

“I’VE BEEN CELEBRATING all month,” says author and chef Lorraine Witte, showing no signs of slowing from the festivities marking her 80th birthday as she settled into a salad at Chouquet’s on Fillmore, just blocks from her longtime home on Lafayette Park.

“I’ve got to squeeze one more career out of myself,” she says. “I’m not a bridge lady. I’m not a club joiner. I just want to keep going.”

And she is.

Witte is busy designing and making jewelry offered at the de Young and Asian Art Museums, and formerly at Mio on Fillmore Street, where Miyo Ota, her first customer, introduced her jewelry. She’s practicing for a recital after returning to the piano lessons she abandoned 40 years ago.

But most of all, she’s honoring her primal passion for food. As “The Chinese Lady,” she’s teaching cooking classes, filming instructional videos for her YouTube channel, penning her food blog and marketing her two cookbooks and an e-book of her top recipes.

“So much serendipity happened,” Witte says of her life, which has included stints in her family’s grocery store and restaurant in Hawaii, as an actress in the original *Hawaiian Eye* series, a reign as Miss Chun King, owner of a food company producing sauces and condiments and, for a time, running in Santa Barbara’s social circles.

She recalls it all in her newest cookbook, *A Pot of Rice to the Wonders of Wonton*. Excerpts follow.

A Particular Passion

My Chinese name is Oi Ing, although my birth certificate reads Lorraine Lum and my friends call me “The Chinese Lady.” I was born in Hawaii to Chinese immigrants and I learned at an early age that food is revered in a Chinese home.

Looking back, I realize that I first became aware of my multicultural heritage through food. My father showed me how to cook with his hands over mine. The process of preparing food became part of my identity: the touching, smelling, chopping, cooking — and then, of course, the joy of eating.

Of all the dishes, I have a particular passion for wontons — small dumplings with savory fillings, usually eaten boiled in soup. In Chinese, wonton literally means “swallowing clouds.” Heavenly!

Daughter of a Butcher

I still have my father’s butcher apron. It’s worn thin, discolored from bloodstains and neatly folded in my kitchen drawer. It gives me wonderful memories that influenced me in a thousand ways — from cultivating life skills that appeared in my love of the earth, to many years of nurturing my passion for food.

I would spend the days after school at my father’s grocery. Next to it was our restaurant, Kapahulu Chop Suey. Before starting my chores, I would sit on a bamboo stool and eat a steaming bowl of egg noodles that were topped with thick slices of char siu and minced scallions.

After my hearty bowl of noodles, I walked to the grocery store where I began my chores. First, the dirty canned goods were wiped with a damp cloth, then on to straighten the paper bags next to the cash register, and finally to fill the bags with rice. I remember so clearly that each bag had to weigh exactly five pounds.

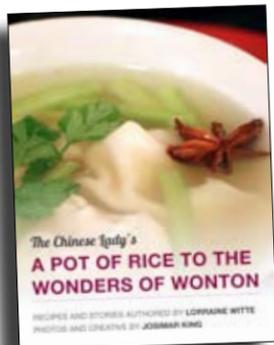
Next, I worked in the butcher shop, which was where I really wanted to be. There, my father taught me how to grind chunks of meat into hamburger by using



JOSIMAR KING

The Chinese Lady

Her love of wonton leads to yet another career — and now a new book and videos



Lorraine Witte (right) turned her passion for food into a new book and a series of videos with the help of Josimar King.



SAMUEL CONIGLIO

a wooden tool to push the meat through a metal hole. He placed my hands under the grinder so I could catch the meat — which looked like fat, red worms. He had me place it neatly onto a tray between green dividers in a glass showcase, then smiled. This was his look I always yearned for, as it meant I did my job well.

Strawberries at the Plaza

In the spring of 1949, my mother planned her first trip to San Francisco, and my sister and I got to tag along. My father took me to Sears and bought me a green suitcase and a matching coat. Sadly, my father couldn’t come with us since he had to work.

On the day of departure, I watched gigantic clouds slowly moving across the sky and read that as a good omen. We flew for 10 hours and finally landed in San Francisco. I felt the cold, damp air against my face. Luckily for me, my new coat kept me warm.

In the cab, I pressed my nose against the window and curiously watched the sights. I grew more excited the closer we got to the Plaza Hotel at Union Square, and I fell in love with the city at first sight.

When the waiter came after we ordered room service, he rolled in a table of food and flowers. There was a large bowl of apples, oranges, bananas and plums — yet what caught my eye was a bowl of bright, red fruit. I had never seen these in my father’s store, so I asked my sister what they were.

“They’re strawberries,” she said. I

reached for one, smelled it, then bit into it. I remember the crunching of the seeds between my teeth followed by the delicious juice that burst into my mouth. I ate one after another until they were gone.

I still love to eat strawberries the same way: slowly and deliberately savoring each juicy bite, loving the seeds that crunch and stick between my teeth.

San Francisco’s Chinatown

In 1951, my mother and I moved from Hawaii and rented an apartment on Pine and Powell Streets, near the cable car tracks. My mother frequented Blum’s coffee shop, sitting at the counter sipping coffee and enjoying a slice of their famous Coffee Crunch Cake. With my legs dangling off the high stool, I would watch the server dip a spatula under water, then hack straight into the crunchy part of the cake. In one motion, he served it up onto a plate and placed it in front of us. The whipped cream oozed out between the layers of white cake, but for me, the best part was the coffee crunch candy that always stuck between my teeth.

My father eventually moved to San Francisco, though he lived elsewhere, as he and my mother had grown apart. On one of his visits, he handed me a whistle attached to a chain to wear around my neck and told me it would keep me safe. Each evening, I held the whistle between my lips to blow at a threat’s notice. Fortunately, I never had to use it.

I still have that whistle. Whenever

students get a little noisy in my cooking classes, I’ll gently give it a blow. Blowing it out of fun, and not of fear, is a very good thing.

Hollywood Moments

In 1960, my roommate Margie and I were settling into the swing of our life in Hollywood.

My day job was at Systems Development Corp., considered the world’s first computer software company. In between acting gigs, I got a second job as hostess at The Islander, a high-profile tiki restaurant near West Hollywood. One night, as I slipped into my super high heels, I saw Tarzan himself, Johnny Weissmuller, walk through the door. As a child I had watched all his movies with my father, and there I stood, a foot from this larger-than-life movie star. In rapid succession, I told him about my love of his movies, my favorite moments in the series and that I agreed he was the best Tarzan of them all.

The commissary was buzzing with the usual extras, crew members and actors. Just then, I looked up and saw Cary Grant saunter into the room. He was tanned, with his famous cleft chin, and dressed to kill in his silk ascot.

He smiled and asked if I was from Hong Kong. I remember that I was so shocked that I instantly froze up and succinctly replied: “No, I’m not.” He smiled in his typical charming manner, then walked away.

All Roads Lead to Food

In 2001, my husband and I were living in Newport Beach when he fell ill. And with his passing, I was lured back to San Francisco a year later. I continued to teach in my home and at upscale culinary showrooms including Purcell Murray, Sierra Select and Dacor.

Later that same year, I had a wonderful lunch at Betelnut on Union Street. I met Alex Ong, the new executive chef from Malaysia, and told him about my idea of pursuing wontons. I asked if he would like to write a cookbook with me, and he responded “yes” with a nod and a smile. For more than two years, we sat across from one another simply brainstorming recipes. Eventually, he encouraged me to continue the journey on my own. “After all,” he said, “it was your idea and your passion that I liked from the very beginning.”

Seven years later, this cookbook was published.

Jumping Into Cyberspace

It was time to enter the digital world. I realized I needed to understand how to use a computer to manage all of my recipes. I bought an iMac and started classes at an Apple store. I loved the training right away; my teachers were all patient and kind. Over eight years of training, I met so many young, talented teachers with whom I’m still friends. Among them: an exceptional young trainer named Josimar King, who has especially been my lucky star. I told Josimar about my newest idea — making video recipes and sharing them on the internet — and asked if he had a camera. He quickly jumped into action, and within a month we uploaded five cooking videos. Today, we’ve shared more than 50 videos — and The Chinese Lady’s YouTube channel exceeds 100,000 views.

Our project has become a full-course meal.

A Pot of Rice to the Wonders of Wonton is available in paperback or Kindle versions on Amazon and as an iBook on iTunes.