

# Understanding Asian America Through Food

**Instructor: Bo Kim**

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This course will use food as a framework for understanding both the history of and contemporary issues facing the Asian-American community.

The popular understanding of “Asian food” in the U.S. encompasses long-held stereotypes of Asians eating dogs, the recent interest in upscale fusion restaurants that raise questions of cultural ‘authenticity’ and hybridity, and the rapid, nation-wide rise of Korean-Mexican food trucks that challenge traditional notions of fusion food and cross-cultural interactions.

This course will study how food and conceptualizations of food reflect larger historical and cultural issues that continue to impact the Asian-American community. Furthermore, this course will discuss the complex legal, political, and economic history of Asian Americans in the food industry through case studies of particular foods and historical events from both a production and consumption standpoint.

Students will learn how to adopt an interdisciplinary, critical framework for understanding food and related issues of culture, ethnicity, diaspora, and identity. Learning and assessment will center on participation in class discussions, brief readings, in-class presentations, and weekend trips to Houston-area restaurants.

Prior knowledge of Asian food will be helpful but not required.

### Learning Goals:

1. Identify contemporary issues facing Asian-American communities (e.g. legacies of immigration, the model minority myth, economic disparities)
2. Describe the history of Asian-American immigration and its ties to food and food practices
3. Explain how food represents and reflects larger sociopolitical issues, ideologies, and histories
4. Compare and contrast historical and contemporary conceptualizations of Asian-Americans and, by extension, Asian food

### Course Materials:

1. All required texts will be available on Owl-space or viewed in class.
2. Students will also need to analyze one outside text for the final paper. Students are responsible for acquiring a copy of this work on their own.
3. Additionally, there will be at least two off-campus restaurant trips during the course of the semester. These trips will generally be scheduled on Saturday nights. Attendance at one trip is required, and students will be expected to pay for the cost of their meal (\$10-\$15). Those with financial difficulties are encouraged to speak to the instructor, and these conversations will be completely confidential.

### Assignments:

Reading responses (20%)- Students are expected to submit a reading response for some of the assigned readings. These responses can be focused on lessons learned, questions about, or criticisms of the reading. Responses will be used to guide class discussions and will not be graded. Responses should be roughly 100-200 words and will be due Sunday evening before class.

In-class presentation (30%)- Students will give a 15-minute group presentation further developing a relevant Asian-American historical or contemporary issue mentioned or discussed in class. These presentations will expand discussion of these issues outside of just a food context. Topics will need to be cleared with the instructor beforehand, but a list of potential topics will be made available.

Final paper (30%)- Students will focus on how Asian foods are conceptualized in literature, print media, visual media, etc. Student will pick one book or film and analyze the political ideologies of the text, its historical context, and how its presentation of food reflects these ideas. The instructor will compile a list of books and films for students to choose from but will be open to students analyzing works of their own choosing. In general, each student must choose a different text to analyze, and texts will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. The final paper will be 3-4 pages in length, double spaced.

### Course Policies:

#### Attendance Policy:

Attendance is expected at each class and at one restaurant trip. Legitimate conflicts must be cleared with the instructor at least 24 hours in advance of class. Two unexcused absences will result in an 'Unsatisfactory' grade for the course.

#### Grading Policy:

- 30%- Final paper
- 30%- In-class presentation
- 20%- Reading responses
- 20%- Class participation and attendance

#### Honor Code Statement:

Students are expected to follow the Rice Honor Code for all work done in this course. Details on the Honor Code can be found in the Honor System Handbook at <http://honor.rice.edu/honor-system-handbook/>.

#### Disability Support Services:

Any student with a documented disability seeking academic adjustments or accommodations should speak with me during the first two weeks of class. All discussions will remain as confidential as possible. Students with disabilities will need to contact Disability Support Services in the Allen Center, as well. For more information, visit <http://dss.rice.edu/> or call 713-348-5841.

#### Syllabus Change:

This syllabus is only a guide for the course and is subject to change with advance notice.

## Course Schedule

8/24 Introduction and Timeline Activity

### **I: Immigration, Discrimination, and Resistance- Legacies of immigration**

8/31 Yellow Peril, Chinese Exclusion Acts  
Case studies: Chop suey

Readings:  
Barbas, "I'll Take Chop Suey,"  
Wei, "An Illustrated History..."  
**(response due 9pm, 9/13)**

9/7 No Class (Labor Day)

9/14 Orientalism, the food of the 'Other'  
Case studies: Dog meat, chicken feet,  
Sriracha factory dispute

Readings:  
Jen, "A Concise History..."  
Mannur, "Asian American Food Scapes"

*TBD Restaurant trip (1 of 2)*

### **II: Labor, production, and distribution- Economies of food**

9/21 Labor strikes on the West Coast, Ward's Cove salmon cannery case  
Case studies: Sugar plantations, grape farmers, 'Alaskeros'

Readings:  
Zia, "Asian American Dreams," Ch. 6

9/28 Multiracial communities and the 'model minority'  
Case studies: Korean grocers (LA and New York)

Readings:  
Zia, "Asian American Dreams," Ch. 4, 7  
(especially important readings)  
**(response due 9pm, 10/4)**

10/5 Asylum, smuggling, restaurant labor  
Case studies: Various

Readings:  
Hilgers, "The Kitchen Network"

10/12 No class (Midterm Recess)

### **III: 'Authenticity' and Contemporary Asian-America- Identity and cuisine**

10/19 Post-1965 immigration and the rise of Korean, Vietnamese, and Thai cuisines  
Case studies: Kimchi, pho, sundubu jjigae, pad thai, Los Angeles, Houston

Readings:  
Takaki, "Strangers From A Different Shore," pg. 416-425, 436-471

10/26 'Authenticity' as the new cool  
Case studies: San Gabriel Valley (LA), Mala Sichuan (Houston), Yelp

Readings:  
Stevens, "Stop thinking and just eat"  
Wei, "How L.A. Became a Powerhouse..."  
**(response due 9pm, 11/1)**

11/2 Fusion food and food trucks (class discussion)  
Case studies: Wolfgang Puck, Underbelly (Houston), Roy Choi (Korean tacos)

Readings:  
Morehouse, "California Foodways"

11/9 Class screening, 'The Search for General Tso'

11/16 Final presentations

11/23 Final presentations

11/30 Wrap-up discussion

*TBD Restaurant trip (2 of 2)*  
*Final paper due (3-5 pages)*