

So that's what they're eating

by **Barbara Ann Rosenberg**

Special to the Daily News

We're about to solve a mystery — a mystery that has bothered me as long as I've been going to Chinese restaurants. (And believe me, that's a *long* time.)

What is it, I wondered, that those waiters, waitresses and restaurant owners seated at the staff table are eating that looks so delicious and smells so enticing — and where is it on the menu? Or, if it isn't on the menu, how do I get some?

And what better time to find out than just before the Chinese New Year, the Year of the Boar 4693, which begins at 12:01 a.m. Jan. 31?

When I asked E-Hsin Foo, husband of restaurateur Susanna Foo, what the staff eats when customers at 1512 Walnut St. have finished their meals, he laughed.

"It depends," he answered. "Most of our staff is Vietnamese, and they like a lot of stews."

Often, he said, the staff meal is a spur-of-the-moment creation, combining what's left in the kitchen with spicy Vietnamese seasonings staffers have brought from home.

"Sometimes we've been really rushed and they're tired, so they just grab whatever is in the kitchen and cook it," Foo said. "For example, if we have filet of beef,

they'll take the trimmings" — the fattier portions relished by Vietnamese, but not by customers.

"Sometimes they bring seasonings from their homes, like the Vietnamese curry preparations that include a lot of hot pepper and lemongrass, and they make a great curried beef for themselves," Foo said.

The Fools sit down to eat "whenever we find the time. Sometimes we eat with the staff, but very often we eat by ourselves. Sometimes it's the only time we have to talk to each other all day long. We're usually both so busy."

Like many Chinese restaurants, Susanna Foo will offer customers a festive banquet menu for the new year. The menu — available for parties of four or more from Jan. 31 through March 11, for \$50 per person — will incorporate a number of Western luxury ingredients: shiitake mushrooms, foie gras, lobster caviar and pine nuts.

At Fragrant Chives, 1623 Walnut St., chef-owner Jimmy Chu prepares the staff meals, which consist of "something different every day. Always rice, of course, or noodles — or both."

The staff meals, like those for customers, depend on what looks good at the market. On a recent weeknight, there were two

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There's rice every night; the New Year's Eve staff party at Fragrant Chives will feature a pig, says Chu (left)

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dishes: a whole striped bass steamed with ginger, scallion and soy sauce, and Hainan Chicken, which takes its name from an island located off mainland China.

"The climate there is sort of like Hawaii," Chu said of Hainan, "and the people eat somewhat differently there from most of the country."

"For example, a lot of lemongrass grows on Hainan, so people use it in the preparation of their food. And they have been specialists in raising chickens for 400 to 500 years, so they eat a lot of it."

Chu will treat his staff and family members to several dishes that are reputed to bring wealth and happiness at a private New Year's Eve party that will begin after the restaurant finishes serving customers on Monday.

The centerpiece of the feast?

"A pig, of course," said Chu. "A suckling pig. That is the symbol of wealth — so we must have it. And, of course, since this is the Year of the Boar, it's especially important."

"When it is the Year of the Ox, we eat beef for the New Year ... Some people eat snake as a symbol for the Year of the Dragon."

However, he added, "No one eats tiger in the Year of the Tiger."

A Chinese family's New Year's dinner at home might include chicken feet and duck, along with steamed fish and seafood, Chu said. "Seafood means 'good business,' and duck stands for 'good food throughout the year,'" he said.

Fragrant Chives will serve customers a five-course New Year's menu from Jan. 31 through Feb. 7. It is \$35 per person, available for parties of two or more.

Suckling pig will be one of the dishes, said Chu. "We want all our patrons to enjoy the pleasure of wealth, so we have included suckling pig as one of the dishes we will serve to them, too."

The 11:30 p.m. staff meal at Mustard Greens, 622 S. 2nd St., is usually based on vegetables and fish, said owner Bill Wong, who operates the neat, contemporary Queen Village restaurant with chef-partner Bon Siu.

"Occasionally chicken. Rarely meat. That's what most people are used to," Wong said.

Wong and Siu will throw a private New Year's Eve party for staff, regular customers and neighbors of the restaurant, prominently featuring many "good luck" dishes.

"Dry oysters mean good things will come to people during the year," Wong noted.

The menu will include *fa choy*, a fine dried seafood — also for wealth — along with pig, chicken or duck, or perhaps all three.

Wong said the pig, chicken or duck are served with the head, feet and tail on "so there's an auspicious beginning, and end, to the year. Most important, the pig must have the tail."

The restaurant will be closed on Tuesday, the day after the party.

"Chinese New Year is our only day off," said Wong, "so we enjoy it with our families."

Mustard Greens will serve a seven-course New Year's menu from Feb. 1 through 14, available for groups of 4 or more for \$28 per person. The menu includes dishes such as lobster stir-fried with ginger and scallion and "firecracker shredded pork."

Ocean Garden at 942 Race St. in Chinatown doesn't close until 3 a.m. That means the staff sits down for a meal at 2:45 a.m., said owner Stephanie Shen, whose brother, Ting Dorn, is the chef.

Some service staffers may sit down for an earlier meal, usually about 10 or 11 p.m. A recent 10:30 p.m. staff dinner consisted of a large mound of tiny clams in a black bean sauce, an even larger mound of sautéed Chinese broccoli, and rice. Both the clams and broccoli are dishes from the regular menu.

Much grander fare is planned for the two 10-course New Year menus Ocean Garden will serve from Jan. 30 through Feb. 15. The *prix fixe* menus, \$138 and \$188, are available to groups of 10. (Smaller parties can order from the regular menu, which will also be available.) Both menus include shark's fin soup, which the Chinese consider a great delicacy. The costlier menu includes more expensive shellfish, such as oysters in black bean sauce, peppered shrimp and lobster.

The following staff dinner recipes can be prepared at home to celebrate the arrival of 4693.

FRAGRANT CHIVES' HAINAN CHICKEN

Chicken:

2 gallons water
1 5-pound chicken, whole
Large bowl filled with water and ice

Rice:

2 teaspoons vegetable oil
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1 stalk lemongrass (white part only), finely chopped
2½ cups uncooked rice

Bok choy:

2 pounds bok choy (Chinese cabbage)
Salt to taste

Bring water to boil in a large pot. Add the chicken. Cover and remove from the heat. Let stand, covered, 30 minutes.

Remove chicken, saving the broth. Dunk the chicken in the bowl of ice water to shrink the skin onto the meat. Cut into quarters or serving pieces.

To make the rice, heat the oil in a large saute pan. Saute garlic and lemongrass — do not brown — for 1 to 2 minutes. Add the rice and stir with garlic and lemongrass for 1 to 2 minutes. Add enough of the reserved chicken broth to cover the rice by ½ inch. Bring to a boil, cover and cook 20 minutes.

To make the bok choy, heat the remaining chicken broth in the pot until it is just boiling. Add bok choy. Cook until tender-crisp, about 10 minutes. Add salt to taste, up to 1 teaspoon, and serve in the cooking liquid. Serve with Dipping Sauce. Serves 4 to 6.

DIPPING SAUCE

2 cloves garlic, finely minced
2 ½-inch slices fresh ginger, peeled and finely chopped
3 tablespoons rice wine vinegar
1 scallion, green part only, finely chopped
2 teaspoons sugar
½ teaspoon salt
Optional: Tiny amount of fresh hot red or green pepper, minced

Combine all of the above ingredients in a bowl. Serve in individual small dishes.

MUSTARD GREENS' STEAMED WHOLE FISH

1 whole sea bass, 2½ to 3½ pounds, cleaned
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon pepper, or more to taste
6 scallions
6 ¼-inch-thick slices ginger
2 tablespoons light soy sauce
2 tablespoons rice wine or dry sherry
3 tablespoons hot chili oil
1 or 2 cloves garlic, sliced

Rub inside of fish with vegetable oil, salt and pepper.

Fill a steamer with a small amount of water and bring to a boil. Place fish, scallions and ginger on a steamer rack in the pot. Cover and steam 15 minutes.

(If you don't have a steamer, fill a large frying pan with a small amount of water and bring just to a boil. Place fish, scallions and ginger on a heatproof plate. Put plate in the frying pan, cover pan and steam fish 15 minutes. Pour off any liquid that accumulates on the plate.)

While fish is still hot, pour soy sauce and rice wine or sherry over it.

Heat hot chili oil and sliced garlic together briefly and drizzle over fish. Serves 3 to 4.

OCEAN GARDEN'S LONG LIFE NOODLES

2 ounces dried Chinese black mushrooms
10 ounces Long Life Noodles (see note)
2 ounces snow peas, cut in ¼-inch pieces
2 cups chicken stock, canned or fresh
1½ tablespoons soy sauce
1½ tablespoons oyster sauce
2 ounces snow peas, cut in ¼-inch pieces
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon pepper

Soak the mushrooms in hot water to cover for 1 hour before starting to cook. Drain and slice.

Bring a pot of water to the boil. Add the noodles and boil 3 to 4 minutes, until they soften slightly. Drain.

In another large pot or pan, heat to boiling the chicken stock, soy sauce, oyster sauce, mushrooms, snow peas, salt and pepper. Add noodles and cook on medium-low heat for 7 to 8 minutes. Serves 4.

Note: Long Life is a brand name for egg noodles that have been pre-cooked and dried. They are available at most Chinese groceries.