



image: *Chequers* 1955
courtesy: Daniel and Amber Ma

INTRODUCTION

My Chinatown: Restaurant Kids is an Asia-Australia Arts Centre project which explores the dynamic social history of the Chinese-Australian community in Sydney many of whom have lived here for five generations. The exhibition showcases their experiences through their personal photographs and objects.

Restaurant Kids is the third exhibition in the *My Chinatown* series. It traces many of the old Chinese restaurants in Sydney's evolving Chinatown through four generations of kids who grew up within a Chinese restaurant environment. Their personal photographs and objects date back as far as Quong Tart's Tea Rooms in the 1880's in Sydney, charting the phenomenon of the Chinese restaurant in Campbell Street (the site of the Capitol Theatre) to the current centre in Dixon Street. *Restaurant Kids* explores the impact of Chinese Restaurants on Australian culture and cuisine and reveals the Chinese-Australian community as a dynamic social group experiencing continual change.

Chinese restaurants in Sydney

The Chinese arrived in Sydney in search of gold during the Gold Rush period in the mid 1800s. Many passed through and settled in The Rocks attracted by lower rents in the Haymarket & Surry Hills area they began to move into this area and set up small businesses and restaurants predominately along Campbell Street.

Some of the first well known restaurants included Shanghai Cafe, Tientsin Cafe, Canton, Nankin Cafe who mostly served Cantonese cuisine. The nearby grocers and Belmore Gardens supplied the restaurateurs with their fresh ingredients and produce.

By the early to mid 1940s, restaurants began expanding along Campbell Street into George, Dixon and surrounding streets. Some of these restaurants were Lims Restaurants and the Modern China Cafe on George Street. Along Campbell

Street restaurants included The Far East Cafe, Jim Lee's Cafe & The Hong Kong Cafe.

In Dixon Street the Lean Sun Low had been operating since the 1930s. During the 1940s and 1950s more appeared including the Eastern Cafe, Tai Ping and grocers Say Tin Fong and Hong Sing & Company.

In the 1950s and 1960s more restaurant & nightclubs such as Chequers and the Ling Nam appeared. Offering caberet style dinners and shows these nightspots were alluring places attracting high society, who came to see famous international stars such as Shirley Bassey and Sammy Davis Junior. During this period other restaurants included; Paradise, Cathay, Bamboo, Mandarin, Sun Sun, Mandarin Club and in Dixon Street many more restaurants established their premises such as the Dixon, the Sunah, Green Jade, Yips Inn. Dixon Street became the final Chinatown, we have today.

In 1965 the immigration laws allowed Chinese chefs to expand their businesses into the suburbs to establish new restaurants. By the 1970s Chinese restaurant had become widespread, many restaurateurs moved to the suburbs. Chinese restaurants now serve every thing from yum cha to almost any variety of Chinese cuisine. Chinese restaurants have had a huge influence on Australian culture and cuisine today. Chopsticks, & woks have become common Australian household items and rice a staple.



image: *Eastern Restaurant* c 1955
Photographer unknown
courtesy: Gwenda Bau