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Why is this nosh different from all other noshes?

Bobbie Christmas Special to the Jewish Times

"I'm thankful you made us eat with chopsticks when we were little," I recently told my father, Mike Rothberg.

"Made you?" he answered. "You children insisted on using them. I don't even know how to use them."

Regardless of my confusion, the fact remains. I, like most of my Jewish friends, have eaten Chinese food from the time I was small. What is it about Jews and Chinese food? Why are we so closely linked? My search for an answer led me to question several Atlantans. Some refused to respond. Others were pragmatic.

The strangest hypothesis came from Bertram Gader, who moved here from Los Angeles a year ago. He says: "Jews have a predisposition for Chinese food because one of the lost tribes wandered off into China. Subconsciously, we're still trying to hook up with that lost Chinese tribe."

Besides a strong sense of humor, the book designer has more than a passing interest in Asian cuisine — he taught Chinese cooking in California. An admitted Chinese food addict, Mr. Gader has gone to extremes to be sure he always has an instant supply. When he and his wife, June, bought their home in Kennesaw, they installed a swimming pool outside and a Chinese stove inside.

"It was no big deal," he insists, regarding the stove that cost close to \$700. "We had a plumber coming to put in a gas line for the dryer, anyway, so it was simple to get him to extend the pipe another 20 feet or so." Simple to install, perhaps, but not many people buy restaurant equipment for their homes.

Others in Atlanta say they don't cook Chinese food at home, which makes it a good meal to eat out. Especially on Sunday, according to Ileana Dwoskin, who finds a combination of Asian and Jewish people at her favorite Sunday spot, China Cooks in Sandy Springs.

The retired designer speculates the ma-

"My mother took me all the time, so I guess she liked it, too. I remember we got a lot of food for a little money." By the age of six, she was handy with her chopsticks. At 65, she doesn't even have to think about them; they are second nature.

Dr. Scott Isaacs has similar memories, although the 29-year-old grew up in Florida.

"When I was little, I remember going to the Chinese restaurant in St. Petersburg on Sunday night. It was like the Jewish social scene," he recalls.

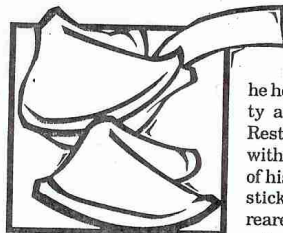
When he graduated from Emory University School of Medicine in 1993,

he held his graduation party at Chamblee's Honto Restaurant. Are his skills with scalpels an extension of his expertise with chopsticks, after having been reared in the cuisine?

I wonder if that's the answer. Perhaps we mothers are trying to fulfill an innate desire to say, 'My son, the doctor.' That would explain why Republicans are born with silver spoons in their mouths, and Jews are born with chopsticks in their hands. Scalpels would hurt too much.

However, a few of us were not as young when we were first exposed to the culinary delights of Chinese food and to the intricacies of eating with parallel poles.

David Nozick didn't taste lo mein or any other such dish until he was grown. A female friend introduced him to the food and the bamboo eating utensils simultaneously. He's adept, now, but he says he understands his friends. "They look at chopsticks in horror," says the Midtown resident. He offers an alternative. Asian markets on Buford Highway sell an array of delicacies as well as items he calls "chopsticks with training wheels," or connected with a pivot. Regardless of his companions' fears, he keeps taking them out for Asian food. "I have many friends who keep kosher at home, but we can go out and eat Chinese food together. It reminds me of my great aunt who kept a kosher home, because no matter who stepped in, she could always



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The retired designer speculates the reason might be economics. When she was growing up in New York, she ate often at a Chinese restaurant nearby.

Bobbie Christmas is a Chinese food-loving Jewish writer in Atlanta.

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Its variety attracts Mr. Nozick, who moved here from California 7 years ago. "You can go to a Chinese restaurant with a group of people and share and get as

much of everything you want," he says. "You can order 10 dishes or two, depending on how many people you have and how hungry you are. Chinese food is never boring."

Mr. Nozick, 37, hits Honto on weekends for his favorite treat, dim sum. Dim sum diners point to what they want from passing carts. Mr. Nozick laughs: "Push carts. Much like our ancestors had."

Does our ancestry also come into play where the fortune cookie is concerned? Who knows? However, Jewish folks take the meal all the way to the final, sweet conclusion — often saving the printed slips. Dr. Isaacs says he's not too busy to locate and read his favorite fortunes:

"One says, 'You'll get everything you want, because of your charm and personality.' Another says, 'Stop searching forever. Happiness is next to you.'"

Mr. Gader also reports cleaning the fortune cookie plate at Wok & Chops in Roswell. "I like the ones that say, 'At 10:15, your doorbell will ring, and you'll be rich.' I don't like the philosophical ones that say things like, 'Life is but a dream.' If I want philosophy, I'll go to a philosopher."

Philosophy, however, is much intertwined with Asian culture. Mr. Nozick gives an example. "When you order a fish, they serve you the head and the tail, too, to signify that in life, there is always a beginning and an end."

Uninitiated Americans look askance at being served a fish with the head and tail intact, but not those of us who grew up eating whitefish. No, we Jews

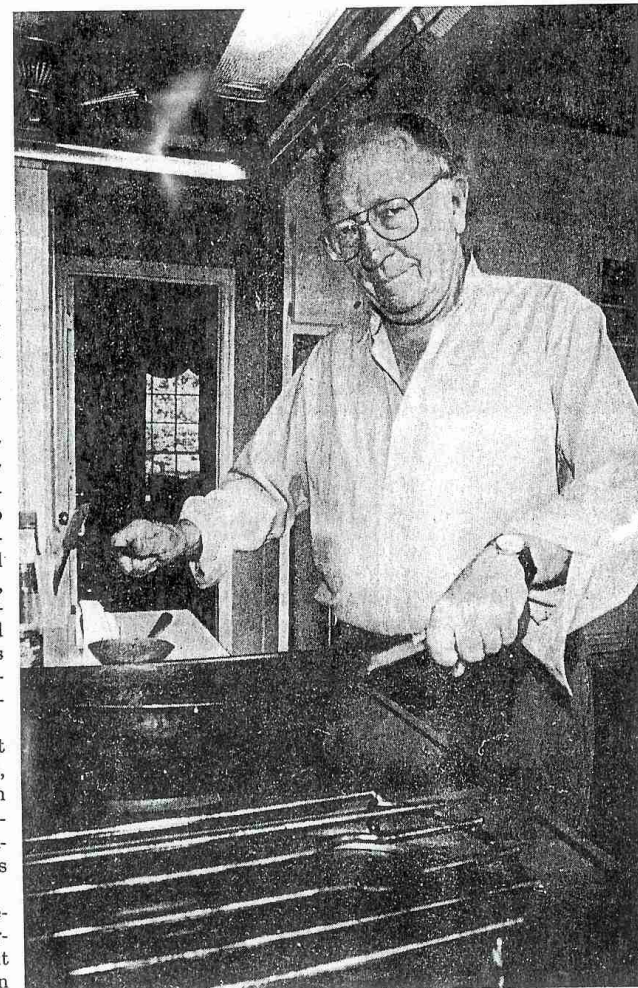


PHOTO BY CHARLES TATE/SHOOT

Doppelganger theory: Could Jews love Chinese food because we're searching for our lost tribe? posits Kennesaw's Bertram Gader.

came weary of the many dishes heavy with meat. When I found a Chinese restaurant in Dusseldorf, I waltzed in. As I crunched down on my egg roll, I tasted something odd — huge chunks of ham stuffed inside. I can personally attest to the fact that Chinese food can be Germanized.

Our mothers fed Kung Pao to us instead of Pabulum, but even though we all agree we're attracted to Chinese food, no one has a definitive answer for why. One friend thinks we gained an appreciation for Chinese food because Jews and Asians were often thrown together in ghettos.

background when he answered the phone. "Dad? Why do we like to go out for Chinese food?" I asked him.

He thought for a moment. "Maybe it's so we don't have to do the dishes."

Universally, we have the same story. Push carts, rituals, philosophy, feeding the multitudes, a respect for ancestors, obviously we do have much in common with Chinese people.

For my final, definitive answer, I return to Mr. Gader. I'm a little worried, because he's starting to make sense. He waxes eloquent as he thinks out loud: "The Chinese people do wear a sort of yarmulke, so I believe we like Chinese food because of the doppelganger theory. Your twin is out there

ports cleaning the fortune cookie plate at Wok & Chops in Roswell. "I like the ones that say, 'At 10:15, your doorbell will ring, and you'll be rich.' I don't like the philosophical ones that say things like, 'Life is but a dream.' If I want philosophy, I'll go to a philosopher."

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Uninitiated Americans look askance at being served a fish with the head and tail intact, but not those of us who grew up eating whitefish. No, we Jews simply dig in, oblivious to the grimaces on the faces of our fish-wary friends.

Nevertheless, some Chinese food is changed, slightly, to accommodate local tastes. I recall a trip to Germany, where I be-

came weary of the many dishes heavy with meat. When I found a Chinese restaurant in Dusseldorf, I waltzed in. As I crunched down on my egg roll, I tasted something odd — huge chunks of ham stuffed inside. I can personally attest to the fact that Chinese food can be Germanized.

Doppelganger theory: Could Jews love Chinese food because we're searching for our lost tribe?, posits Kennesaw's Bertram Gader.

Our mothers fed Kung Pao to us instead of Pablum, but even though we all agree we're attracted to Chinese food, no one has a definitive answer

for why. One friend thinks we gained an appreciation for Chinese food because Jews and Asians were often thrown together in ghettos.

That answer sounds too dark. I considered it, then did the thing every good Jewish daughter does. I called my father again.

Dinner plates clanked in the

background when he answered the phone. "Dad? Why do we like to go out for Chinese food?" I asked him.

He thought for a moment. "Maybe it's so we don't have to do the dishes."

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"That's it!" he finally says with conviction. "We'll all eat Chinese food together next year in Jerusalem." □

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