

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT

JULY/AUGUST 2006

Silver Spoon *Food Arts* presents the July/August 2006 SILVER SPOON AWARD for sterling performance to **Susanna Foo**, the Philadelphia chef/restaurateur who brilliantly pioneered a union between Chinese cuisine and French technique and presentation. Her Sino-French fusion, a word she's reluctant to use, continues to have currency, not only at her eponymous restaurant in Philadelphia and at **Suilan by Susanna Foo** in the **Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa** in Atlantic City, but at new restaurants that channel her inspiration, such as **66** and **Mainland** in New York City and **Buddakan** in Philadelphia and New York City. Foo is about to lead emulators down another path when she soon opens **Susanna Foo Gourmet Kitchen**, a 220 seat casual Asian restaurant in suburban Radnor, Pennsylvania, that will bring to the fore the substantial flour-paste wrapped dumplings, lamb dishes, and noodles of her native northern China.

Although Western chefs were starting to cast Eastern light onto their dishes, few European notions had penetrated Asian cookery in America when Foo set out on a professional career in the late 1970s. Foo changed that. She employed Western produce when their Chinese equivalents couldn't be found and then introduced fresh Chinese ingredients such as water chestnuts, lotus root, taro root, and soybeans when they became available. She built sauces on Western-style roasted bone stocks rather than the soy/cornstarch-based quick wok sauces so common in American Chinese restaurants. She based dishes around a single-serving, center-of-the-plate item rather than family-style platters. Her growing renown led to opportunities to travel, which opened her Chinese and Asian dishes to influences from countries as non-Eastern as Italy (rigatoni with duck confit and spicy Singapore-style tomato sauce) and Mexico (roasted pork quesadillas with brandy/hoisin sauce).

Despite her accomplishments — including two James Beard Awards — Foo can still give the appearance of the demure librarian and housewife she was before she got roped into cooking at Hu-Nan, her immigrant in-laws' homey Chinese restaurant in Philadelphia. "I'm still nervous about people liking my food," she reveals.

Born Su Sui-Lan in Inner Mongolia and raised in Taiwan, Foo and her husband, E-Hsin Foo, moved to Pittsburgh in 1966 to attend graduate schools. She had taken cooking classes with Fu Pei-mei, the Julia Child of Taiwan, and avidly watched the real Child on TV in the United States, replicating her recipes when she entertained. While at Hu-Nan, she was taken under the wing of a supportive diner, Jacob Rosenthal, the retired president of The Culinary Institute of America. He arranged for her to take the CIA's eight week professional program (1981), sent a friend to the restaurant to school her in French basics, and introduced her to the haute cuisine world of Lutèce and others in New York City. After honing her style at Hu-Nan for a few more years, she opened a restaurant under her own name in 1987.

"I never thought I could do this," she says. "I was a housewife. To be a leader was the hard part for me. But I'm fine now." — JIM PORIS

Susanna Foo

