

An Interview with Grace Young: Stir-Fry Guru, the Wok, and Saving Chinatowns

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Grace Young(杨玉华), often hailed as the “Stir-Fry Guru,” is an award-winning cookbook author, culinary historian, and passionate advocate for preserving Chinese towns around the country. In March 2020, during the height of the pandemic, she collaborated with videographer Dan Ahn and Poster House Museum to create *Coronavirus: Chinatown Stories*, a powerful video series that shed light on the struggles faced by Chinatown businesses right before New York City was about to lockdown.

In this interview, Grace discussed her journey as a cookbook author and the enduring challenges faced by Chinese restaurants. She also talked about her work on how to save the Chinatowns and its significance. Her insights offered a deeper understanding of Chinese American heritage through food, culture, and community resilience.

What inspired you to pursue a career as a Chinese cookbook author?

Grace Young: My parents were extraordinary Chinese home cooks, and I grew up eating the same traditional dishes they had enjoyed in their youth in China. I always knew their cooking was something truly special. I wrote my memoir-cookbook, *The Wisdom of the Chinese Kitchen*, for future generations, so these classic recipes would never be forgotten. The memoir launched my career as a Chinese cookbook author, marking the beginning of my journey to preserve and celebrate Chinese culinary traditions. I went on to write *The Breath of a Wok* and *Stir-Frying to the Sky's Edge*.

It took much cajoling and persistence to convince my 70-year-old mother and 82-year-old father to teach me the recipes I had grown up eating. Over the course of two years, I traveled to San Francisco to cook with them. To my surprise, as we cooked, my parents—who had always been reticent in conversation—began sharing memories of their days in China and the early years of their life in San Francisco. Through the process of recording these recipes, my family’s culinary

legacy was passed down to me. My parents have since passed away, and I am profoundly grateful to have their recipes and wisdom to honor their legacy.

You have devoted much of your career to preserving the iron wok. Your family's 75-year-old carbon-steel wok is at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. What is the significance of the museum wanting to collect your family's wok?

Grace Young: My family's wok tells an important story about what happened to many woks in Chinese American households in this country—it was forgotten. When my parents began their married life in 1949, they relied on their wok to cook all their meals. However, when we moved in the 1960s, our new electric stove couldn't generate the same heat as our old gas stove to properly heat their round-bottomed carbon-steel wok, so they switched to using a skillet for stir-fries. I also believe that Western cookware was a way for my mom to assimilate into American life.

My Auntie Betty once described what life was like growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1930s: "The kitchens in Chinatown were so small back then that a wok simply couldn't fit. Everyone was poor. It was common for four or five families to live on one floor, sharing a single kitchen with only two or three burners. Woks weren't even available to buy when we were young, so I learned to stir-fry with a skillet. Even if we'd owned a wok, the residential gas burners didn't have the high flame needed for Chinese cooking."

Over the years, I've observed that these circumstances weren't unique to my family. Even today, many Chinese Americans use Western cookware instead of a wok. Worse still, many now rely on nonstick woks and have little understanding of how to use a traditional carbon-steel or cast-iron wok. Thankfully, in recent years, there's been a resurgence of interest in wok cooking. Yet, I believe my family's wok, now housed at the Smithsonian, documents an essential chapter in the story of this revered cooking implement and its journey since its arrival in America.

Could you explain to us why you are so fascinated with the wok?

Grace Young: Even as a child, I was captivated by the carbon-steel woks displayed in Chinatown markets, drawn to their mystique and promise. My father was friends with many chefs in San Francisco's Chinatown, would often explain that the secret behind an exceptionally delicious stir-fry was the chef's expertise at wielding a fiery, red-hot wok. By the time I was a young woman, I instinctively understood there was something special about mastering the art of cooking with a traditional wok. I became determined to join that exclusive club of cooks who had unlocked its mysteries. In many ways, the wok launched my culinary life.

In March 2020, you and videographer Dan Ahn, in collaboration with Poster House Museum, created the video series Coronavirus: Chinatown Stories. Why are these videos important?

Grace Young: These videos, primarily filmed on March 15, 2020, feature interviews with restaurant and shop owners in New York City's Chinatown discussing the devastating economic impact of COVID-19 on their businesses. Shot just hours before Mayor de Blasio announced the citywide lockdown, they serve as a poignant oral history, capturing the struggles Chinatown faced during one of its darkest periods. Many owners shared that their business had dropped by as much as 80% since the start of 2020, leaving them unable to continue. 70% of Chinatown restaurant owners had decided to close indefinitely on March 16th—unaware that the lockdown was imminent—because the financial losses had become unsustainable. These are particularly powerful videos because most owners are deeply protective of their privacy and rarely display such raw emotion, pain, and vulnerability. They offer an unfiltered glimpse into the profound challenges Chinatown endured and the personal toll the pandemic took on its community.

In the fall of 2020, you partnered with the James Beard Foundation to launch the social media campaign #SaveChineseRestaurants. What was the reason you created this campaign?

Grace Young: In April 2020, CNN reported that COVID-19 was devastating Chinese restaurants across the country. A staggering 59% of independently owned Chinese restaurants had ceased their debit and credit card accounts, suggesting they had permanently closed.

Meanwhile, P.F. Chang's, one of the largest Chinese restaurant chains, received millions of dollars in COVID-19 relief loans. I feared that by the end of the pandemic, we might lose too many of the unique mom-and-pop Chinese restaurants that contribute so much to this country's rich culinary landscape, leaving us with nothing but soulless chains like P.F. Chang's.

With this alarming possibility in mind, I approached the James Beard Foundation to propose a partnership for a #SaveChineseRestaurants social media campaign. The goal was to raise public awareness of the struggles Chinese restaurants were facing and to encourage people to support them. The campaign asked the public to visit their favorite Chinese restaurant, take a photo of their order, and share it on Instagram. This simple act aimed to drive lifesaving business to establishments that were being unfairly shunned due to COVID-19 stigma.

I'm happy to say the campaign garnered significant media attention. People shared heartwarming posts about their beloved Chinese restaurants, and it became a meaningful way to rally support for these vital cultural and culinary institutions during an incredibly challenging time.

Now that the pandemic is behind us, do you think Chinese restaurants in New York City and across this country have fully recovered from the pandemic and what are some of the challenges facing Chinese restaurants?

Grace Young: Every Chinese restaurant is unique, but in general, most are doing much better than they did during the height of COVID. However, most have not yet fully regained the business they had pre-pandemic. Restaurants in historic Chinatowns face additional challenges due to decreased foot traffic. In cities like Boston, San Francisco, Honolulu, and New York City, Chinatowns are located near financial districts, where many workers have not yet fully returned, significantly impacting lunch revenues.

Before COVID, restaurants in Chinatown often stayed open past midnight, but now the majority close as early as 7:30 or 8:00 p.m. due to reduced business and a growing preference among workers to go home earlier for safety reasons. Skilled workers, such as chefs, are also harder to find. Young people are not interested in such grueling work.

Profit margins for Chinese restaurants have always been razor-thin, and now, with rising costs—from energy and rent to insurance—profits are being squeezed even more, further slashing already razor-thin margins to the breaking point. Inflation has added yet another layer of difficulty, making recovery a slow and arduous process for many of these establishments.

You have been called the “accidental voice of Chinatown” and have done a lot of important work saving Chinatowns nationwide. What is the general state of Chinatowns in America and why do you think your work is important in this regard?

Grace Young: From Honolulu to New York City, historic Chinatowns have reported a dramatic decline in foot traffic and tourism, coupled with increased crime, compared to pre-pandemic levels. On top of this, all Chinatowns are grappling with the ramifications of gentrification and encroaching development, which threaten the character and survival of these communities.

At the start of 2024, I visited Honolulu’s Chinatown which is so charming and was heartbroken to see shops closing by mid-afternoon due to lack of business. Oakland’s Chinatown has been plagued by numerous crimes, and Philadelphia’s Chinatown is facing the looming threat of the billion-dollar 76ers arena, which will devastate the neighborhood. It’s equally painful to see my hometown Chinatown in San Francisco with numerous vacancies along Grant Avenue. Meanwhile too many seniors in Boston and New York City’s Chinatowns are struggling with food insecurity, highlighting the growing hardships these communities face.

I’ve been very lucky to receive national media coverage for my Chinatown work, which has helped raise public awareness that we cannot take these communities for granted. People often think of Chinatown as simply a destination for delicious and affordable food, but if you look deeper, you’ll see the story of America. Chinatowns are places that empower immigrants of all backgrounds—individuals who have endured backbreaking work and countless sacrifices in pursuit of the American dream. Chinatowns are also an important part of America’s identity, culture, and history adding richness and diversity to our communities.

Chinatowns are made up of mom-and-pop operations, many multigenerational businesses that have been part of the community for decades. Each one reflects the sweat, dedication, and perseverance required to earn a dollar, embodying the resilience and spirit that define these cherished neighborhoods and the American spirit.

Do you have advise on how people can show their support for Chinatowns?

Grace Young: It's so important to visit your local Chinatown—to dine in the restaurants, shop in the markets, bakeries, and stores, and immerse yourself in these vibrant cultural communities. When you explore Chinatown, you'll experience a one-of-a-kind neighborhood with not only great food, but also a place rich in culture, traditions, and history. It's a reminder of how we are stronger when we are connected as humans—something that has been lost with the rise of big-box retail and online shopping.

With most Chinatown businesses being mom-and-pop operations, their survival becomes increasingly difficult in the face of these challenges. The truth is, we must all support our Chinatowns today, or they may not exist for future generations to enjoy tomorrow.