

Historical Ramblings

The Rice Bowl – Serving Lompoc for 60 years

The décor hasn't changed much since the 1950's. The red naugahyde-clad booths, with their shiny formica tables, await customers yearning for authentic Chinese food. The brightly painted walls are spotless and a variety of plants lean towards the light streaming through the front windows. Some may consider the décor "kitschy." Others find it charming. Regardless, when you step into the Rice Bowl, it's like stepping back into a theme diner of the 1950's. It appears that any minute Elvis may enter the building!

Ning Hoy Wong emerges from the kitchen and scans the restaurant. Spotting a familiar customer, he rushes to them and greets them with a hearty handshake. "It's good to see you," he exclaims. He then returns to the kitchen, in his trademark hurried walk, where he joins his wife and sons in preparing the Rice Bowl's legendary food.

The Rice Bowl is Lompoc's oldest continuously operating restaurant - a downtown Lompoc landmark for sixty years. Ning Hoy's father, Shuck Moon Wong, began working in the Lompoc Café on the southwest corner of I Street and Ocean Avenue in 1945, which was then owned by Shuck's brother, Jim. When Shuck came to visit after World War II, Jim convinced him to stay and run the restaurant while Jim took a short break. That short break turned into a 60-year legacy for the Rice Bowl. Shuck's wife Sue did not care for the small town of Lompoc. She preferred the cosmopolitan life of Hong Kong. In 1946, when Shuck decided to remain in Lompoc and stay in the restaurant business, Sue agreed – only if the restaurant served authentic Chinese food. Jim Wong loved the idea and returned to teach Shuck how to cook. In 1947, the restaurant's name was changed to the Rice Bowl. The following year, the business was moved to 111 E. Ocean Avenue. Then, in the early 1950's, the Wong's purchased a vacant lot nearby and built a new building for the restaurant, with living quarters upstairs. Shuck Wong liked the neon sign at the Lompoc Theatre so much, he had an equally colorful one installed on the front of the restaurant. Sue also liked the sign, as it made downtown look more like the big city she longed for.

The Korean war years were prosperous for the Wongs. As Camp Cooke was reactivated, thousands of military personnel were assigned to the base. At the request of the military, the Rice Bowl stayed open 24 hours a day to meet the demand of the newly arrived troops. Christmas Eve of 1952 saw about 150 soldiers in dress blues with their wives packing the restaurant, eating 25 cent hamburgers and drinking free coffee. The group crowded around a decorated tree singing Christmas songs all night long. The next morning the soldiers shipped out to Korea. The end of the Korean War saw the deactivation of Camp Cooke. When the base reopened and became Vandenberg Air Force Base in 1958, the Rice Bowl enjoyed renewed popularity, with the military population once again packing the restaurant.

High School students attending Lompoc High School at its first location at L Street and Cypress Avenue also boosted the Rice Bowl's popularity. The nearby restaurant was a favorite after school hangout where kids could stopped for a daily Coke. Ning Hoy, himself a 1956 graduate of LHS, also stopped at the Rice Bowl after school. However, once he was there he stayed, since he lived upstairs!

The popular eatery became a household name. Everyone in town ate there at one time or another. A night of Chinese food meant a family outing downtown or a quick phone call to the Rice Bowl for take out. Although

primarily a Chinese Restaurant, the Rice Bowl also served steaks, chops and hamburgers in deference to those who preferred American fare.

As Lompoc grew, the Rice Bowl, along with downtown in general, lost popularity. Fewer people shopped downtown as the commercial center moved northward. New restaurants were bigger, faster and sleeker with no style and, most noticeably of all, no “kitsch” or character.

Thankfully, the Rice Bowl still survives. The Wongs continue to prepare their meals with fresh ingredients. Their food is not frozen nor is it fast food – it’s cooked to order. Enjoy some tea, sit back, relax and absorb the ambience and kitsch. You certainly don’t want to miss Elvis’ arrival.

What is the secret to the Rice Bowl’s sixty-year success story? It could be the consistently good quality of the food. According to Ning Hoy Wong, however, a business is only successful if the owner lives upstairs.