

Cory Ng – The co-owner of Potluck Club in Chinatown

[Music in]

Cory Ng: Hi my name is Cory Ng, I'm currently 36 years old.

JZ: This is Cory Ng.

Cory Ng: I don't say that out loud, I stopped counting after age 30.

JZ: The owner of Potluck Club, a restaurant in Chinatown. He now lives in Brooklyn but comes to Manhattan's Chinatown every single day.

Cory Ng: I guess besides I don't reside in Chinatown, my entire daily life is in Chinatown, and it's been like that for pretty much all my life.

JZ: He's always been passionate about what he's doing, starting from the time when he was a little boy.

Cory Ng: I'm a hat person, I've been wearing a hat since I was in junior high school.

JZ: His love of hats even got him in trouble. His mom was called to his high school because he wore a hat in class -- She had to take the subway all the way from lower Manhattan Chinatown to the deep Bronx.

Cory Ng: I'm sure my mom was super pissed off. My mom was using OVER A HAT! My mom was like, working, and trying to provide my family. And it's like, yo, you're making me come to the school over a hat and because you're not listening.

JZ: He still loves hats, and he at least has hundreds of hats. It's part of his identity.

[Music Out]

JZ: But nothing compares to his love of his community - the place he grew up, where he spent time with his family, friends. And most importantly, his culture.

JZ: Ng has harnessed that passion into his restaurant business - The Potluck Club

Cory Ng: 百樂 (in Cantonese), phonetic thing, so pot luck is the English, Chinese name is 百樂. 百 is a hundred, and 樂 means celebration. So it kinda really works out, you know how Chinese is poetic like, it means a hundred celebrations or a hundred happiness. We really like that it kinda phonetically worked out with Put Luck.

JZ: In a potluck, people gather and each contributes a dish to dinner. But at Ng's restaurant, he sees it as: "everyone brings something to the table." Maybe it's a good story, conversation, laughter or even a problem you can talk about over the table.

JZ: Ng and his friends started the business one and a half years ago. Their love of Chinese culture can be seen everywhere in the restaurant. The two little Shaolin Monks poster, Chinese comic books Lao Fu Zi, round tables, the double happiness, and the huge Chinese calendar with some number tricks.

Cory Ng: And of course, the beauty of the date if you're familiar with the Cantonese numeric kind of belief. 128, January 28th, and it's 128 (in Cantonese). It just means easy money, you'll be successful, stuff like that.

[Ambi fade out, blank space for few seconds]

JZ: Ng's mom was born in Taishan, China, and his dad comes from Hong Kong. They immigrated to the U.S. in the 1960s. And lived in Manhattan's Chinatown ever since.

JZ: Ng's most precious memories are from growing up in Chinatown, where he was immersed in Chinese culture. The Chinese New Year, for example, is his favorite holiday

Cory Ng: I used to climb on balconies and scaffolds just tried to get a better area of view and all these stuff used to be my favorite time of any day. Even though we hate, dread winter, that day is very warm and very welcome.

JZ: Dancing lions - which blesses businesses, family dim sum - which brings people all together. These were the things that resonated with Ng growing up.

JZ: But these days, the festival is not as big as it used to be, especially with more residents leaving Chinatown.

JZ: According to the New York City Census in 2020, more than 3,500 Asian residents left Chinatown during the past decade, which accounts for a drop of 21.7%. And the majority who left are aged between 24 to 54.

Cory Ng: I think a lot of youth has left Chinatown, and that's not necessarily a bad thing but it's just what's going on right now. A lot of new young businesses aren't being built in Chinatown.

[Music In]

JZ: For some Chinese Americans, leaving the old neighborhood might seem like a mark of success. But Ng wonders, at what cost?

Cory Ng: I know every kid that I grew up with, and all my friends I have when I was a teenager. All graduate college, great college degrees, but what happens when you get a college degree? To get a corporate job. That's a natural route.

Cory Ng: When that happens, everyone leaves and Chinatown loses its culture, loses its soul because no one is contributing to it anymore. The only people contributing to it or the people that are still here which is, honestly everyone's over 65.

JZ: In 2020 the percentage of Chinatown residents aged over 65 accounted for more than 20% of the population. The same data in 2010 is about 14%.

[Music Out]

[Ambi of restaurant]

JZ: The Potluck Club is operating from 5:30 pm to 9 pm through Wednesday to Friday, and three more hours at noon on weekends. The seats are fully booked everyday.

JZ: Zhan Chen is the co-owner of the restaurant, also the executive chef and Ng's best friend. Chen is integrating his knowledge from culinary school into Cantonese food, which attracts a lot of young people.

Chen Zhan: Why I think our food is special is because it's kinda like a fresh lens looking into the food we're all familiar with. I didn't change too much of what we have on the menu, it's just things you're familiar with that have minor adjustments and tweaks to it where I feel could be better?

Cory Ng: He's taking all that knowledge and go: How do I take this knowledge and put it into Cantonese food, really that's the root of our soul. Because we've been eating this all years. Where can we take the roots of our culture, everything we've ever known about it, but also make it ours. Make it ours and define it, not gonna say we're the definition but, define it for ourselves also express it to the community for the new generation.

Zhan Chen: I've been eating this food my whole life, so I want I could say that I have some ideas of what I want to do with it, and I still have a lot more I want to do with it. It's only been a year, we're just at the beginning of the journey, and we'll see where it goes.

[Ambi out]

JZ: Ng and his friends all grew up in Chinatown, and now they're proud of what they're doing to their community.

Cory Ng: Me and my team, my friends, we're very proud to be doing what we're doing in our community. We're not leaving, but we hope that there's a lot more of us. Because it's gonna take way more than five people, to resurrect, and to keep Chinatown thriving. It's gonna take ten thousands of us, and that's what it was like when our parents immigrated.

Onomatopoeia - Sounds like New York - is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. This episode was written and produced by me, Jace Zhang. Joanne Faryon is our professor and executive producer. Music by blue dot sessions. Special thanks to Peter Leonard.