

Popular SC chef Francis Tong dies

Francis Tong, popular restaurant owner, died Thursday morning at Santa Cruz Community Hospital. He had suffered a stroke Dec. 3.

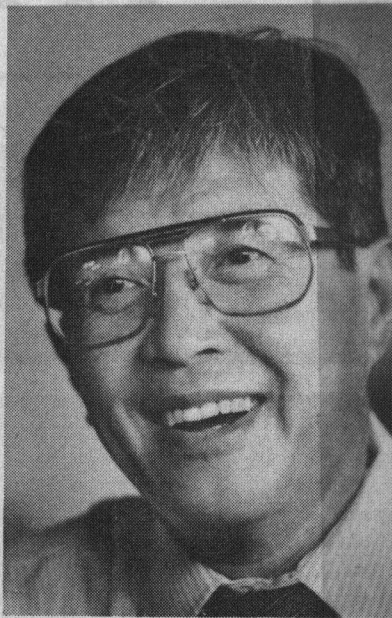
Tong, 58, lived in Santa Cruz and operated Chef Francis Tong's restaurants in King's Plaza in Capitola and at The Square in Aptos. He was voted Best Chef in Santa Cruz in a 1982 newspaper poll.

A native of China, Tong learned English at an early age, and held a number of public relations jobs in the airline industry. He moved to Santa Cruz in the early 1970s and helped run the New Riverside Restaurant for a Tokyo-based investor.

He said pressures of the job made him turn to gambling, and soon he was several thousand dollars in debt; he was subsequently arrested and convicted for embezzling money from the restaurant to pay his debts.

Soon after beginning his sentence, he was allowed to take part in a work furlough program and began cooking dinners at the Dinette restaurant on Cooper Street, where his reputation for excellent food and low prices quickly spread.

After 2½ years at the Dinette, he opened Chef Francis Tong's in Capitola. The restaurant



Chef Francis Tong

prospered, and he opened a second restaurant in Aptos about two years later.

This year, Tong made a video series on Szechwan cooking, and his first cookbook is now available.

In a recent interview, Tong said his success was based on a good attitude toward life.

"I live very simple — I live, dress and eat simple," he said. "I was down so many times, but I was never down. I'm just a born optimistic guy."

He leaves four children.

A memorial was held Sunday at Norman's Family Chapel. On Monday, there was a private cremation.