

28 March 1974

Dear Harold:

If Mr. Miao wants to help you, it will be because you and Lil are the kind of people you are and because you treat him like anyone else: that is, you don't take unfair advantage of him simply because he's Chinese.

So in your approach to him, the important thing is to do it in such a way that if, for any reason, he has any reservations, he can decline gracefully.

You can, for instance, ask his advice about where to get what you need. If he wants to help you, this will enable him to do so on his own terms; if for some reason he doesn't want to get into that, he can get out of the situation without embarrassing anyone. I spell all this out not because you need to be told and won't do it instinctively anyway, but only because Mr. Miao already is indebted to you and this makes any Chinese uncomfortable. Jennifer thinks, and I agree, that he will welcome any opportunity to show either of you his appreciation. Under normal circumstances -- if you had been Chinese too -- this would have worked itself out long ago. But the situation is not normal; you are Americans, and his reluctance ~~to risk offending the mysterious morals of the inscrutable West has stayed his hand, as it were.~~ to risk offending the mysterious morals of the inscrutable West has stayed his hand, as it were.

If he is cooperative and helpful, he can tell you much more that will be invaluable besides how and where to acquire a wok.

He can, for instance, put you on to a source for fresh noodles, which can be of growing importance to you when Lil really gets rolling. Only one demonstration in his kitchen showing how to prepare noodles, for instance, would be worth hours and hours of reading about it. He also can tell you where and how to buy peanut oil. It's much cheaper by the gallon. We use perhaps a gallon in six months. What I really hope is that he will invite you both into his kitchen one day. That would be the most valuable thing of all.

Chinese cabbage: there are two kinds. Most common usually is the fat, bleached head known here as Napa cabbage. It has a white flat stem and a pale green leaf from the bleaching. This is the real Chinese cabbage, called pai ts'ai in Peking (it means white vegetable) and shiu choy in Cantonese. Mr. Miao presumably is Cantonese and will call it shiu choy.

The other kind of Chinese cabbage is not bleached. It has a long, beautifully white stem like white Jade and a dark, curly green leaf. It's called bok ~~or~~ choy or pak choy by Cantonese, ~~and~~ (and by Mr. Miao), which would be pai ts'ai in Peking, where the distinction is made by calling it hsiao pai ts'ai or little white vegetable.

Let's hope you are able to get that small freezer at a used price. Like you, we were restricted merely to the two-foot compartment in the refrigerator, but two or three years ago we blew ourselves to a small 4-foot Sears freezer which we keep in the basement, there being no room in the upper part of the house. It works beautifully; has a front-opening door and a very serviceable formica top if we could use it in the kitchen. We use it mostly to keep bread frozen fresh, along with fresh noodles

(packaged in four-ounce meal-sized plastic sandwich bags) and fresh pork, which we buy in roasts and cut up, again in four-ounce lots, for freezing. Mme. Chao has some good advice on using the freezer for Chinese food supplies.

As I recall it, we paid around \$120, perhaps a little less, for this thing new. It has been defrosted only two or three times, and is entirely satisfactory. If you can get its equivalent for \$50 or less you should be doing very well.

I think you're right -- your electric wok should do very well as an electric skillet. Any round lid, particularly with a high bell to it, will cover it efficiently for any steaming effect that is needed.

You don't say, but I assume that you cook with electricity. We've heard that the frequent need for quick changes in heat in Chinese cooking can be overcome by having one electric burner turned to high and another to low. This way the wok can be shifted from one to the other if needed. We've never tried it, but it sounds like a solution. Another might be a small camp stove that produces a gas flame. This isn't a good long range arrangement, but it might some time fill a stop-gap need.

Anyway, I have no doubt that the electric wok will certainly have its uses; it's just that you'll sooner or later need a second wok anyway in all probability. We both cook at once as a matter or ~~course~~ course, and even have a third, bigger wok which we seldom use but which is useful for large batches of mass-feeding dishes like ch'ao mien.

Best from us both,


jdw