

It's All About the Food

By Barb Young

There weren't many places to buy live frogs in Vancouver. But Mom insisted on fresh, so Chinatown was it. Dad hauled himself out of the bamboo lounge and shuffled to the sliding vinyl doors. These doors separated our private lives at the back of the store from the customers in the front.

Dad knew he shouldn't have complained about last night's dinner. We only had three dishes of food, when normally there would be four – one for each person at the table. Mom was now eager to show she lacked no culinary imagination. Rather, the failure lay in someone else's inability to find decent provisions.

Dad got into his 1972 Toyota, with me alongside. This station wagon was the first substantial item he had bought after immigrating to Canada, and Dad was the only person who knew the magical incantations to get it started. I loved our limousine. Long hours in the store meant fewer outings for me, so accompanying my parents on their errands was a treat, even if it was to Chinatown

There, beyond the gaze of the health inspectors, lay a wild frontier of two and four-legged creatures huddled in cages, waiting to be braised in soy sauce. All Cantonese speakers knew the old saying from the shores of Kowloon Harbour: "If it moves, eat it. If it doesn't move, build on it."

We parked in front of Sun Wah on Keefer Street and entered the meat store. Mr Jang wasn't my favourite merchant. He had pockmarked cheeks that were flame-red, and

he would often taunt me by saying, “I can never remember. Are you a boy or a girl?” This was in reference to my short hair and lack of physical development.

Dad said with a slight knowing nod, “We’re looking for something special for dinner tonight.” Mr Jang’s heavy brows lifted, and he ushered us behind the counter to the warehouse in the back. Rough-hewn wood shelving covered two of the walls. Wire cages of various sizes were stacked on these shelves, ranging from the gerbil cage to the one holding the Dalmatian. *Wow, that dog was really big.* The last time I was here I thought I saw an unhappy civet cat, but by the time I remembered to look it up in the Encyclopedia at home, I had already forgotten its markings.

“How much per catty for the frogs?” asked my Dad. “I’ll give you four of them for \$8.00,” replied Mr Jang. He knew that each person in our family would want their own frog. Mr Jang scooped out the four fattest frogs and put them in a cardboard Cougar boot box.

The box shifted in my hands as we walked back to the car. “Thump, thump.” I had to slap the lid down when the frogs jumped too enthusiastically. I thought excitedly about the expression on Mom’s face when she saw what we had bought.

“Why are they still alive?” she demanded. “Why didn’t you tell Mr Jang to kill them first?”

Dad shook his head and said, “They won’t be as fresh then.”

Mom clunked the frogs with the handle of her meat cleaver. They became still. She didn’t want to cut off their heads yet – presentation was important. Etiquette required that the heads of animals served at mealtimes be facing the most respected person at the

table. Mom poured corn oil into the blackened wok and turned the flames up high. If she charred the skin of the frogs, they'd be easier to peel.

But the frogs would not go gently into that good night. The hardest one began to stir. It stretched out its legs and tumbled off the mah jong table onto the concrete floor. The frog hopped frantically towards the vinyl doors and then through the 6-inch gap. "Get it!" Mom shrieked. Dad flung open the door and ran to the front of the store, wire-rimmed glasses sliding down his face, meat cleaver held high in warrior pose. This was not going to end well.

The frog bounded down the main aisle, past the toilet paper and Dare cookies. It was leaping for the front door and freedom on 12th Avenue. A few of the regular customers, already accustomed to seeing strange events at Brookside Market, grew alarmed. Who was Mr Lee chasing – a robber?

Dad was not agile. I was afraid that he would trip and impale himself on the meat cleaver, so I ran after him. The frog took a sharp corner after the pantyhose display and headed up the produce section. Customers were jostling each other near the front door, trying to escape from the man wielding the weapon. Only Mrs Hanley was too slow to get out. The frog sensed the breeze coming from the open door and doubled back. It darted between the legs of Mrs Hanley's walker.

"Baby piglet," Dad yelled at me, "Run ahead and throw your jacket over the frog". I dashed out the door and up the sidewalk, past the cobbler and barber shop. The frog was moving quickly. I hurled my windbreaker into the air, and the shoulder of it fell over the frog. Dad stomped wildly on my jacket. Eventually, it grew still. I hoped Mom would wash the jacket later.

We brought back our subdued prize to the empty store. Mom unfolded my jacket, and we gaped at the troublemaker. The frog looked bigger now that it was so flat. Mom shook her head and said to Dad, “The next time you bring dinner home, make sure it’s dead.”

I sighed in relief. Winter was coming soon, and snake would be the ideal remedy for cold blood.