



SOUTH CHINA SEAS

A Global Foodie's Heaven

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MODERN VANCOUVER IS A HOTBED OF global cuisine influences, with the average Vancouverite taking his parents out for dinner at Vij's Indian restaurant, buying Italian pasta on the Drive, or sipping Taiwanese bubble tea on lunch break between bites of teri-mayo meat from Japadog.

Even for such people, a visit to a small ethnic food store in Vancouver known as South China Seas Trading Company could be a transcendent experience. Since the 1980s, the store has set a gold standard for ethnic food ingredients in the city, becoming a favourite haunt of foodies and experimental chefs throughout the region. On a rainy Tuesday, co-owner Joyce Chang-Dickson spends time in one of the two South China Seas' stores, located near Commercial Drive. It is the first day of reopening since the horrific accident in January, in which a car rammed through the wall, shattering everything in the store. The car narrowly missed one employee, who dived out of the way before it smashed into the kitchen.

To the untrained eye, the store looks fully stocked with exotic foods, but Joyce flutters around the store, looking at the shelves and seeing an absence that only genuine food lovers can see. She murmurs to herself: *there's*



still so much we don't have. It's this absence of selection that inspired her husband, Don Dickson, to start the South China Seas store at a time when most Vancouverites had no idea what they were missing. A graphic designer by trade, Don had moved from Toronto to Vancouver during the 1960s. He recalls Vancouver as a "backwater," the only exciting characteristic being that it was on the ocean. He soon embarked on a three-month trip that took him to Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Singapore. "I just loved the food there – but I came back here, and I couldn't find the ingredients. I tried shopping, went all over town, but back then, you couldn't even buy a bottle of soy sauce," he laughs. Don waited anxiously for someone to start up an Asian food store in Vancouver and finally decided to take up the challenge himself at the Granville Island Public Market. Despite the 70 applications for one available spot, his bid for an Asian food store won because it offered something new and original in the Eurocentric market. With a photograph of a junk boat on Hong Kong's harbour as its logo, the company set its sails into a new era of cooking in Vancouver.

The small store on Granville Island is stocked with astounding foods from all over the globe, like the *bhut jolokia*, or "ghost chili," which is even hotter than Tabasco sauce. This chili is the stuff of legend, and often used to repel wild elephants. There are also fragrant, beautiful Meyer lemons, fresh kaffir lime leaves, tiny green "pea eggplants," and Himalayan truffles. There are shelves filled with magnificent, one-of-a-kind cookbooks, and a "Wall of Fire" featuring spices from around the world, ranging from Korean hot sauce to Jamaican jerk sauce. Although the company's name evokes images of food from Asia, the shelves are stocked with items from around the world, from Central and South American countries like Peru and Mexico, to the Caribbean Islands, to Middle Eastern culinary hotspots like Morocco and Lebanon.

Don jokes that the store is due for a rebranding, and because the store is so global, many customers ignore the store's roots in Asian food. He recalls the story of a Mexican couple

that frequented the store, mistaking it for a Mexican store. "They were here every weekend buying tortillas and Mexican seeds and they said one day, 'We've been really thinking we want to try Thai food. Do you know where there's any place that sells the ingredients?'"

Almost every item on South China Seas' shelves tells a rich and fascinating story. To illustrate this, Don explains how foods can be shared across and between cultures, "First, regarding Thai pea eggplants, or *bingal*, *makua puong* in Thai; Jamaican customers call them *susumber*, and they seem to be the same plant in terms of edibility, flavour (bitter), medicinal properties. Botanically, they are both identified as in the solanum family, but with different species identifiers." Don makes a point that Jamaicans may be surprised if they knew similar plants were used widely in Thailand. The customers of South China Seas reflect this tendency to eat international, that is, across cultures. Over the course of the interview, Don helps an East Indian man choose the perfect dark soy sauce for his Szechuan stir-fry, and charts the course for a young Chinese student wanting to make the perfect Thai curry for her friends. They are what Don would call "globavores," people who eat foods from all over the world, outside of their own cultural background.

Joyce Chang-Dickson can relate to this. Moving to Richmond from Taiwan at 16, she remembers being exposed to new cuisine in her new home country.

"My parents were pretty adventurous. They mixed different ethnic styles of foods from outside of China; some of it was Russian-influenced," she says. She wistfully recalls growing up in Richmond, where few Chinese people lived and where farmers' markets – now supplanted by supermarkets – introduced her to fresh fruit and produce from the valley, all radically different from the Chinese food she grew up with.

Like her husband, Joyce marvels at the way in which mainstream markets have started embracing ethnic foods and catering to Vancouver's increasingly diverse shoppers. "The guys from Safeway, they just come in here now with a clipboard, and check what we have. Whatever we have, they just order the same thing," she



Don Dickson and Joyce Chang-Dickson

says with a small sigh. "But ours tastes better. Like the lemongrass, we get it from Thailand, while they get it from California. We tell customers that the Thai lemongrass is sweeter and has a better taste. That's all we can do."

Luckily for the couple, many people in the city are passionate about their food, and come to South China Seas, even if a cheaper version can be found at the local Superstore. Many people come for now-common foods like cilantro and avocado, because their selection is better. The store has survived despite the import of Asian foods by mainstream supermarkets, as well as the "eat local" movement that swept B.C. in the last few years.

According to a 2007 report by the BC Ministry of Agriculture, BC farmers produce just 48 percent of the food eaten by British Columbians, with tough competition from cheap imports coming from the US, and sometimes, more costly food from abroad. The owners of South China Seas recognize the importance of local food, but say it would be a bad idea for people to limit their palate to locally-grown food.

"I think it's great, as long as it's not pushed too hard," says Don. "The reality is that if the whole of Greater Vancouver had to feed ourselves with food grown within 100 miles, half of us would starve to death before six months." He says the ideal situation would be to eat the fresh local foods whenever available, and limit import to the foods that cannot grow here.

To people like Joyce, obtaining "ethnic" food isn't just about curiosity and novelty; it's a tangible connecting point between immigrants and their cultural roots. "There are quite a few things I remember, like *zung*," says Joyce. "It's

a bamboo leaf-wrapped sticky rice, and you get them from Chinatown. I always wanted to find out how [my parents] made it. You buy them from stores and they're terrible...either the flavour's not right or the texture of the rice is not right." She also remembers the vivid flavours of her parents' exquisite *nian gao*, or New Year cake, and holds fond memories of helping her mother decorate the cake. It's a taste of her Taiwanese heritage that can't be bought at any local market -- a flavour that cannot be recovered now that her parents have passed away.

"Food is connected to a lot of things," says Don, noting that attitudes toward new foods reveal the general openness to new experiences. "Some people will walk by the store and say, 'Ugh! What's that?' like they're offended by the presence of something they don't know." He recalls one survey, in which he read that the average American did not try foods that he or she had not tasted by the age of six, and wonders how this influences other aspects of their lives. Everyone remembers the suspicion Barack Obama stirred when he mentioned "arugula" during his Iowa campaign. The leafy vegetable has become a symbol of elitism and foreignness, a disconnect from the average American who only buys the familiar, green-leaf lettuce.

This is precisely the kind of xenophobia that South China Seas has been trying to fight for over 20 years, with its slogan "Life's Too Short for Boring Food." Whether in search for a lost family cooking tradition, or a journey to the unknown through their taste buds, the people who come to South China Seas are always in for new surprises and challenges. The store—which used to stick out like a Gauguin painting of Tahitian nudes in a gallery of French demoiselles—is now the last of the Granville Island Public Market's original tenants.

"Life's too short to close yourself to new experiences," says Don, before handing a green peppercorn to a young Chinese girl who has been hesitantly eyeing the bag. She begins to chew and soon squeezes her eyes shut, laughing at the green orb's unexpected hotness. After staring at the peppercorns in wonder, she wanders through the store, looking for even more flavours to take home.