

The Scrutable Chef

A ready smile lights up the face of Ken Hom, the young Chinese-American chef, cooking teacher, and author, when he talks about his approach to cooking and entertaining. "Though I cover all areas, not just Peking, Sichuan, or Fujian cuisine, I think Cantonese properly done, not bastardized, is my style—eating well but lightly and using the best and freshest ingredients with as little handling as possible."

Hom, who is on the faculty of the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, is the author of *Chinese Technique* (Simon and Schuster, 1981, \$16.95), an illustrated step-by-step primer modeled after Jacques Pépin's *La Technique*.

"Chinese cooking involves all the senses," he says. "The dishes must be visually attractive and the aromas should envelop you pleasantly. The interplay of texture and flavor contrasts is important, and there's even an aural aspect in the sensuous sounds—a sizzling wok and the gentle click of chopsticks, as one Chinese chef describes it."

Hom's personal plan for entertaining embodies these elements. "I often have dinner parties for about six friends, a sit-down dinner, with quite a formal table setting. I like pure white napery, beautiful crystal, and fine china—white with a thin gold border, perhaps. At each place setting I put a pair of chopsticks.

"And although the table looks formal, once we're seated the atmosphere is totally casual. I don't mind how much wine is spilled on the tablecloth, as long as the guests enjoy themselves."

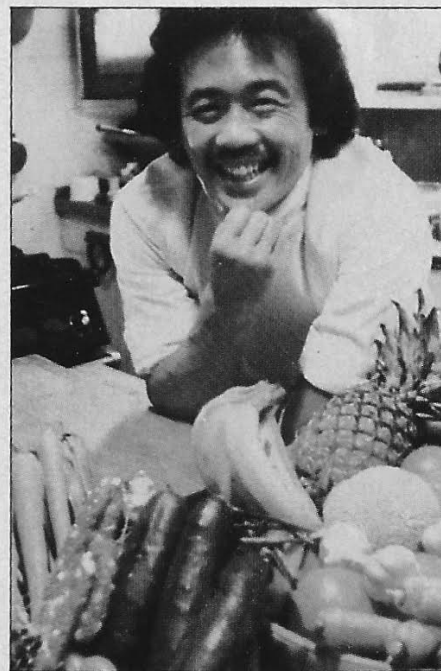
Because Hom's dinner parties usually last from four to six hours, he asks people to arrive early. "We start off with Champagne right in the kitchen, Roederer Cristal, Perrier-Jouët, or Bollinger—and I never serve anything with it.

"I like to serve the dishes one at a time so that each dish can be savored and appreciated individually, and I can offer some 'surprise delicacies.' My idea is to present not overabundance, but diversity."

Often the reason for the dinner is to taste and evaluate a number of wines, European and California. "I always try to match the wine to the dish.

That's one reason I avoid serving soup."

A typical dinner might start with a delicate steamed fish. "The first course should always be light, so the fish would be simply dressed with salt, scal-



Ken Hom

lions, and a touch of garlic. For the wine I'd uncork a California or French Chardonnay, perhaps a Meursault."

The second course would be a bit spicy, perhaps shrimp in a light Sichuan sauce of scallions, ginger, and garlic "in the right balance of flavors. With this I'd serve a fruity-spicy Gewürztraminer from Alsace, one that

is assertive enough to stand up to the dish."

Hom likes to include a pork dish, perhaps his version of mu shu pork "without the pancakes, but simply stir-fried with tree ear mushrooms and lily stems. With the pork, a good red Burgundy, such as a Côte de Beaune, or fruity Beaujolais, perhaps a Brouilly."

Duck will be next, served in two courses. First Peking style, crisp skin, again without pancakes but with traditional hoisin sauce and scallion brushes. The wine: a fine Bordeaux or California Cabernet Sauvignon—a Château Latour or a Beaulieu Private Reserve.

Part two of the duck course will be the meat, "stir-fried with crunchy vegetables—water chestnuts, snow peas, red and green peppers, and bamboo shoots—a light, flavorful dish. And I continue to pour the Bordeaux."

Hom may add another dish or two, depending on his mood and his guests' appetites, but he eschews desserts other than fresh fruit or a fruit sorbet. "I like to leave the table feeling great—and I want my guests to feel the same way. I don't want anyone to fall asleep at the table."