

A Tribute to the Pekin Cafe

PastMatters
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The elaborate oriental facade of 2877 University Avenue has been a North Park constant since the 1930s. The bright neon sign announcing "Pekin Cafe CHOP SUEY" seemed to smile as you walked through the double wooden doors. But those doors are closed for now.

A sign posted on the window announces to all "loyal and amazing customers" that the difficult decision to retire the restaurant as of March 2019 was made "with a full and heavy heart," but staff "are ready for the next chapter of retirement and new endeavors." A thank you sign on the door notes, "It has been an absolute pleasure knowing you all and serving you through the generations...Thank you for welcoming us into your lives and making us a part of your tradition."

The uniquely styled restaurant building sits between the stately white brick Granada Building and the elegant terra cotta Spanish Renaissance North Park Theatre — more recently Observatory North Park — on the south side of University Avenue east of Granada Avenue. The contrasts in architecture were not always so exuberant. The Pekin Cafe building started life in 1922 as the North Park Furniture store owned by Frank J. Crover, who came to the United States from Germany in 1911. The building was constructed in a Spanish Revival style with a parapet roofline and four long narrow windows on the half floor above the first floor.

In 1923, Pabco Paint took over the building and operated there until 1931.

In June and July of 1931, permits for plumbing, plastering, electrical and gas work recorded in the Evening Tribune indicated major changes were happening at 2877 University Avenue. The Evening Tribune's July 10, 1931 issue recorded permits by San Diego Neon Sign Company for an "electric sign" at the building.

The San Diego Union's July 12, 1931 issue announced Pekin Cafe was "just opened" and would serve their regular \$1 dinner for only 50 cents "to get acquainted with the people of San Diego." The restaurant advertised it was a place to dine and dance on New Year's Eve in 1931 and placed similar ads for many years afterwards.

The San Diego Union's June 23, 1935 issue noted "Pekin Cafe Reopened After Redecoration — Entirely redecorated in an Oriental motif, Pekin cafe, 2877 University ave., has reopened. The same policies that prevailed before will be in effect, it was stated, with the same Chinese cooks, food, prices and service." Newspaper advertisements through the 1940s highlighted the cafe's "exclusive booths." In 1948, the restaurant advertised being newly decorated with "all private booths."

A fire on October 21, 1981 extensively damaged the kitchen, but the restaurant re-opened on February 24, 1982 after repairs and redecoration that eliminated the private booths.

Pekin Cafe has been owned and operated by a close-knit circle of friends and family throughout nearly nine decades. In addition to creating some of the first "Chinese-American" dishes — including their brightly advertised Chop Suey — these courageous immigrants provided employment and housing for others who had just come to America. Pekin Cafe became a safe place for many Chinese immigrants to take their first steps toward success in a very new world.

The 1932 City Directory was the first to list a restaurant at 2877 University Avenue, and the person associated with the address was Kway Chew. His name also appeared as Kway "Chow" in various directories through the years, including as the manager of Pekin Cafe in 1945.

Book (also "Back") Cho and his wife Muriel worked at the restaurant in its early days, and Muriel was listed as working at Pekin Cafe in 1947. In a departure from most directory listings during the 1930s, the 1935 Business Directory listed "Cho Book You" as the restaurant at 2877 University Avenue instead of Kway Chew or Chow.

Even though newspaper advertisements consistently used "Pekin Cafe" from 1931 forward, the name did not appear as a separate listing in the City Directory until 1940. That year, Kway Chow was named with Backyau Chow, So Leung and Leo Ying as being with the restaurant.

So Leung (1899-1955) came to the U.S. from China in 1917. In 1930, he was operating a retail produce business and boarding with Leo Ying, who came to the U.S. from China in 1921 and was also selling produce.

Ying (1905-2004) formally changed his last name to Fong in his 1951 naturalization paperwork. He worked at Pekin Cafe and co-owned the business and the building with his nephew Roy Lowe Fong and friend Frank Chan for many decades. Leo Fong retired with his wife Emily in 1973.

Roy Fong (1921-1999) and his wife Irene were both born in China and became naturalized U.S. citizens in 1964. He was a long-time head chef at Pekin Cafe and retired in 1973.

Frank Chan (1902-1974) witnessed Roy Fong's naturalization paperwork — on which both were listed as restaurant owners. Chan was born in Walnut Grove, California. He and his wife Mamie worked in retail stores before he began managing the Pekin Cafe in 1946. Mamie (1911-1999) was born in Taft, California. She was a hostess and cashier at the restaurant and translated for others who did not know English as well.

In the early 1970s, Leo Fong's son Kenneth took over Pekin Cafe. Kenneth and his wife Maria have owned and run the restaurant ever since.

The final message to restaurant customers concluded, "Thank you for loving us and thank you for the memories." North Park says the same to all members of the Pekin Cafe family, past and present.

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JUST OPENED

PEKIN CAFE

2877 University Ave.

Next to the Fox North Park Theatre,

Just to get acquainted with the people of
San Diego and vicinity we will serve to-
morrow (Monday), North Park Dollar
Day, our regular \$1 Dinner **50c**
for

Chinese viands prepared in true Chinese style—Delicious

Open Daily—10 A. M. to Midnight
Saturday—10 A. M. to 2 A. M.

| For Reservations
Phone Hill 3893

Dine and Dance at the

PEKIN CAFE

2877 University Avenue — Next to North Park Theatre

The San Diego Union's July 12, 1931 issue presented advertisements for North Park's monthly Dollar Days, including this notice for the "Just Opened Pekin Cafe." (Courtesy of the San Diego Union and NewsBank, Inc.)

Chop Suey Chow Mein
Also Orders Put Up to Take Out



Bring the Family—Enjoy
Real Oriental Dishes

Dance if You Wish

Exclusive Booths Beer & Wine
Excellent Cooking: Best Service.

PEKIN CAFE

2877 UNIVERSITY AVE.
Next to N. P. Theater. H. 3893.

In 1935, the restaurant gained a new facade, as illustrated in this advertisement from the San Diego Union's July 14, 1935 issue. An earlier advertisement from the San Diego Union's June 23, 1935 issue touted "The New Improved Pekin Cafe" and told customers to "Look for the New Attractive Oriental Front." (Courtesy of the San Diego Union and NewsBank, Inc.)



This 2019 photograph proves that the Pekin Cafe has retained its distinctive facade and neon sign for more than 80 years. (Photo by Steve Hon)



Emily and Leo Fong were among the early founders of the Pekin Cafe. (Courtesy of the Fong Family)



Leo Fong (right) cooks with his son Marvin in the Pekin Cafe kitchen. (Courtesy of the Fong Family)



Leo Fong. (Courtesy of the Fong Family)



Interior of the Pekin Cafe before October 1981, with the private booths along the left. (Courtesy of the Fong Family)



Roy Fong, long-time head chef and co-owner of Pekin Cafe. (Courtesy of the Fong Family)