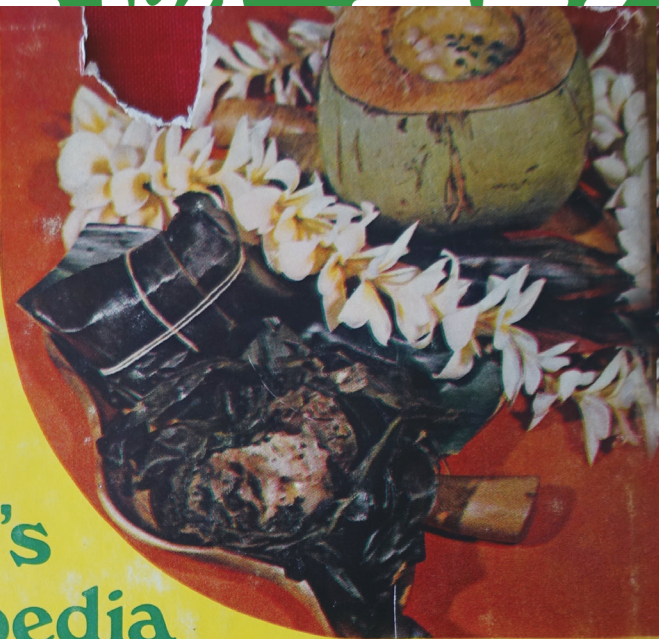


...ways to  
 enjoy the best of  
 Oriental cuisine  
 from your own  
 kitchen...



The  
 Gourmet's  
 Encyclopedia  
 OF

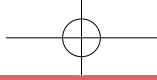
# CHINESE-HAWAIIAN COOKING



by ALYCE and  
 THEODORE CHAR

32 pages of illustrations  
 in black and white  
 and full-color

*Kiki Aranita's adventures in  
 vintage cookery*



**T**he *Gourmet's Encyclopedia of Chinese-Hawaiian Cooking* by Alyce and Theodore Char is an odd bit of 1970s history. It belongs to old Waikiki, which lives on only in thrift stores and on the retro postcards you find in every drugstore.

I'd stumbled upon a copy of the cookbook at one such thrift store in Waipahu, my grandparent's neighborhood on Oahu, which was once a sugar plantation town, and is now comprised of tiny wooden houses, Filipino mansions and very loud, wild roosters.

The cookbook reads like a memoir, although it also contains glossaries, set menus and sweeping statements defining the soul of Chinese cuisine. Several dishes are served in hollowed-out tropical fruit. The authors, wearing aloha print outfits and spiffy glasses, pose stiffly with cocktails.

It is an earnest scrapbook - not of Chinese-Hawaiian food, but rather dishes cooked by a Chinese family that happened to live in Hawaii. What we call the "local food" of Hawaii, a mingling of plantation-era cuisines, has preserved and popularized many Chinese (particularly Cantonese) recipes. However, only a few of these, like Beef Tomato and Chop Sui, seemed to be included in the cookbook.

I'm always looking for quirky recipes to adapt for Poi Dog Philly, the Hawaiian food cart that I own and operate in Philadelphia. The number of unfamiliar dishes in this cookbook was promising, but its reliance on canned ingredients was unnerving. For Poi Dog, my partner Chris and I make every sauce and every ounce of stock completely from scratch. We cure our own salmon in Hawaiian salt and make our own sausages. Except for Spam, we do not use canned food.

As I flipped through the book, I noted that the narrative is told mainly from Alyce's perspective: "My husband and I play contract bridge to pique our intellect, we travel to observe and to learn, and we cook to create. Cooking has afforded us much pleasure as a husband-and-wife team. This book reveals our accumulated knowledge, 'how-to' tips, and even our secrets."

I decide that I am ready to learn the Chars' secrets.

## CORN AND PORK

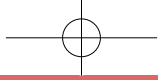
I start off cautiously, with a simple recipe from the chapter entitled "Vegetables." (This dish contains nearly as much pork as corn but whatever.) The terse description tells us: "This was Grandmother Char's concoction and remains a favorite dish."

Because it is March and therefore not corn season here in Pennsylvania, I'm relieved that the Chars note: "Frozen corn kernels are firm and a good substitute."

As I start to stir-fry, I notice some discrepancies in the recipe that call for quick decision-making. For example, the ingredient list specified 1/8 of a teaspoon of pepper, but the instructions ask me to stir-fry with 2 tea-

spoons of pepper. I opt for the latter. I make a paste of tapioca starch and boiling water, then simmer everything for 15 minutes.

**VERDICT:** Corn and Pork turns out to be seriously delicious. I'm tempted to layer it under some chawanmushi or add some fresh shiso to fancy it up a bit, but it's also great the way it is. When Chris tries it, he is also surprised. "It doesn't immediately strike me as Chinese or Hawaiian. It's comfort food for sure. And versatile. We could throw an egg in there ..." He finishes his plate after pouring hot sauce over it.



Something about the authority with which the Chars write makes me wonder if they were famous. When I showed the book to my aunt, who was born and raised in Hawaii, she clucked, "That couple was murdered. No one knows who did it."

A little digging turns up this item in the *Honolulu Star Bulletin*:

*It was 20 years ago this week – on Dec. 28, 1978 – that the bodies of Theodore and Alyce Char were found inside the entryway of their 12th floor condominium unit. No one was ever brought to justice in the stabbing deaths. Dr. Richard Chang, a Honolulu internist, died of a heart attack on Sept. 21, 1984, two weeks before he was set to go on trial for the murders. He was 59. Police had no leads in the case in the first four years after the stabbings. But Chang was charged in 1983 after the Wailana parking lot attendant came forward to say he let Chang into the building the morning of the crime. Prosecutors said a bloody fingerprint left on the back of a Christmas card hung on the door of the Chars' apartment belonged to Chang.*

I am unable to find anything else about the deaths of this socialite couple. I wonder how they would feel, knowing that this cookbook is their legacy.

## THREE MUSHROOM CHICKEN & PRESERVED KUMQUATS

Next, I tackle the Chars' recipes for preserved kumquats and Three Mushroom Chicken: "The novelty of this dish, a Vancouver recipe, lies in having three different kinds of mushrooms. Chicken combines well with the smooth texture of the mushrooms." I set Chris to work salting, rinsing and dissecting a whole fryer chicken. Meanwhile, I dump kumquats in boiling water and baking soda, then scramble to find anything that resembles "long-stem crystal dishes in clear or contrasting colors." Being of the generation that believes mason jars are suitable substitutes for wine glasses, I settle on some jam jars. Chris starts complaining, "Why rub the chicken with salt and then rinse it?"

I shrug. "Why would they tell us to get a whole chicken if we're just going to chop it up?"

"Maybe you couldn't get cut-up chickens in the 1970s?"

Then I realize that although the recipe calls for the liquid from canned French mushrooms, I'd accidentally bought fresh button mushrooms instead. However, I do have canned straw mushrooms, so I use their liquid

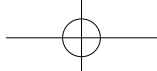
instead. Chris grimaces, "I'm not eating that." I brown some thoroughly smacked ginger and the chicken in the wok, adding salt and whiskey. I also drink some whiskey.

There is so much liquid in the wok, it looks like chicken soup. I let it simmer for 25 minutes, according to the directions, but it is still pretty soupy by the time we sit down to taste it.

**VERDICT:** It's not bad, maybe a bit boring. Chris says, "It seems like something that would be on an American-Chinese menu. That thickish brown sauce, mushrooms that look like they came out of a can ..."

"They *did* come out of a can."

I pile a plate high with Three Mushroom Chicken, Corn and Pork, rice and some kumquats and bring it to my friend Julie. To me, there is no question in my mind that these are derivations of Chinese cuisine. (Then again, growing up with home-cooked Chinese food has given me the parameters for understanding all other food.) What happens if I take away the labels of "Chinese" or "Hawaiian"? Offering



Julie no background information, I set the plate in front of her.

“This tastes like southern North-American Mexican to me. Oh my God, I love this,” she says. “I keep waiting for the mushrooms to be gross, but they’re not! I hate mushrooms but I can’t stop taking bites of this.”

She tries the Corn and Pork. “This tastes like a loose meat sandwich from Ohio. I’ve tried to replicate that so many times. I mean, that sandwich is pleasantly dried crumbly beef and I know this is pork but IT TASTES CLOSER

TO IT THAN I’VE EVER HAD. Even if it’s pork. THIS TASTES SO MUCH LIKE DARKE COUNTY, OHIO.” Julie is shrieking at this point.

She takes a bite of a kumquat, “Oh these are just GOOD.”

Jabbing her fork at her plate, she keeps rambling. “This tastes like rural Ohio to me. The cilantro was like, huh? But besides that, this is succulently bland, like a really good Ohio mom cooked this.”

In the cookbook, nostalgic Cantonese-influenced recipes comprise the majority of the dishes. Overtly Hawaiian recipes are few in number and relegated to the “International” section.

In Hawaii, there is a great emphasis on humble food. Rice has overtaken taro as the primary starch of the islands by leaps and bounds, and Hawaii’s two main examples of comfort food – plate lunches and Spam musubi – could not exist without rice. As I cook through each recipe, I put on a pot of rice out of habit, and it is only as I write this article that I realize none of the recipes actually asked me to do so. The Chars lay out many options for menus and their recipe instructions can be painfully wordy, yet few of those words ever refer to rice.

## PIPI KAULA

One of the regular menu items at our food cart is pipi kaula, Hawaiian-style beef jerky. By now, Chris and I have tested dozens of recipes, eventually arriving at a marinade that consists of crushed red pepper, ginger, garlic, soy sauce, brown sugar and Hawaiian red salt. The Chars’ recipe, a little simpler than ours, does not call for ginger or any kind of pepper.

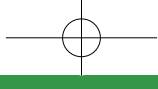
The recipe’s headnotes tell us: “The best pipi kaula we ever tasted came from the island of Hawaii. We are told the people who process this commodity cannot fill their orders fast enough. As nearly as possible, this is the recipe we have guesstimated.” Sounds promising.

The first step instructs us to cut the beef against the grain into 3/8” pieces. Chris imme-

diately starts grumbling. “Against the grain? Are you sure? First time I’ve ever seen those instructions. And that length is oddly specific. Why not just half an inch?”

We follow the instructions faithfully until it becomes impossible. Considering that it’s snowing heavily, we are unable to do dry the meat in the “true Hawaiian way, tied with string and hung on a clothes line to sun 2 days.” Instead, we prepare the Chars’ pipi kaula as we usually do ours, by baking it in the oven for several hours at 175° F.

**VERDICT:** It turns out way too salty – almost inedible. We choke on a few pieces and throw the rest away.



I find a 1962 profile of Alyce Char in The Spokesman-Review. By the early 1960s, the Chars were already pillars of the community; their residence was a gracious Manoa house. Alyce comes across as something of a Hawaiian-Chinese Martha Stewart – an expert socialite, but modest:

*“But I’m just a small town girl. Why me?” asked Mrs. Char when we met to talk .... She is big town in Honolulu where she is known as one of the most popular hostesses cooking Chinese. She does her own cooking, assisted by her husband and eldest daughter Beverly.*

Alyce maintained that her dinner parties were simple and inexpensive. “I’m not serving a feast; just a good meal for good friends,” she insisted. Dressed in red Chinese lounging pajamas and a long embroidered jacket, she told the interviewer: “I wore this for you to see. It’s my idea of a hostess gown, and my daughters wear matching robes.”

## RICH POUND CAKE

A pound cake recipe in a purported Chinese-Hawaiian encyclopedia of food? The Chars explain: “So many have asked if our pound cake recipe will be in the cookbook that we are proud to include it. Everybody who has tasted it describes it as ‘delicious,’ ‘consistently good texture’ and ‘yum yum.’” That seems like sound reasoning to me. Also, the previous owner of this cookbook had jotted a note: “Rich Pound Cake. *Very good.*”

The instructions are straightforward. After mixing together butter, egg yolks, milk, powdered sugar, egg whites, mace and vanilla, I read the following: “Bake in moderate oven (325° F to 350° F) about 1 hour, or until done when tested with cake tester.” I find the lack of a precise temperature infuriating. I set my oven at 325° F and the timer for 55 minutes and cross my fingers.

The pound cake comes out with a dark golden crust. I let it cool and slice it into large cubes. It is impressively fluffy and light – the least pound-cake-like pound cake I have tasted,

while still being recognizably a pound cake. Though I handle the cake delicately, parts of it still crumble.

**VERDICT:** I bring the pound cake to a house party – the kind where you find makeshift beer pong tables and sour cream-based dips. People are already pretty drunk when I arrive, which is helpful because the drunker they are, the more crumbs and compliments they drop. I park myself close to the table, double-fisting red wine and homebrewed beer in order to catch up to everyone else. Meanwhile, I take note of what people say about the pound cake and try not to stare too intently at them chewing.

“It’s excellent! Delicious!”

“Oh hey, it’s crumbling.”

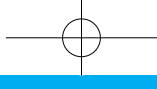
“This is really good.”

“It’s kind of dry.”

“Well, it’s pound cake.”

I consider the Rich Pound Cake to be mostly a success.

The names of the Chars’ children are listed in the cookbook’s dedication page. On a hunch, I look them up on Facebook. I find out that they attended Punahou School, my alma mater, but four decades before I enrolled. Only Beverly Char’s name gives me a viable result. Breathlessly, I send a message asking if she is indeed the daughter of Alyce and Theodore Char. As I write this, I still have heard nothing from her.



## FRIED CHICKEN NOODLES

I look forward to trying this dish because the anecdote accompanying the recipe is hilarious:

*There used to be a restaurant in Honolulu which by Chinese standards served the best Chinese food. Most nine-course dinner parties celebrating longevity birthdays, weddings, or the month-old birthdays of babies were held there. The wooden stairway, with its worn stairs, added to its rustic charm. The noon specialty was Fried Chicken Noodles. Some people claimed the secret lay in the Chicago-made noodles, others said it was the gravy, but the cook smilingly murmured, "Me smart cook, China come."*

The recipe calls for pork bones, carrots, dried dates, fresh ginger, brown sugar, salt, canned chicken broth, fresh pork, a fryer chicken, rock salt, these mysterious "Chicago-made noodles," salad oil, sesame oil, garlic, a can of bamboo shoots, dried mushrooms, ham, tapioca flour, soy sauce, Chinese parsley and green onions. Making the stock - from chicken broth and pork bones - and the gravy is laborious, even as I cheat by using chicken thighs instead of the whole fryer chicken. But boiling the noodles and frying them into noodle cakes

is tremendously satisfying.

The Chars list a few variations at the end of the recipe: "Canned whole chicken may be substituted for fresh chicken. Simply shred meat and add liquid to stock, omitting chicken broth" and "For quickie method, substitute canned whole chicken and omit making stock with pork bones. Use extra can of chicken broth."

I can't even imagine what a canned whole chicken would look like. The gravy turns out well.

**VERDICT:** Chris likes the crunchy texture of the noodles and declares it to be "better than the Three Mushroom Chicken," which he is still complaining about. I decide it would have tasted fresher if I had left out the ham and canned bamboo shoots, though the Hawaiian in me totally understands their presence. In Hawaii, we have a special relationship with canned goods, especially Spam and Vienna sausages. The next day, Chris feels nauseous and tells me, "I did that thing where you try to pinpoint the source of your nausea: Think about all the food you ate the day before and whatever makes you feel the most sick is the culprit. Well, I thought of those noodles."

*We follow the recipe faithfully until it becomes impossible*



## BEEF TOMATO & BRANDIED CHICKEN IN COCONUT SHELL & POI

I invite several friends over for a dinner party inspired by the Chars' culinary guidelines: "A balanced and satisfying Chinese meal ... should consist of a soup; main dishes, each of which has as the major ingredient chicken, pork, beef, fish and/or seafood; and a vegetable." My menu lacks a vegetable dish, but I think I deserve bonus points for serving something inside an empty coconut.

I make the "poi" first, whose recipe I find completely mind-boggling. In Hawaii, the staple starch is poi, which is made from mashed taro root. But this recipe calls for pumpkin, water, sugar, salt, cornstarch, sugar, coconut milk and vanilla. A bit of Googling tells me that Chars were likely thinking about "po'e," a Tahitian fruit pudding. But I'm pretty sure they don't have pumpkins in Tahiti. I mention this to my friend Mel, who says very helpfully, "Well, you're doing it right because it's March and there are no pumpkins here either."

In the end, I buy organic pumpkin in a Tetra-Pak at the grocery store, which saves me from having to boil a fresh pumpkin and put it through a ricer. In a large mixing bowl, I combine 1½ pounds of pumpkin with two cups of sugar and an alarming amount of cornstarch. The recipe has a footnote: "If a chewy dessert is desired, use 2 cups cornstarch instead of 1½ cups." I can't imagine putting more cornstarch in this. I bake the "poi" at 300° F for 30 minutes, pour the coconut milk and vanilla over it and continue baking for another 15 minutes, skeptical that this mess will turn into custard.

I give Chris four coconuts and ask him

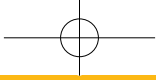
to hack them in half for Brandied Chicken in Coconut Shell. He struggles to saw them open, only succeeding with two. Meanwhile, I happily start throwing bits of chicken, dried dates, ginger, green onions and whiskey into a wok. Once again, the recipe calls for canned mushrooms. Once again, I opt for fresh.

The stir-frying culminates in the addition of brandy, and then the mixture is meant to be ladled into the coconut shells and refrigerated until needed. The recipe concludes with these final serving instructions: "Fifteen minutes before serving, heat in oven 325° F. More brandy should be provided in decanters at table."

I definitely do not own decanters. I put the bottle of E&J directly on the table.

The recipe for Beef Tomato is simple: flank steak and tomatoes with small quantities of sesame oil, brown sugar, soy sauce, onion, oyster sauce and tapioca starch. One instruction makes me shudder: the beef is to be stir-fried until half-cooked, then put back into the same bowl where it had been mixed raw with tapioca, oil, brown sugar and soy sauce. Every ServSafe-certified particle of me is alarmed. I spoon the meat into a clean bowl.

**VERDICT:** Beef Tomato is a hit at dinner. (Buoyed by this victory, I'll make a huge batch of Beef Tomato two days later to serve at my food cart. We will sell out of nearly everything that day - all our kalua pork and mochi nori fried chicken and every last Spam musubi. But we will only sell five Beef Tomato plates.)



# *I can't even imagine what a canned whole chicken would look like.*

Back at my dinner party, the “poi” isn’t nearly as bad as expected but it does give rise to mockery. Mel asks, “What makes this Tahitian?”

“The coconut milk?”

“Definitely not the pumpkin.”

“Right. Because what would the first Thanksgiving be without the Tahitians?”

Mel continues: “I really liked the beef, though the gravy was the best part. The dessert definitely felt dated, as did the coconut shell chicken. It’s so ‘60s or ‘70s to serve something in a coconut. Serving food in a hollowed out fruit makes a non-Hawaiian dish automatically Hawaiian. Just like you put cream cheese on something and it’s automatically Philly.”

“At our food cart, when we tell new customers that we serve Hawaiian food, they always ask: ‘Is there pineapple in it?’”

Chris interjects, “People will call anything Hawaiian if you put a pineapple on it.”

Mel says, “It’s like shorthand for making something exotic and different.”

Chris adds, “I feel like Chinese and Hawaiian food are both subject to constant inauthentic interpretations ... Put those crunchy, canned La Choy noodles on something and that’s shorthand for Asian.”

As a child in Hawaii, I was unable to assign any categories of ethnicity to the food I ate. Our family potlucks always featured cone sushi, enormous charsi u bao, kalua pig, macaroni salad, pork guisantes, kimchi, lavosh and avocado Jell-O. I look at these items now and think: Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian, American, Filipino, Korean, Armenian? I have no idea. Like many families in Hawaii, my clan is very ethnically mixed, as is the food that we consume and share.

The Chars’ cookbook, born a generation before me, does not include the food I consider to be Chinese-Hawaiian; there is no mention of manapua, pork hash or pepeiao. *The Gourmet’s Encyclopedia of Chinese-Hawaiian Cooking* has its roots in Chinese food, but the “Hawaiian” part of its title refers less to the few pseudo-Hawaiian recipes in its pages than to the flexibility that Hawaii offers its cooks.

With its recipes constrained by the lack of fresh ingredients, the Chars’ cookbook is trapped in time, but it was also an open door to the world of a Waikiki hostess where elaborately carved fruit, fancy cocktails and devastatingly stylish outfits were de rigueur.

Alyce and Theodore Char never lived to see their Hawaii change into a land where low-slung bungalows have been replaced by mirrored skyscrapers. Nor did they anticipate a time when cooks both amateur and professional would rededicate themselves to exploring traditional ingredients and truly Hawaiian methods. I wish they could have seen it for themselves. 🍷

