

a n i n s p i r a t i o n , a s u c c e s s , a r o l e m o d e l

From the culinary kitchen to the comedy stage, Les Chan delivers more than a plate full.



L E S C H A N
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b y N a t t a l i a L e a

It's easy to fall for Les Chan's Oriental culinary sensations — hot'n'spicy Szechuan, Mandarin and Cantonese classics, sizzling Teppan dishes, and authentic Peking favorites. But if dim sum isn't your craving, this kitchen god's Occidental dishes, like featherweight pasta or mango creme brulée, will surely tantalize your tastebuds. Not for a second will your attention wander from this 41-year-old Victoria-based chef, who, among other things, has also been a stand-up comic, tourism promoter, motivational speaker, teacher, fiber artist and volunteer.

As the elf-like Chan effortlessly zigzags a red pepper in half, it's hard to imagine that he is handicapped. People who don't know him well often think that he had polio. Chan is paralyzed in his left arm and leg, the result of an inoperable brain tumour that was treated when he was 13. "I personally don't think that I'm doing anything special," he says, as he leads a cooking class. Chan's quiet demeanor can be misleading, as his sense of humour becomes apparent. One friend describes the diminutive man as a cheeky little rascal who gets away with just about anything. When on stage for a comedy routine, the third-generation Chinese-Canadian deliberately starts off by being pathetic: "Hi, I'm Les Chan. I'm Chinese and handicapped... Now what more can happen?" Then Chan starts spewing out his routine, ending his performance by telling a Chinese joke, "I tell a joke in Chinese. They're all stunned because they don't know what I'm saying. 'It's a Chinese joke', I say."

"There's no one quite like him," says David Baker, a Victoria family doctor. Fourteen years ago, Baker met Chan working behind a deli counter on Thetis Island. "His banter was so entertaining that my wife and I would sail up just to listen to him. When he quit, we were disappointed."

About a month later, Baker recognized Chan on a Victoria street by his distinctive gait, sporting a Panama hat. "I told him, I know who you are", recalls Baker, as he introduced himself to a puzzled Chan. Four days later, Chan walked into his office. "Our challenge is to live the life with what we've got, instead of wishing we had something else," reflects Baker. "I've never met a person who's less handicapped in my life...What makes Les an inspiration is that he lives through it (his handicap), instead of rejecting it. It's a gift, often more apparent to others..."

Born in Nanaimo, B.C. on April 2, 1956, Chan is the third child of a successful business owner and his wife. Cousin Lorrie Grimm, a Vancouver school teacher recalls Chan being "a pretty happy and chatty kid, who followed his cousins around, always wanting to be included. Mike was the typical older bossy brother and Sue was the typical older sister sibling and really they weren't that close to him."

On growing up during the 1950s and 60s in Nanaimo, a Vancouver Island town with few Chinese families, Chan recalls, "I learned at an early age that I was different. Got a lot of ribbing from the kids in the playground, about the Chinky Chinaman, little kids use that...I didn't think that the cultures were that different, except when you looked in the mirror. Everybody wants to be accepted and then you want to have the blond hair, blue eyes and lighter skin to conform."

As he's matured, being part of today's ethnic society is reason to celebrate cultural differences, says Chan, who confesses to using his ethnicity to his advantage. "When my friends piss me off, I tell them. One phone call to China and I can have a billion relatives here."

When Chan was being auctioned off at a bachelor's charity fund-raiser eight years ago, the bidding hovered around \$300. Long gone were the wrapped fortune cookies that Chan had thrown to

the audience as he strutted down the runway the first time. So Chan stepped out another time, turned his back to the audience, lifted up the tails of his tuxedo to reveal a bumper sticker on his butt that said, "Made in China." That act sent bidders in an uproar.

If his humor is used to hide something, it's the pain that Chan has felt — the disappointments, the

embarrassment and shame that comes with being handicapped in our society. Baker, a close friend of Chan's, suggests that being handicapped in a Chinese society is an even bigger curse, "There's a stigma with being handicapped in a Chinese society... an Oriental thing, very difficult in real terms to deal with."

Chan's mother, afflicted with rheumatoid arthritis since his elder brother was born, has been the source of his inspiration. "We all have choice in life," says Chan. "I've got a lot of strength through the strength of my mother. Watching her doing things, always doing, knowing always that she's always in pain...she seems to rise above it, hasn't held her back in her life."

Still, the trauma of being diagnosed with a brain tumour 28 years ago remains indelibly etched in Chan's mind. For a couple of months, he experienced headaches that worsened with time. Their severity shook him up so much that he ended up vomiting mucus. When the headaches occurred during school, he would excuse himself from class to go to the nurse's room, lay down and vomit. Then he would go home and feel fine. It was a Sunday morning in spring when an unbearable headache sent a delirious Chan to his parents' bedroom. "It's a Chinese thing. You suffer. You don't tell anybody," says Chan. He remembers being held down by several Nanaimo hospital orderlies before waking up

in a Victoria hospital with his aunt Dorothy by his side. The tumour was located at the base of his brain stem. Radiation therapy was required and for 13 year-old Chan, the most difficult part of the ordeal was losing his hair.

Meanwhile, his immediate family was trying to come to terms with the situation. Cousins, aunts and uncles remained in suspense, smiling demurely at Chan after his recovery and complimenting him repeatedly on how well he looked. It didn't become known to Chan until a few years ago that his family never expected him to live beyond his fourteenth birthday. "When you have a family that's been told somebody's not expected to live, the whole family is never the same and there's the tendency to hold back. It's a way of protecting themselves, hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst," explains Baker. "If you have a brother or sister who's handicapped (especially in an Asian society), it's morally embarrassing. Peer pressure is even stronger than the family bond and for kids to see Les grow up, there's this fear thing, a living example of what can be feared."

The first operation was a success. However, two years later, Chan was rushed to the hospital for a second time to have a second shunt tube installed in his brain. Being a teenager was difficult for Chan, self-conscious about being bald at the sides, being gawked at by his peers, making the physical adjustment and his mind on sex all the time. The most painful day back at school was in physical education, being stared at by the jocks as he stumbled across the gymnasium floor.

It was during high school that Chan discovered his love for the arts, as he acted in school plays and relished cooking classes. His first cooking gig was preparing dinner for the Lantzville Theatre Group — 25 persons. "I didn't know what I was doing at all," Chan recalls. Undaunted, after graduation he attended Malaspina College in Nanaimo, taking hotel and motel restaurant management while waiting on tables at a Chinese restaurant. After 18 months of college, turned off by computers and accounting, Chan dropped out to work for his father's import store, selling wicker and cookware. There, he held his first cooking class that was broadcast by the local community television station as *Going For A Wok*.

By 27, Chan was becoming more confident with himself and decided to leave Nanaimo. "Being handicapped is kind of like being a blonde woman with large breasts. They look not at her face, but her large undulating breasts. So when people look at me, they look at the way I walk, not my face. It still carries on, 28 years later and I realize it's just really human nature.. To be perfectly honest, I don't like going by mirrored buildings and see me walk. I just accept it because it's not going to really change."

In 1985, Chan moved to Victoria to look for work. He was unemployed for 18 months and living off welfare when he eventually procured a job at The Kitchen Etiquette, a cookware shop in downtown Victoria. Lorna Knowles, the owner-manager, says of her first employee that she virtually hired him over the phone. "Out of 50 applicants, there were two that had a passion about food and food preparation."

You could tell from talking to Les on the phone that he had a passion and he's never lost it. He does amazing things."

Today, Chan runs his own cooking school, caters to people's private homes under Beauty & Feast (which includes a special dining program for lusting single men dubbed the Laid Away Plan), speaks to high school students through the Pacific Rim Institute of Tourism, visits stroke patients and is an active member of the tourism networking organization, Victoria AM. As Victoria's self-proclaimed ambassador to Chinatown, decked out in a Coolie hat and traditional Chinese dress, Chan leads people through a Chinatown tour that ends with dim sum lunch. Over the years, he's picked up conversational Cantonese from the local merchants.

Jesse Dillard, a massage therapist and member of Victoria AM, says Chan has made a major contribution to Victoria and all the things that he's been involved with. "He puts a lot of energy into what he does."

Since 1992, Chan has co-hosted Chinese New Year in Victoria's Market Square. Two years ago, he orchestrated a Ghenghis Khan dinner at the Empress Hotel, creating the dinner menu and organizing the display for Chinese artifacts. When he complained about the food at the comedy bar YUK YUK's, that's when Chan made his stage debut: "I am a strong believer that you should think of the thing that scares the shit out of you and just do it."

His course, Culinary Conquests, for people with disabilities, received a front page write-up in the Victoria Times Colonist in November 1993. "I've taught blind people, deaf people, stupid people and lots of stupid people, more than I care to mention who weren't handicapped. The thing to concentrate is on what you can do and know your limitations"

Most of his spare time is devoted to needlepoint, an art he learned from his Aunt Ruth during his 20's. While watching television, Chan patiently stitches threads through an embroidery hoop, propped between his right knee and his chest. At first, Chan followed printed patterns of nostalgic houses and teddy bears. He then progressed to flower designs, followed by art deco. In March 1995, a display of 20 works entitled Talking Threads was displayed at Victoria's Tudor Rose Tea Room. "All my artwork has puns to them, such as Art Gecko — three lizards sitting on a canvas, or one piece with a plate, cutlery and frogs leaping from the plates, called They Say It Tastes Like Chicken." A second art show with four other artists at the Eaton Centre in March 1996 was a total sell-out for Chan, who called his collection of 13 works — Art Dishcoteque. He dished out more puns, like Liz Grill of My Dreams. Still to come is a show pertaining to a tea theme, fitting for Victoria with its strong British roots.

A media hound, Chan has appeared on Good Morning America and been interviewed by CBC's Arthur Black and Australian TV during the Commonwealth Games. He thinks that it's good for handicapped persons to be in the media to dispel the misconception that "people often correlate handicapped as mentally disordered."

There's no end to what Chan wants to pursue next, who's up at 6:00 a.m. and going until 11 p.m. every day. He leads a pretty normal life — drives a car, swims for exercise and doesn't have any hired help. "Unless you push yourself, you don't know what you can't do," says Chan. Just as a reminder, a plaque rests on his desk that reads, OPPORTUNITY IS NOWHERE. He reads it as, "Opportunity is now here." ☘

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By Faiyaz A Kara **TIGER'S TALE**

Let's face it, watching golf on TV is about as exciting as watching a late-night infomercial. But every time I see Tiger Woods step up to the tee. I can't help but be carried away in the jowls of Tigermania. Is it the fact that he's only 21 years old — a mere tot in a sport governed by sagacious veterans? Maybe it's his ability to handle pressure on and off the golf course. Or is it because he's a man of colour in a predominantly all-white sport? Perhaps it's a combination of all three. But one thing's for sure: his road to the pro tour has taken him down dark roads that others in the sport have never travelled.

After turning professional in August 1996, he lived up to expectations by becoming the youngest golfer ever to win the prestigious Masters. There's no question that Woods has a knack of not letting stressful situations affect his game. Even before turning pro, the question of his race was an incessant, nagging issue that Woods felt needed to be dealt with. While many in the media play up his ethnicity, Woods' desire is to de-emphasize it. Take, for example, this recent media statement Woods issued:

The purpose of this statement is to explain my heritage for the benefit of the media who may be seeing me play for the first time. It is the final and only comment I will make regarding the issue.

My parents have taught me to always be proud of my ethnic background. Please rest assured that is, and always will be, the case — past, present, and future.

The media has portrayed me as African-American; sometimes Asian. In fact, I am both.

Yes, I am the product of two great cultures, one African-American and the other Asian.

On my father's side, I am African-American. On my mother's side, I am Thai. Truthfully, I feel very fortunate, and equally proud, to be both African-American and Asian.

The critical and fundamental point is that ethnic background and/or composition should not make a difference to me. The bottom line is that I am an American and proud of it.

That is who I am and what I am. Now, with your cooperation, I hope I can just be a golfer and a human being.

In 1975, Lee Elder became the first black man to play in The Masters. In a sport that some consider racist, Tiger Woods has shown a remarkable maturity while injecting new life, and a

refreshing attitude, into an otherwise staid sport. In fact, organizers of tournaments have been caught off-guard by the large crowds following Woods. The galleries, reminiscent of "Arnie's Army" that followed Arnold Palmer in the 60s, comprise a new generation of younger fans — "Tiger's Troops" if you will. There's no doubt that from a marketing standpoint, Woods will do for golf what Michael Jordan did for basketball, and Wayne Gretzky did for hockey.

Woods' pride in his heritage was exemplified in early February this year when he, along with his mother, travelled to Thailand to play in the Asian Honda Classic — a tournament particularly dear to Tiger's heart since it takes place in the birthplace of his mother. After falling ill in the pro-am due to the extreme heat, Woods gathered himself to win the tournament, much to the delight of his mom. "Any win is great," Woods said, but he added that playing in his adopted home of Thailand was special. "It's nice to have victories like this."

In light of the remarks made to Tiger Woods by Fuzzy Zoeller, it's clear the sport has a long way to go before golfers of all backgrounds are truly accepted. Jackie Robinson handled racial injustices in his sport with dignity, and excelled on the field. Woods, it seems, may have the same impact on golf as Robinson had on baseball. Go get 'em Tiger. ☘