*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong, (Frederic)*Inter-County Leader

**Making memories through my New York travels**

The first time I got on an airplane was when I left Hong Kong for the United States; goodness, that was 50-some years ago.

My college was in southern California, and that’s where I spent most of my time, going to school and working. Somehow, I did manage to visit my high school buddies from Hong Kong who were studying in other states, but it was by bus only. I never had a chance to fly again until my career took a turn many years later. I was invited to interview with companies in different parts of the country, and hence, I started to learn more about different airports and to begin my journey of traveling.

After spending 15 years in just one state, all I knew was San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Sacramento. Then the sky opened up, and I started to learn more about other states — Florida, Washington, Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, Wisconsin, New York, Minnesota, and many others. Even though most airport terminals look the same inside, the views before landing are all different. I loved the window seat as I could check out all the sceneries. Yes, California is a big state; yet, it is just a small part of a huge country!

In most of the states, planes would pass through mountains or forests before they landed on the runway. But not New York City; the plane would fly past buildings after buildings before it finally would land. It is indeed a land of cement forests. The first time I was in New York, I was in awe, as it reminded me so much of Hong Kong — tall buildings and busy people everywhere! And everyone seemed to be in a hurry.

I was on a business trip, hence not much time for sightseeing. My mission was to try different dipping sauces from various Chinese restaurants, and to create the perfect one for a restaurant owner (who is Jewish) so he could use the sauce for his Chinese restaurant in Beverly Hills. A bizarre story indeed, but that’s the story of my life. I think I had tried 15 dipping sauces from different restaurants, and I finally came up with my own. To spend all that money just to develop a dipping sauce? Why not, if you have plenty of time and money?

After my daughter graduated from college in Boston, she decided to move to New York to try her luck. She didn’t have a job lined up and she didn’t know a single soul; yet, she just packed up and went. Sounds a lot like her old man.

So, what kind of advice could I give her? I could hear her defending herself, “You did it, Dad, why can’t I?” That’s why I didn’t say a word. As in a miracle, not only did she find an apartment, but she also landed an amazing job. I guess luck ran in our family.

My wife and I went to visit her after she settled in. New York is nice to visit, but it is not my kind of town — I don’t like crowds and I am very frugal — to spend a fortune on hotel rooms and meals is not my cup of tea.

The third trip to New York was more fun, as all my expenses were paid. I was working for a Spanish broadcasting company then. No, don’t ask why in the world a non-Spanish-speaking Chinese person was working in a Hispanic company. To survive, you just got to do what you got to do.

Anyway, the company was bought out by some American investors who were interested in the growing market. They were looking for a new name for the company and were offering a prize for the winner — an all-expenses-paid trip to New York. Out of 500-some entries, they picked “Adelante,” which means “moving forward.” And guess who submitted it? Yes, yours truly.

It is nice to spend money when you don’t have to think about it. The prize included the plane fare, the hotel, $500 cash, plus dinner with the CEO of the company. I was shocked and elated. Not only could we visit New York in style, but we would be dining with the CEO.

I forgot the name of the restaurant, but we will never forget the dining experience. Needless to say, candles, shining chandeliers, spotless china and glassware … and the servers all dressed better than we did. Oh well.

But the scariest part of the whole experience was that the menu had no prices! Yes, no prices. Never in our lives had we eaten in any establishments that wouldn’t tell you how much it cost for your meal.

As a matter of fact, part of my skills in designing a menu is how to price the menu. Some would just put an even number as the price — $6, $9, $13, etc. — while some would put $23.99 just to reflect the price is under $24. But this menu had no prices listed! I looked at the CEO and he looked confident that we didn’t have to wash dishes afterward. So, I acted like we ate at places like this often and started to relax a bit.

We had appetizers, entrees, wines, after-dinner drinks, desserts and more after-dinner drinks. I stopped trying to figure out how much the meal would have cost me after the second glass of wine. Lordy, couldn’t wait to tell the guys at the office.

Our next time back in New York was when my daughter got married. It was a joyous occasion indeed, my little girl all grown up and found her true love. At the reception, before I gave the toast, I told the guests that in China, we called our daughter “Chien Jin.” In translation, it means a thousand teals of gold.

Just imagine how much it is worth for a single teal (bar) of gold and multiply that 1,000 times. I looked at the groom and said, “I’m giving you the most treasured possession I have ever had. And now she is in your hands. Please take good care of her.” Everyone cheered.

Finally, our most recent visit to New York was after our grandson was born. He was barely 7 or 8 months old. Watching my daughter feeding the baby, changing him and giving him all the attention and love just melted my heart.

Four months later, they announced that they would be moving to San Francisco as my son-in-law got recruited for a new job. Life does go around in circles. New York is not my kind of town, but it has left a lot of fond memories in my heart.

Who knows, we might return someday for a visit. I’d like to go back to the restaurant where the menu has no prices just to see for myself. I will bring my personal rubber gloves just in case I have to wash dishes.

*Peter’s new book “Have You Eaten?” is now available. It is a memoir of him growing up around food in Hong Kong, plus a lot of fun and interesting dishes from his cooking classes. Check out the video on his website, phkwong.com.*