

The Evolution of Asian Fusion



FROM THE FAR EAST TO A RESTAURANT NEAR YOU

The concept of blending multiple culinary traditions is nothing new. However, up until late in the last century, it wasn't a choice; it was a natural occurrence when groups of people migrated into new lands, or conquered others. Today, Asian fusion is a gastronomic reflection of 21st-century America where diverse traditions find common ground.

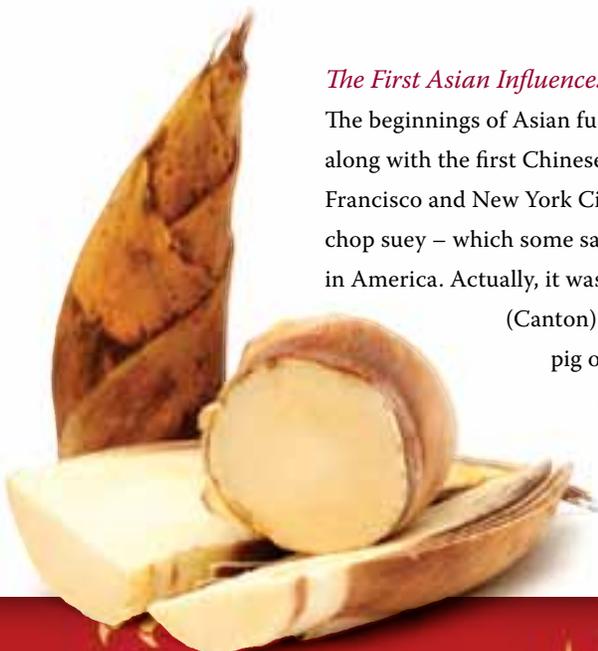
Fusion Within Asian Cuisine

Even within Asian cuisine there are examples of fusion, such as Thailand's massaman curry. The word massaman means "of Muslim origin," and in the 18th century, Indian Muslims brought their spices with them; so the curry featured their cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom alongside Thai standards like lemongrass, chili, and tamarind.



The First Asian Influences in America

The beginnings of Asian fusion cuisine in America arrived along with the first Chinese immigrants who settled in San Francisco and New York City. There are many myths surrounding chop suey – which some say is the first Asian fusion dish created in America. Actually, it was a dish native to the Guangdong province (Canton) of China. It originally featured chicken and pig offal, bean sprouts, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and plenty of spices. However, chop suey was the first authentic Chinese dish to be Americanized.





The Roaring Twenties: The Mystery of the Orient

In the 1920s, Americans were obsessed with the “mystery” of the Far East. That fascination is evident in architecture, fashion, perfumery, and literature from that time period. Chinese immigrants responded with “chop suey parlors” that served dishes (none of which were authentic) that catered to the American palate. These included meat fried in thick batters and sweet and sour dishes with pineapple chunks and maraschino cherries.

The Mid-Century Modern Cuisine of Choice

In the 1950s, Americanized Asian food became very trendy because of a restaurant chain called Trader Vic’s Polynesian-American Restaurant. Far from authentic, the menu offered a flaming appetizer platter called “pu pu” along with completely inauthentic beef with lobster sauce. At the same time, Chinese restaurants began popping up in suburbia – and the expression “going for Chinese” was born.



Chinois – The First Actual Fusion Concept

Up until the 1980s, most examples of Asian cuisine in the U.S. showed a lack of respect for authentic Asian ingredients and flavors. Wolfgang Puck’s Chinois on Main, opened in 1983, was the first restaurant to integrate American and Asian cuisine by holding both in high regard. Still thriving today, Chinois continues to inspire current restaurateurs looking to integrate Asian fusion into their menus.

