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# Reaching for the Moon at China Moon Cafe

By Michael Bauer, May 26, 2011; San Francisco Chronicle,  
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China Moon Cafe, which opened in 1986, was an unassuming 1930s-style diner that attracted loads of national attention that belied its modest dimensions. Located on Post Street between Jones and Taylor, it had a long counter, Formica booths and an open kitchen where Barbara Tropp recreated authentic Chinese recipes.

Of course, “authentic” is a hot-button word, and while she was a Chinese scholar who went to great pains to do it right, she also became an early advocate of local and seasonal ingredients, which was unusual for American Chinese restaurants.



The counter and the booths at China Moon Cafe.  
Chris Stewart / The San Francisco Chronicle 1988

Starting with well-researched classics, she used California ingredients and sensibilities to create the dishes on her compact menu. Many contend she did for Chinese food what Alice Waters did for Western cuisine; others called her the Julia Child of Chinese cuisine.

In a review of China Moon Cafe in June 1986, Patricia Unterman described the food:

My most recent dinner was stunning. A tender, perfumed breast of five-spice duck (\$9 for two) served as the centerpiece for a Peking antipasto plate. The succulent meat was balanced by very hot, juicy cabbage pickle and a pile of fragrant, elegantly thin, chili orange noodles. Crisp, sweet, white pastry buns (\$3.75) were stuffed

with a melange of wild and domestic mushrooms stewed together in oyster sauce. The filling tasted like a rich, exotic meat. Little plates of spicy red onion pickles (\$1.25), sweet and sour, hot and garlicky, went beautifully with everything. Twice-wrapped sausage on a bed of leeks, red bell peppers and onions (\$4.50) came in a parchment packet that enclosed thick slices of aromatic, greaseless Chinese pork sausage.

The short menu, unheard of in Chinese restaurants, only had about seven starters, four main courses and several Western desserts made with Asian ingredients, such as fresh ginger ice cream with bittersweet chocolate sauce.



Barbara Tropp in 1999, Michael Maloney / SF Chronicle

Probably the most popular dish, and the one I still crave today, was the pot-browned noodle pillows. I remember one topped with Velvet Chicken, fennel, artichoke hearts, chard and sugar snap peas in a spicy lemon sauce. On a menu from the mid 1990s, she also offered Sand-pot Casserole with house-made lamb sausage, oven-baked shallots and root vegetables in a spicy soy balsamic sauce.

Part of the reason for the restaurant’s popularity was Tropp herself, a barely 5-foot dynamo who referred to herself as a “peanut.” She shopped Chinatown and farm-

ers' markets, carrying bags on the back of her motor scooter. She also wrote two definitive books. One was "The Modern Art of Chinese Cooking," published in 1982. In 2004 it was inducted into the James Beard Foundations' Cookbook Hall of Fame, and in 2007 the organization cited it as one of the 20 cookbooks essential to a culinary library. She also wrote the equally lauded "China Moon Cookbook," was an advocate for women in the restaurant business and was the co-founder of Women Chefs and Restaurateurs.

When Tropp was inducted into the Who's Who of American Food and Beverage by the James Beard Foundation in 1989, Karen MacNeil wrote: "Feminine, feisty and relentless in her search for authenticity, Barbara Tropp is largely responsible for changing the United States' stereotypical version of the Chinese restaurant."

Tropp sold the restaurant in 1997 because she was fighting ovarian cancer. She remained active in the food world, but after several remissions she died in 2001.