuo Zongtang — a real nineteenth century military hero from Hunan. A great man. Who never ate this dish and never heard of it.

CUSTOMER

So the name is just — borrowed?

MADAME WOK

In 1973 Peng opened a restaurant on 44th Street in New York. Henry Kissinger became a regular customer. Kissinger brought Hunanese food to public attention. But American customers wanted something different. Sweeter. Crispier. So Peng adapted the recipe. Added sugar. The dish transformed.

JENNI LI

And now it is everywhere.

MADAME WOK

The most ordered dish in Chinese restaurants across America. A documentary was made about it — The Search for General Tso. The real Hunanese people? Most have never heard of it. Too sweet they say.

CUSTOMER

So it is not really Chinese.

MADAME WOK

It is the story of Chinese people in America. A chef who lost everything in a civil war. Rebuilt his life in a foreign country. Adapted his cooking to survive. Created something new that the whole world claimed as authentic. That is not just a recipe. That is the immigrant story.

Song 10 — THE STORY OF GENERAL TSO'S CHICKEN — Madame Wok

SCENE 11 — DUCK SAUCE PLEASE

A takeout customer at the counter.

CUSTOMER

Can I get extra duck sauce?

JENNI LI

(counting packets carefully) How many egg rolls did you order?

CUSTOMER

Two.

JENNI LI

(hands over two packets) Two packets.

CUSTOMER

Can I get more?

JENNI LI

(pause) How well do I know you?

CUSTOMER

I come here every week.

JENNI LI

(adds one more) Loyal customer discount.

MADAME WOK

(calling from kitchen) Tell them what duck sauce actually is Jenni!!

JENNI LI

It has almost nothing to do with duck. The name most likely originated in Boston's Chinatown around 1927. First newspaper reference — Boston Herald. January 15th. A dinner on Hudson Street. Duck sauce mentioned alongside soy sauce and mustard. Nobody explained what it was. Everyone apparently already knew.

CUSTOMER

So it started in Boston?

JENNI LI

Probably. Spread to Rhode Island seven years later. New York eleven years after that. A company called Kari-Out started making the little orange packets in 1972. Now they are everywhere.

CUSTOMER

What is actually in it?

JENNI LI

Water. Sugar. Cornstarch. Apricot. Artificial coloring. Yellow Dye Number Six.

CUSTOMER

That does not sound very Chinese.

JENNI LI

It is not really. The original was probably plum sauce — a traditional Cantonese condiment served with roast duck. Americans preferred it sweeter and thicker. Classic Chinese American adaptation.

CUSTOMER

Does it actually go with duck?

JENNI LI

One factory executive estimated that less than five percent of all duck sauce ever touches a duck.

MADAME WOK

(calling out) And apparently plain noodles if you work at the factory!!

Song 11 — DUCK SAUCE PLEASE — Jenni Li

SCENE 12 — THANK YOU COME AGAIN

Late evening. The last table is finishing dessert. Fortune cookies on the table. The restaurant is quiet. Jenni Li clears the other tables. Madame Wok stands in the kitchen doorway watching.

MADAME WOK

(quietly) Same family. Every Friday for twelve years.

JENNI LI

The Garcias?

MADAME WOK

Their oldest daughter was two years old when they first came in. Now she is in high school.

FATHER

(standing to leave) Same time next week Madame Wok.

MADAME WOK

We will be here.

JENNI LI

(after they leave) Do you ever get tired of saying it?

MADAME WOK

Saying what?

JENNI LI

Thank you come again.

MADAME WOK

(pause) I have said it ten thousand times. To ten thousand people. Some came back. Some never did. Some I never saw again after one visit and I still wonder about them.

JENNI LI

It is just a phrase.

MADAME WOK

No. It is a wish. Come back. This table will be here. This food will be here. We will be here. Thirty years and we are still here.

MADAME WOK

Your grandmother said it. My grandmother said it. Every Chinese restaurant that ever opened in this country — they all said it. The ones that survived and the ones that closed. Every single one.

JENNI LI

Thank you come again.

MADAME WOK

(smiles) Thank you come again.

MADAME WOK

(opens the door, cool night air) Lock up when you leave.

JENNI LI

(alone in the empty restaurant, picks up the last fortune cookie, cracks it open, reads the slip of paper, smiles)

Song 12 — THANK YOU COME AGAIN — Madame Wok and Jenni Li

MADAME WOK'S CHINESE RESTAURANT

"Two women. One restaurant. Thirty years of love served one dish at a time."

Written by David S. Harris
A Digital World TV Productions Original Musical