



## Saving Sweet & Sour

In the decade between 1947 and 1958, the City of Toronto bulldozed two-thirds of its Chinatown. Homes and businesses that had been held by Chinese Canadians for half a century were razed. Banks, community centres, newspaper offices, music societies, and schools fell to the wrecking ball. By the time the dust settled, heavy machinery had flattened several blocks of downtown Toronto. The way was clear for a shiny new city hall to rise at the intersection of Queen and Bay streets, on what would become Canada's largest civic plaza, Nathan Phillips Square.

What remained of Chinatown was primarily composed of businesses that served people outside of the community, with a few local organizations sprinkled throughout. Among these businesses stood the “Big Four” Chinese restaurants: Lichee Garden, Nanking Tavern, Sai Woo, and Kwong Chow. Opened during the very decade of the demolition, these restaurants mainly catered to non-Chinese diners, serving food that would be mocked as “inauthentic” today: dishes like chop suey, sweet-and-sour pork, egg foo young, and chicken balls with sweet-and-sour sauce. Torontonians had become familiar with these dishes from the takeaway chop-suey shops that were popular in the city, but the Big Four went beyond cheap eats and presented Chinese dining as an elegant, sit-down affair. As some of the first restaurants in Toronto to obtain liquor licences, the Big Four boasted menus that contained hundreds of dishes, served in air-conditioned dining rooms that could seat multitudes of people.

The individuals behind these restaurants were entrepreneurs, community leaders, and innovators who created connections with all sections of Toronto society — from everyday diners to the local and federal elites whom they wined and dined with lavish banquets. By fundamentally altering how Torontonians ate Chinese cuisine and how they thought about Chinatown, these restaurateurs used food to change hearts, minds, and stomachs in their effort to save the remaining part of their neighbourhood.

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