

## Sandy (XueMei) Chen, Inspiring Story

In the heart of a vibrant Chicago, amidst the hustle and bustle of daily life, I was a determined young college student. I had a dream, a vision of becoming a successful accountant. However, my dreams were shadowed by the looming financial burden of tuition fees and the cost of living in the city.

My family could only offer limited support, and scholarships only covered a fraction of my expenses. Faced with the stark reality of mounting student loans, I knew that I needed a solution. That's when I decided to seek employment to alleviate the financial strain.

In my pursuit of financial independence, I landed a job at "Tang Dynasty," in 1990, on 100 East Walton Street. Voted one of the best Chinese restaurants in Chicago, known for its delectable cuisine and warm, welcoming atmosphere. I hoped that working time would provide the extra income I needed to put myself through college. But little did I know that my journey had just begun.

As I donned my apron and greeted customers with a warm smile, I quickly realized that this job was more than just a means to an end. The restaurant wasn't just a place to earn money; it was a place to grow, learn, and thrive. The bond I formed with my colleagues, the satisfaction of serving delicious meals, and the joy of making customers smile made me fall in love with the restaurant industry.

Despite the long hours spent juggling work and college, I excelled in my job during the Tang Dynasty. I was promoted from server to supervisor, to banquet server, and earned to be a bookkeeper and office manager for their corporation. As my dedication and natural talent for the restaurant business shone through. It was as though my true calling had found me.

The restaurant industry taught me invaluable life skills – time management, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication. It also nurtured my innate love for creating a hospitable and inviting atmosphere. I felt a sense of fulfillment I had never experienced before.

One fateful day, while I was helping my friend's father-in-law's restaurant called House of Dong Yuan at 2911 N Halsted Street, He pulled me aside. He recognized my passion and talent and saw the potential for me to lead the establishment to new heights. He offered me the chance to buy his restaurant, after 35 years and now he wanted to retire. He wanted me to shape its future and carry on its legacy. It was a moment of truth, a moment that called for a leap of faith.

With unwavering determination and gratitude in my heart, I accepted the offer. I decided to follow my passion and build a career in the restaurant industry that had captured my heart. I soon realized that I could be an accountant of a different kind, managing budgets, optimizing operations, and ensuring financial success for the House of Dong Yuan.

Growing up in the city of Wen Zhou, Zhe Jiang Province of Southern China, in a small village just south of Shanghai, I began my culinary journey as a child by helping prepare meals for my large family. Living with four siblings and more than 10 first cousins all under one roof in China, I was only ten years old when I learned the art behind cooking traditional Chinese cuisine. However, limited ingredients and portions presented challenges in delivering consistently delicious meals. I met the call for creativity and before long, took the place in the kitchen along with the task of feeding the whole family.

My culinary inspiration stemmed from my father, who moved the family to the United States in 1984. It was that my father taught me how to work with a mixture of Eastern and Western ingredients. This new region offered more ingredients, and I quickly became accustomed to my favorites including crabmeat wonton, walnut shrimp, and glazed orange chicken among others.

After I took over the House of Dong Yuan. I built the business for five years, before expanding into a bigger space, five blocks north at 3506 N. Clark, and changed the name to Chens Chinese & Sushi. I maintained the same staff, including the chef I personally trained and who is still with the company to this day. I attributed the success of Chens to both luck and ambition and ten years later, I decided to take that luck and ambition, along with my delicious Chinese cuisine and sushi, to the North Shore. I opened Koi just in time for the Chinese New Year in 2004. After many years of practice, Le Sud French Mediterranean Restaurant in Roscoe Village was born in September 2018.

Thanks to my wonderful team and supportive local diners. I think globally and eat locally. Now I am planning to celebrate Koi's 20-year anniversary. My team helped me earn the Evanston Leadership Award from former Evanston Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl in 2013. Businessperson of the Year award from Evanston Chamber of Commerce in 2019, and Business Ethic Award from Lighthouse Rotary in 2020.

To this day, I like the culinary aspect of the business the most and is often found in the kitchen in an apron, chopping vegetables, creating new pieces of "art", and plating the fresh ingredients that Koi is known for. The culinary world is not my job—it is my life and passion. I enjoy the labor of love; a tradition that I have carried since I was a little girl learning the joys of cooking in China.

Years passed, and my journey had come full circle, from a struggling college student juggling plates and textbooks to a successful restaurateur and guardian of The House of Dong Yuan's legacy. I often found myself reflecting on how my life had taken an unexpected, inspiring turn. In the end, it was not just about balancing books but about nurturing my love for the restaurant industry which had become my true career, a testament to the magic of following one's passion. I had turned my journey into a story of inspiration, proving that sometimes, life has a way of leading us to where we truly belong.

1994-1999 House of Dong Yuan 2911 N Halsted Street, Chicago, IL --Owner

1999- 2012. Moved and changed the name. Chen's Restaurant 3506 North Clark Street, Chicago, IL – Owner

2004- Present. Koi Fine Asian Cuisine 624 Davis Street, Evanston, IL – Owner

2018- present. Le Sud French Mediterranean Cuisine, Roscoe Village, Chicago – Owner