

SC-111 Biog - (T)

Brief Life/Mard Naman

A WOK ON THE WILD SIDE

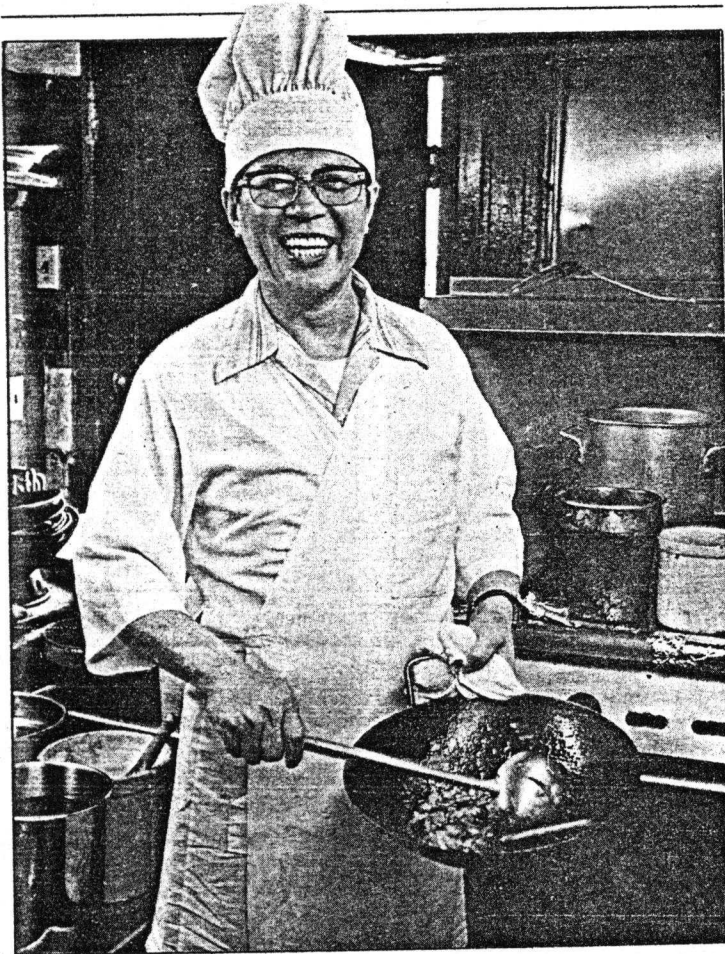
ON THE NIGHT of January 24, 1977, restaurant manager Francis Tong had his hands full of dough. Not the kind of dough from which won ton are made, but the kind that is sometimes called the root of all evil. On this day, as on several other occasions, Francis had cashed a hefty check by forging the name of his employer at the New Riverside Chinese Szechwan Restaurant in Santa Cruz. Cash in hand, he then headed straight for a local, legal casino to play poker—and to lose.

The 52-year-old Francis Tong was leading a double life. He spent his working hours as the popular and successful general manager of the New Riverside, an establishment that had been in the red until he took over and turned it into a money-maker. But when he wasn't in the restaurant, Francis Tong was in the casinos of Santa Cruz and San Jose, losing money to the tune of thousands of dollars a month. Sometimes he ventured further afield, with similar results: In Las Vegas, he once dropped \$9,000 in fifteen minutes. Between October, 1976, and January, 1977, he had, by his own admission, gambled away \$18,000 of New Riverside money.

Francis's losing ways did not fail to attract the attention of the other gamblers, who would spot him entering a casino and rush over to get in his game. ("He was a *terrible* player," a dealer at the J & J Club in Santa Cruz fondly recalls. "He used to literally throw money away.") "I am *not* a good player," Francis agrees.) And they were soon to attract the attention of the law, too: In March, 1977, Francis Tong was busted on one count of grand theft and four counts of forgery in Santa Cruz Superior Court.

It was the end of one double life for Francis Tong, and the beginning of another. For while he was out on bail, Fran-

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cis made a monumental discovery: He was a much better cook than crook. Such a good cook, in fact, that he was offered the unique opportunity to spend his days behind the burners of a restaurant stove and his nights behind bars at the Sheriff's Rehabilitation Facility in Watsonville. "It's hard to remain objective when you eat his food," explains Santa Cruz Assistant District Attorney George Kovacevich, who handled Francis's sentencing. "That beef with oyster sauce, you *got*ta have that."

BUT THEN, it is very difficult for anyone to harbor a grudge against Francis. Maybe that's because he's

got a firm handshake, a ready smile and the ability to remember your name forever after hearing it only once. (This last talent he picked up during a stint as a Dale Carnegie instructor in 1963.) Or maybe it's because—with the major exception of gambling—he's very good at what he does. That might explain what happened the first time Francis got caught, in June, 1976: His employers at the Tokyo-based company that owned the New Riverside traced a missing \$34,000 to Francis and his nasty habit. Instead of pressing charges, they forgave him.

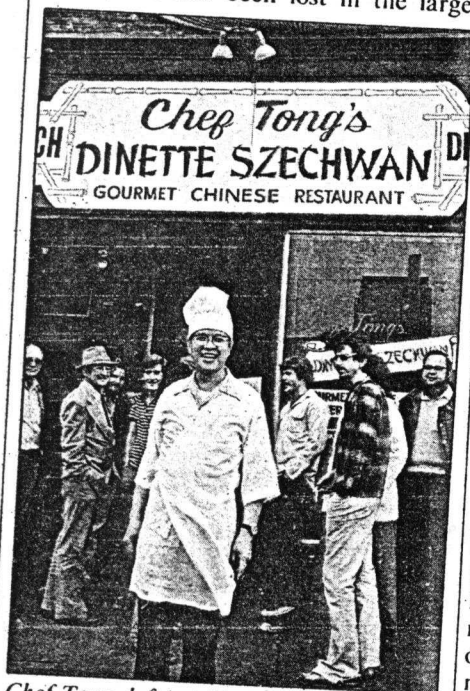
But by 1977 it was apparent to everyone that Francis had to be protected from himself. Nobody saw it more clearly than Francis. To him, getting arrested was not a disgrace, it was "the best thing that ever happened to me. Otherwise, I would never have stopped gambling!" He recalls with actual pleasure the day he was busted: "When the police came, I was laughing, I was smiling. I knew I deserved it. The load was off my shoulders."

Francis willingly provided the district attorney's office with information. Still, no one was able to figure exactly how much he had taken. According to D.A. Kovacevich, "Francis may have taken up to \$98,000. Because of poor accounting, it's hard to tell. But if that figure is correct, the amount embezzled was the most I have ever seen in Santa Cruz County."

If Francis ever needed the power of positive thinking, it was during the spring and summer of 1977. While waiting for the justice system to decide what to do with him, Francis had the encounter that would change his life. Shortly after he was arrested, Francis ran into Bill Williamson, an old acquaintance from the casinos. Unlike Francis, Bill was a good gambler—good enough to have run several gambling establishments for many

years. "Francis is an intelligent person," says Williamson, "but when it comes to gambling, he doesn't know anything. He's completely lost."

If Francis had been lost at the gaming tables, Bill had been lost in the larger



Chef Tong, left, wields a wok; above, eager eaters surround him outside his restaurant.

sense of having no Purpose in Life. But by the time of Francis's arrest, Bill had already been resurrected as a born-again Christian and owner of a Santa Cruz restaurant, a greasy spoon called Dinette. When they ran into each other at the Dinette, Francis had his arms full of groceries. Bill suggested a meal. Francis was happy to comply. Over Francis's spicy cooking, the two men discussed the evils of gambling. By the end of the evening, they had a deal: Francis would become the chef at a new restaurant to be called Chef Tong's Dinette Szechwan.

Appropriately, the Dinette Szechwan is housed in a born-again building. In a past life, the Dinette was The Antlers Club, one of the oldest card parlors in Santa Cruz. For seven years in the sixties, The Antlers Club had been run by none other than Bill Williamson.

FRANCIS STARTED cooking in April. By September, when he was sentenced to a year in Santa Cruz County Jail, he had acquired a loyal following of patrons who craved his expertly cooked, fiery fare—a following that did not exclude influential members of the legal community. And so in October Francis was given a unique opportunity: During the day, he would be allowed to continue working at the Dinette Szechwan, turning out the kind of food that melts men's hearts. But late at night, sometimes after the stroke of midnight,

he would return to the rehabilitation center. Judge Roland Hall, who handed down the sentence, even let Francis take Tuesdays off so he could drive to San Francisco to shop for supplies. After four and a half months of this routine, he was out on parole.

There were three other provisions to his sentence. One stipulated that Francis pay restitution in the amount of \$9,739—something that, with the help of his faithful customers, he is doing right now. Another placed him on five years probation. The third required him to abstain totally from gambling and never again to enter a gambling house. This may have brought grief to Francis's old playing partners, but Francis himself apparently has suffered little. "I went to Reno for two days and had no interest even in the slot machines," he says.

Francis loves this country, for it is here that his tale of sin and redemption has been able to end happily. "If this had happened to me in China, where I was born [in a city north of Hunan], I'd be through. Never have another chance. But here if you work hard, you become a new man. People respect you." He jumps out of a chair in the little restaurant. "I'm a new man!" he shouts excitedly. "I was reborn, definitely. I'm a hero in Santa Cruz!"

His customers agree: The Dinette Szechwan is packed from five o'clock on, night after night, with patrons spilling out into the street to wait for coveted table space.

And they're not waiting in line to soak up atmosphere. The Dinette Szechwan may be low on style, but it's way up there on food. Chef Tong serves up five kinds of hot sauces, makes his own chili paste from scratch, uses no monosodium glutamate, and cooks his red snapper dishes—eleven of them—from wharf-fresh fish. Diners have been overheard swearing that Francis's cooking provides their taste buds with a near-religious experience.

All Francis wants to do now is cook. "If you gave me a million dollars to stop cooking, I wouldn't do it!" he claims. "What's a million dollars to me?" He dreams of opening a chain of Chef Tong restaurants in university towns throughout California. And, to repay the good people of Santa Cruz for their leniency, he wants to teach them to cook la cuisine Tong in their homes. "I want to do something for Santa Cruz; I want to do something for this country," he says.

If other towns take to Francis as wholeheartedly as Santa Cruz has, there may be no stopping the man. As one leaves his restaurant after downing a memorable meal, one sees a tiny cookie fortune pasted on the door. "You will be showered," it says, "with good luck." Dale Carnegie couldn't have said it better.

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