In Southern California, the world’s major cuisines are now at my doorstep. But how my food habits began can be traced back through my parents to South China, then forward through my own childhood and adolescence in Mississippi and Florida.

My parents’ own families originated in China’s Pearl River Delta, a region that until not that long ago, supplied nearly all Chinese immigrants to the U.S. This coastal region is heavily urbanized and includes Hong Kong. Its climate is sub-tropical, like Florida. Rice is the dietary staple, and the cuisine (known in the U.S. as Cantonese or Hong Kong style cooking) features seafood and fresh produce. In stark contrast to northern Chinese (“Mandarin” or “Beijing”) cuisine, where rice is ignored in favor of noodles, southern Chinese cooking emphasizes fast cooking times and natural flavors, colors, and textures and, except for onions, garlic, ginger, and the ubiquitous soy sauce, little seasoning—hot chili peppers need not apply. Unlike (say) French cuisine, southern Chinese cuisine has no sauce reductions or baked pastries to speak of.

My basic food dispositions, basic tastes, and my world view of food—thus come from China’s Pearl River Delta, via my parents. These include:

- **A general obsession with food.** Historians argue that China’s recurrent famines made its culture a “famine culture,” with an unusual amount of concern focused on the ups and downs of food and on the next meal. Though born in the U.S., I’m definitely like Chinese my ancestors on that measure!
- **A taste for fresh produce, mainly vegetables.** This preference is a direct reflection of Cantonese cuisine.
- **In food preparation, a love of improvisation** that makes me constitutionally unable to follow a recipe. This yen for improvisation traces back to a couple features in Cantonese cooking. One is the southern Chinese technique of stir-frying in a wok; in stir-frying exact proportions don’t matter. The other is yet another manifestation of famine culture: “Cantonese will eat anything with four legs,” an old saying goes, “except the table.” In other words doctrine or conventions shouldn’t interfere with trying out new ingredients or novel combinations.
An additional couple of food habits can be traced to historical events experienced by my parents before I was born, and to the natural environments of a couple places where I grew up.

- I prefer the simple, the ordinary, and the cheap over the complicated, fancy, or expensive. Though from very different backgrounds (Mom’s parents were wealthy merchants whereas Dad’s were members of the laboring class) both experienced severe privation during the Great Depression of the 1930s and thus developed a frugality that they practice well into their 90s. I’ve inherited this frugality in a milder form. I’m a bargain hunter and I value well-prepared common food above high-ticket meals. I’ve had more than my share of high-ticket meals, enough to help me discern—most of the time—the difference between high-ticket and middle-ticket fare. Just the same, I’ve usually put my discretionary money into something other than a fancier meal.

- I have a couple of strong dislikes—for tropical fruit, and shellfish. Both phobias come from my parents but as negative reactions to their ardent passion for those foods, which in turn were played out in the verdant environments of the Deep South. My fruit phobia (except for tomatoes, Persian cucumbers, squash, and olives—which Americans consider “vegetables”) can be traced back to a childhood in Florida, where tropical fruit from our back yard—mounds of papaya, guava, and mango, not to mention oranges—were on the menu every day. During those years was I served enough tropical fruit to last nine lifetimes. Ugh—what an overdose! On the Mississippi coast, where I subsequently spent some of my childhood, the overdose effect was the same but with crustaceans as the subject. Our Mississippi house there was located on a bayou, from which we
harvested blue crabs in our own traps, just fifty steps from the front door. When recently I tried to tell a Mississippi story to my own kids, I turned to Mom for verification: “Isn’t it true Mom, that we had piles of crab on the table almost every week?” Her reply: “Not exactly son, on good weeks we had piles of blues every single day!”

♦ Conclusion. By the time that I entered college, my culinary roots had been shaped by culture (cuisine of the Pearl River Delta), historical events (the Great Depression as experienced by my parents), childhood places (Florida and coastal Mississippi), and family psychology (overdose reactions to some of the foods that my parents love).

Some elements of my eater identity developed later, including medical challenges and felicitous marriage to a woman who was raised in a culture completely at odds with the Chinese attitude toward food. These will be the subject of future blogs.

Word count (not including captions): 810.
Word count (including captions): 923.