

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a red chili pepper. The pepper is the central focus, showing its characteristic ridged texture and vibrant red color. The lighting is dramatic, with deep shadows and bright highlights, giving it a fiery appearance. In the center of the pepper, there is a white rectangular label with the text "KUNG FU SPICE" printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

KUNG FU SPICE

I kicked a stone into the road as I walked home. My confidence was low and I was feeling pretty sorry for myself. I felt like a failure at seventeen years of age.

I was no good at anything. OK, I could cook, but nobody at school thought cooking was cool. Not unless you were on TV. That wasn't going to happen. Not to me.

Ah, well,' I told myself, so Alex Chen is never going to be one of life's stars'

I was nearly home. I was thinking about food. My home is The Golden Dragon, one of the best Chinese restaurants in Liverpool, so I think of food a lot. I cooked here at weekends for my dad. Dad always said I was a really good cook. He even said I was good enough to enter the Young Cook of the Year competition on TV. But I wasn't sure. I mean, I liked cooking, but did I want to be a cook? Well, yes I did - but I wanted to be the best. I wasn't sure I could be that.

So far, I'd never been the best at anything. The school football team had turned me down. I had failed my driving test. Huh! If only I could be the best at something.

'The trouble with young people today,' said Grandmother as she helped herself yet again to the chicken and rice I had cooked, 'is that they don't care about the old ways and traditions. Nobody cares about old people any more.'

By 'young people' she meant me and my dad and by 'old people' she meant herself. Grandmother was the oldest person in the Chen family and she came from Hong Kong every February to see Dad, Mum and me for Chinese New Year.

'A son should visit his mother - not the other way round. Isn't that the way in England, too, Delia, dear?'

'I'm from Liverpool,' said Mum. 'Don't ask me about the rest of England. I've been married to George for eighteen years now and I still don't understand how they do things in Hong Kong.'

Dad smiled. It was the same every year. Grandmother and Mum always pretended to act as if they didn't understand each other, when we all knew they did really.

'And you know how busy the restaurant is at this time,' said Dad. 'Nearly every Chinese family in Liverpool eats out at Chinese New Year. That's when we make most money. And it pays for you to come here, doesn't it, Mother?'

'Maybe so,' said Grandmother. 'But young Alex always stays here for Christmas with the English side of his family-'

'That would be me,' said Mum.

'But he never has Chinese New Year in Hong Kong. He's fifteen now-'

'Seventeen,' I reminded her. I always have to remind her how old I am.

'As I said,' Grandmother continued, 'he needs to get in touch with his own traditions'

'Yeah, I know,' I said. 'But I can do both, can't I? I mean, I was born here, not in Hong Kong. But I still see Hong Kong nearly every summer. And Dad, you make sure I know everything about the place.'

'Everything?' said Grandmother. 'You still can't speak Chinese very well.'

'Neither can Dad,' I said.

'I've just got out of practice, that's all,' Dad answered.

'All right, everybody,' said Mum. 'Relax. Grandmother, we make sure Alex knows about both sides of his family.'

'Really?' Grandmother asked. 'How much does he know about my little brother, his Great Uncle Tong Po?'

'Mother,' Dad said quietly. 'Even I don't know much about Uncle Tong Po. I've only seen him in a few old photographs. Why do you mention him now?'

'Because,' said Grandmother with a big smile, 'he's coming to see us. He'll be here tomorrow morning!'

I'd never heard of Great Uncle Tong Po. Neither had Mum.

'Excuse me,' Mum said. 'Why hasn't anybody ever told me about Great Uncle Tong Po?'

Grandmother was loving every minute of this little drama. She chewed a piece of chicken thoughtfully and then she began.

'My little brother, Tong Po, ran away from home when he was fourteen,' she said. 'He wanted to join one of the temples in China to be a priest and study martial arts, you know, kung fu. I didn't believe him. But he did run away and we never saw or heard from him for years. Mother and Father pretended to forget him, but I don't think they ever did. In those days people didn't ask many questions about young men who ran away from home. It happened all the time. None of us heard from him. Mother and Father both died just a few years later.' I thought this was fantastic! A relative who was a Chinese priest who studied martial arts? Cool!

'So, Grandmother,' I asked, 'was he a priest?'

'Well, he sent me a letter about ten years ago. He said he would see me one day. The letter was from the Shaolin Temple in China - that's where they study Chinese martial arts. So I suppose that's what he did. I wrote to him, telling him all about my family - including you, Alex. He never wrote back. Then this morning I got another letter from him. He said he was coming to see us!'

'A letter from the Shaolin Temple?' I said. 'Wow!'

'No, Alex,' Grandmother said, 'it was from London. He's in London and he's going to come to Liverpool by train. He's going to get a taxi here when he gets to Liverpool station. He'll be here by ten o'clock tomorrow morning. He wants to stay for a month - maybe more. There was no time to write back but I knew you wouldn't mind, of course.'

'Of course,' said Mum, with a small smile.

'Does he speak English, Mother?' Dad asked.

'He spoke English as a boy,' said Grandmother, 'though we mostly spoke in Chinese. You can practise your Chinese, can't you?'

'Don't expect me to!' said Mum.

'Don't worry,' Grandmother laughed. 'We'll tell you what he's saying, right?'

Dad and I looked at each other. We were going to spend a month or more with a Shaolin priest in the centre of Liverpool during Chinese New Year.

I could hardly wait to tell my friends at school!

On Saturday mornings I usually get up early and help out in the restaurant. I cook for the lunchtime customers.

We get a lot of Chinese customers at this time of year. It was no surprise when a Chinese man of about sixty sat down for breakfast. He was small and fat with very short black hair and he looked smart in a dark suit. I watched with interest as he ate the dumplings I had made. I was really good at making dumplings.

He saw me looking.

'Did you make these?' he asked in English with a Chinese accent.

'Yes, sir,' I answered. 'I hope they're OK?'

'Too much salt,' he said quietly. 'They are good but use less salt.'

'Sorry, sir,' I said, thinking he didn't know what he was talking about.

'Here,' he said, picking a dumpling up with his Chinese chopsticks. 'You try - and then tell me if I'm wrong. What tastes stronger, the dumpling or the salt?'

I took the dumpling and put it into my mouth. I thought about it as I chewed. He was right - I'd made them quickly. I never questioned how good they were. They were just a little too salty.

'You see?' he said. 'Only a good cook would know the difference. And I can tell you're a good cook, Alex Chen.'

I heard gentle laughter behind me. It was Mum and Dad and Grandmother.

'Listen to your Great Uncle Tong Po, Alex!' said Dad. 'He especially wanted to taste your dumplings!'

Uncle Tong Po! I was expecting somebody who looked like Bruce Lee, but he looked like... well... like Grandmother but fatter.

Dad closed the restaurant while we all joined Uncle Tong Po round the table. I felt shy in front of him. Even though I've never done martial arts myself, I've always liked watching the kung fu films. And this man knew all about Shaolin kung fu and he was sitting right next to me! I didn't know what to say.

'I used to make these dumplings all the time at the Shaolin Temple,' Uncle Tong Po said. 'I see you know something about cooking too, Alex.'

'Thank you, Uncle,' I said. 'But you must know all about different kinds of kung fu from the temple,' I asked. 'What were you best at?'

'I was best at kung fu cooking!' he laughed. 'I could cook a complete meal in under three minutes!'

He was joking, right?

'You were at the Shaolin Temple for many years, weren't you, Uncle?' Dad asked. 'I think Alex is interested in your kung fu fighting. After all, the Shaolin Temple is famous for teaching kung fu - you know, teaching you to fight with your hands and feet.'

Uncle smiled. 'Yes, but all kung fu means is "a thing done well". And what I did well was cook!'

'Cooking?' I asked. 'But you're a Shaolin kung fu teacher, aren't you?'

'Yes,' said Uncle. 'I teach kung fu cooking!'

Maybe I wouldn't tell my school friends about my great uncle the Shaolin kung fu teacher after all - not if he was only a cook!

'Little brother Tong Po,' said Grandmother. 'It's so good to see you. But now you're here, what are your plans?'

'I'm going to spend time with my family and I'm going to teach Alex some Chinese cooking!'

'Alex is already pretty good, you know, Uncle,' said Dad.

Uncle stood up and said, 'Show me the kitchen and give me a few minutes'

I showed him the kitchen. Then we waited.

After just a few minutes, Uncle came out with a bowl of dumplings.

'Eat!' he told us. So we each took a dumpling and put it into our mouths.

I was used to good dumplings, but these were absolutely delicious. They were the best dumplings I had ever tasted in the whole of my life. I could tell by everyone's faces that they all felt the same.

'So what do you think of your own dumplings now, Alex?' Uncle asked.

Compared to these beautiful dumplings, mine were awful. They had none of the magical taste of Uncle's wonderful dumplings.

'I don't know how you did it, Uncle,' I said. 'I could never cook something that good; never in a million years'

'All good cooks say that when they first taste real cooking,' Uncle said. 'I know I did.'

I looked down. I didn't know what to say.

'We start tomorrow!' Uncle said. 'But first, I'd like to have some rice wine with my big sister!'

Sundays used to be relaxing. Not anymore. Now I got up early and Uncle taught me his cooking.

The first day Uncle made me cook something by myself while he watched. I cooked one of my favourite meat recipes. When I had finished, I put the food in front of him. Then I watched as he tasted it. I looked on nervously. It was the best I could do. I hoped he liked it.

'Too much spice,' he said. 'Spices are added to give more flavour - not take it away. And the meat isn't cooked enough.'

'OK,' I thought to myself, 'you do better!'

Uncle just said, 'Wait here for a few minutes!'

I did. A few minutes later he brought me exactly the same thing. I say exactly, but, of course, it wasn't. Uncle's meat with spice was the best I'd ever tasted. The meat was soft and there was just the right amount of spice. It was a meal made with a true love of cooking.

I thought I could never cook like that. I felt like giving up.

Uncle put his arm round me.

'Now,' he said, 'the lessons begin.'

The first week was awful. I tried to do things in the same way as Uncle. I wanted to look good, but I was nervous. I got things wrong. My food tasted just the same as it always did.

'Start trying to love the food,' he said. 'Enjoy yourself. Feel happy about your cooking!'

But I didn't feel happy. I felt terrible.

'It's no good, Uncle!' I told him. 'I'll never be able to cook like you. I don't know how you do it. It's like magic. I just don't know your secret.'

Uncle nodded and smiled.

'Ah,' he said. 'You've finally worked it out. I knew you would. You're a smart boy.'

Worked it out? Smart boy? I didn't know what he was talking about. Was I smart? I said nothing.

'You don't think I was a Shaolin priest for nothing, do you? I mean - we have secrets, we know things, we know all about spices - secret spices. Magical spices.'

Magical spices? I didn't know if Uncle was being serious or not. But then, he was Shaolin...

'Once I have prepared my food in the right way, it's ready for my secret kung fu spice!' he said with a smile. 'Come, you watch me as I prepare some spicy chicken with rice. You must do everything exactly as I do. Everything. If you do it right, I will add some of my kung fu spice and then your food will be as good as mine.'

Great! Uncle had some special Shaolin spice that made his cooking so good. I wanted it too!

I watched everything he did. I measured everything in exactly the same way, I cooked for the same amount of time, at the same temperature - I did everything the same. In fact, I really enjoyed cooking the meal.

I felt certain that my food was perfectly cooked this time.

Then I saw Uncle do something very strange: he took a small leather bag from his pocket, put in his thumb and finger and took out a little bit of some powder. He sprinkled it over his finished food, and then sprinkled some over mine. I only saw a tiny amount fall from his fingers. I couldn't see it when it was on the food.

'Taste mine first!' Uncle told me.

I tasted a mouthful. It was so delicious that I could hardly imagine anybody else producing anything as good.

'Now taste your own,' Uncle said.

Mine looked the same, but I didn't believe that it could taste the same. When I put the food into

my mouth, my eyes opened wide with wonder. It tasted just as good as Uncle's food! I was so happy that Uncle laughed.

'You see!' said Uncle. 'If you prepare the food with love, that's when you can add a little bit of kung fu spice. Nothing will taste finer then! But it's our secret, yes? You mustn't tell anybody about the secrets of the Shaolin Temple, right?'

'Yes, Uncle. I won't tell anybody.'

'Now, come - we have much to study if you are to learn the secret ways of a Shaolin cook!'

The next few weeks were the busiest I had ever had in my life. I was doing my school work. I was cooking for Dad in the restaurant. And I was learning everything I could from Uncle.

I thought I already knew a lot. But soon I realised I knew very little. I learned how to measure food. I learned what to add to it to give it extra flavour - including spices. I learned about every meat, fish and vegetable. I learned how to make simple food tasty.

Every time I cooked some food, Uncle added a little bit of kung fu spice from his bag.

After a while, Uncle said I was doing very well indeed. But I still wanted to know about Uncle and his time at the Shaolin Temple. I asked him again if he had ever learned about real kung fu.

'I told you before,' he said. 'Kung fu just means "something done well" - it doesn't matter what is studied. But, Alex, I have a present for you.'

'A present?' I asked.

Uncle put a small leather bag on the kitchen table. It was just like the one he used.

'Take it!' he said. 'It's kung fu spice - it's yours. Be careful how you use it - not too much - just a tiny bit with every meal. If you cook with love, the spice will work. It won't if you don't!'

'Wow! Thanks, Uncle! Can I look at it?'

'If you want to, but take care - it's too valuable to waste!'

I opened the bag and looked inside. It was a small bag and inside was some white powder. It certainly didn't look special. It didn't smell of anything much either. But that didn't matter to me. I knew it was the secret Shaolin magic of a real Shaolin priest!

'This will last you a long time if you use it carefully,' he told me. 'But you must cook the way I taught you. You must cook with love - or it won't work.'

'Will it work on any food or is it just Chinese food?' I asked. I wondered about this because my mum made brilliant English and French food. I enjoyed cooking that too.



'If you cook any food with love, it will work,' Uncle said. 'Your kung fu spice will make it the best it can be!'

I put my bag of spice away in my room. I had never forgotten about Dad's idea about the Young Cook of the Year competition on TV. I asked Dad about it and he thought it was a great idea. We emailed my entry form the next day. I was feeling confident now. After all, with my kung fu spice, how could I lose?

'Alex! It's a letter!' Mum called.

It was morning and I was still in bed.

'It looks like it's from the TV people!'

I ran downstairs, took the letter from the table and tore it open.

Everybody was watching me.

'Well...?' asked Dad.

'Yes!' I shouted. 'They've said I'm going to be in the Young Cook of the Year competition! The first part is next week!' Mum hugged me, Dad shook my hand, Grandmother kissed me on the nose and Uncle smiled.

'Hey,' I said. 'It's not going to be easy. If I'm going to win this, I have to beat the best young cooks in the country!'

I looked at Uncle and knew that, with the help of his kung fu spice, nobody could beat me.

Time flew by. I worked hard. The first part of the competition was held in Liverpool for the northwest of England - my part of the country. All the other young cooks were having their competitions around the rest of England. I won my part easily with my Chinese cooking. It was fun! But I made sure that with every meal I added a tiny bit of kung fu spice. I didn't tell anybody about that, of course. It just looked like I was putting on a last bit of salt or something. But it worked. They all loved my cooking - and so did I.

The next part of the competition was in London. If I got through that, I would be in the final on TV.

Mum, Dad, Grandmother and Uncle had come to the first part of the competition. I wanted them to be there for me in London too. With my kung fu spice I couldn't fail.

The best young cooks in the country were all in the competition. I had to beat them all. I felt nervous. It was a big day! My family had to wait at our hotel, which was nearby. If I got through this part of the competition, they would see me on TV in the finals.

I was with five other young cooks from all around the country. We all had to cook in a top

London restaurant and we were going to be judged by one of the top cooks in London. I wasn't going to cook Chinese food. I didn't mind. I could cook most things now. With my kung fu spice I could cook anything!

We were taken to the kitchen of the restaurant. The head cook gave us our instructions. He told us that we each had to cook one course of a meal. I had to cook steak with potatoes and green beans. Steak wasn't food I cooked often, but I knew how it was done. We had less than one hour to get the meal ready.

No problem.

I knew exactly what to do for a course like this. I knew how steak should be cooked - not too much, not too little. I knew how to cook potatoes and vegetables so that they were just right. I did everything right. But the main thing was this: I felt good cooking the food. I enjoyed myself.

Soon, the food was ready.

All I needed next was my kung fu spice to make everything perfect. Just a tiny bit was all I needed. I reached for the little bag in my pocket.

It wasn't there!

I searched all of my pockets, but I just couldn't find it. What could I do? I felt afraid. The skin on my back went cold and my tongue went dry. I wanted to run out and find my uncle. He must have some more kung fu spice - I had to have it. I had to!

But it was too late. The judge was already on his way to taste my food. Oh, no! Without my Shaolin magic I was just an ordinary cook. What chance did I have of winning now?

The competition judge was French. He looked like he knew everything about cooking. He looked at my steak and cut off a piece. He put some potato on the same fork and some green beans as well. Then he put it all into his mouth and chewed.

Dad, Mum and Grandmother were waiting for me as I walked into the hotel lounge. Where was Uncle?

'Alex!' Mum cried. 'Did you get through?'

'Of course he got through, didn't you, Alex?' said Grandmother.

'I don't know how,' I said, 'but I did it! I got through!'

And why are you so surprised? You know enough about cooking to win, son,' Dad said. 'We all know that, even if you don't.'

Mum hugged me and Dad looked very pleased. I was pretty pleased myself. I had got through to the finals without the help of my kung fu spice. I could hardly believe it!

'Hey, where's Uncle?' I asked. I couldn't see him anywhere.

'I'm sorry, Alex,' said Grandmother, 'but my brother told us he had to go back to the temple. It's just like him to disappear suddenly. He never changes! But he left this letter for you...'

Grandmother gave me an envelope. I opened it and inside was a letter and... the bag of kung fu spice! The letter said:

Dear Alex,

I have to go back to the Shaolin Temple. I have been asked to help a young man with his wu shu - that's the real Chinese name for martial arts, which I also teach. Like you, he's good but he needs a little push.

I knew you didn't need my help any more. I took the 'spice' out of your pocket while you weren't looking. It wasn't magic spice at all. It was just rice powder.

I'm sorry about my little lie. All you needed was confidence - not magic. I was right, wasn't I?

I will visit again next year. I want to taste more of your delicious cooking!

Tong Po

'So he could fight like Bruce Lee after all. I knew it!' said Mum as she read the letter. 'But what's all this about spice?'

'Just something I borrowed from Uncle,' I said. 'It's not important - not any more.'

I noticed Dad was smiling, but he had tears in his eyes. Mum had her arm round him.

'After all,' Dad said, 'you have a competition to win - right, son?'

I knew Dad was right. I knew I was good. I could win Young Cook of the Year now. Thanks to Uncle Tong Po I was a real kung fu cook.

With or without kung fu spice.

- THE END -

Hope you have enjoyed the reading!

Come back to <http://english-e-reader.net/> to find more fascinating and exciting stories!