

Twentieth Century Settlers in the Blackstone Valley

Museum of Work & Culture, Woonsocket, Rhode Island

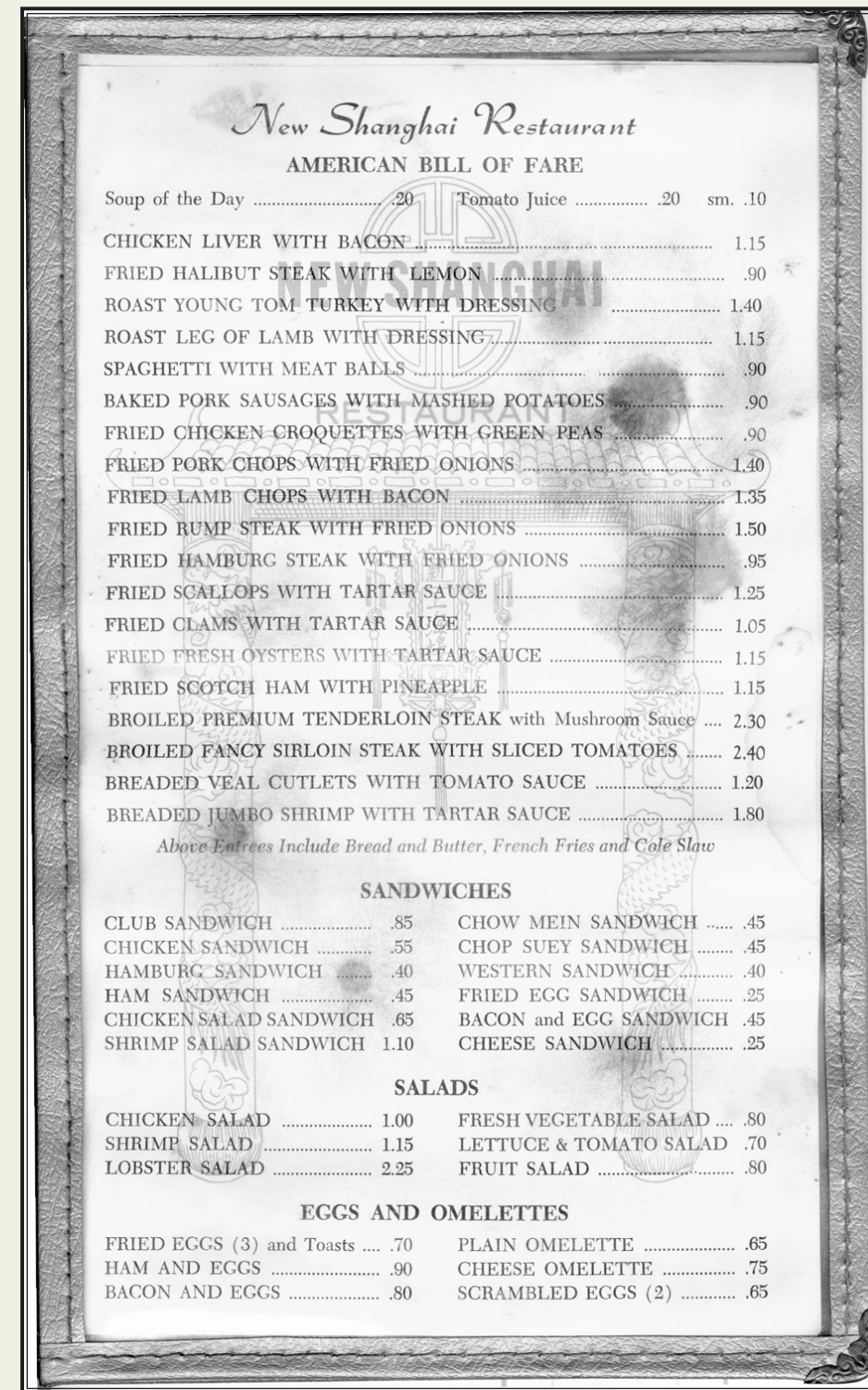
East meets... East?

At the start of the 20th century, Chinese immigrants were the only ethnic group legally restricted from entering the United States. Many Americans, particularly on the West Coast, had responded negatively to large-scale Chinese immigration to the United States during the 19th century. President Chester A. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. This immigration policy was founded on racial stereotypes about the “unassimilable” character of the Chinese. Many Americans felt that Chinese would never be able to blend into American society as European immigrants could. As a result, Chinese immigrants already living in America became ineligible for citizenship, and were instead designated “permanent aliens.” The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943 as a “thank you” for Chinese aid to the United States during World War II.



New Shanghai Restaurant advertisement in French, 1938, courtesy of John Chan

In 1900, a small Chinese population lived in the Blackstone Valley. While many Chinese immigrants in Rhode Island worked in laundries, as they did in other Eastern cities, some opened their own restaurants. These establishments served American-Chinese food like chop suey, a dish that included meat, vegetables, and bean sprouts served with rice or on moistened white bread. Chinese immigrant Charlie Goon Lee Sing opened Shanghai Low at 267 Main Street, Woonsocket, in 1905. Originally the restaurant was on the second floor of the Warfield block building next to what was then the Bijou Theater.



New Shanghai Restaurant menu, c. 1966, courtesy of John Chan

After a 1938 fire closed the restaurant for eight months, it reopened on the first floor as the New Shanghai restaurant. Sing's partner, Thomas W. Ark, sold the restaurant to Ben Chan when he retired in 1965. The restaurant, now known as Chan's, was expanded and is still a vital part of the Blackstone Valley food and music landscape.



Ben Chan and Tommy Ark, courtesy of John Chan



Left: Ben Chan and family, from *The Woonsocket Call*



Right: Woonsocket High School graduation, 1970s, courtesy of John Chan