***Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong***

**Cooking for how many?**

On May 5, we hosted a fundraising banquet at my wife’s Hope Church in Cochrane. The theme was Chinese. Yes, serving Chinese dinner on Cinco de Mayo is a strange combination. But hey, this is America, we are free to do whatever we want, right?

So, we ended up serving 200 dinners, in a town with a population of 420. That’s amazing, and totally awesome!

Cochrane is a small town southeast of where we live. I don’t know how many miles it is, but it is about a two-hour drive. I’m finally learning how to drive long distance.

My wife would drive back and forth every week to preach at her church. Some weeks she would stay there for a few days, but other weeks, she would just drive down and return home right after the service; and I would volunteer to drive so as to give her time to relax and think about her service.

My jar of keeping those brownie points is getting pretty full by now; wonder what to do with them someday! Since I love to sing and play music, she volunteers me to sing at her service. Extra brownie points, what the heck! So, I get to drive, sing gospel hymns, play guitar and bang on the church piano. I’m improving on my driving skills and get to practice my music, too. Maybe I should pay her instead?

I did a lot of fundraising dinners at her church when we were living in Milwaukee. Goodness, we’ve done Chinese dinner, Italian, Mexican, German, Irish … and whatever.

I’ll never forget that one time when we were hosting a German dinner, a gentleman who was visiting from Germany came to the kitchen and told me that was the best German potato salad that he ever had.

I smiled and thanked him; didn’t have the heart to tell him that all I did was to add some soy sauce to the salad dressing. Ahhh, the secrets of us chefs; we all have our own secrets. But what’s the point of carrying them to your grave?

Colonel Sanders had been guarding his secret of 11 herbs and spices for his fried chicken his whole life; and had built his fame and fortune with it. Now that the secret recipe has been revealed, everyone exclaimed, “What, that’s it?!?”

I can see Colonel Sanders smiling in his grave. “Yes, my dear friends; that’s it! There are no secrets after all.”

Anyway, Cochrane is a nice, quiet family town. Everyone knows everyone; it is a small community indeed. In a town of 420, there are two churches and five taverns. Oh, how I love living in Wisconsin, we’ve our priorities right!

There is a VFW in town, serving a lot of fundraising dinners for volunteer firefighters or other organizations. It has a huge dining hall, with an updated kitchen; a perfect place for a special banquet!

So, I mentioned the idea of doing a fundraising dinner at VFW to a few of the church members. Talk about striking a look of horror in their faces!

“You’re nuts! Serving Chinese dinner in a small community like ours? Who is going to do it? Who would come to the dinner? Who, who, who … ?” I felt like I was talking to a bunch of owls for a while. I was about to give up on the idea, then a light turned on.

There is a gentleman named Orlin Brommer — can you believe that there are two Orlins in a church of 70? — in the congregation who is a wonderful soul to be around. He is always helpful with the church projects, very handy with tools, and always smiling and cheerful; and oh, he loves to play the ukulele and sing too. His smiling face turned to a frown when I mentioned about my dream of doing a fundraising event for the church; then he sounded like an owl — who, who, who!

Being a business consultant, a chef, and an instructor, I wrote a business plan on what to do, and how to conduct this project. I would give a cooking class to teach helpers to make the food. The cooking lesson fees would go to the marketing fund to initiate the project.

We did our cooking class, with the menu that I have in mind — spring rolls, crab rangoon, beef and broccoli, sweet and sour chicken, Szechuan pork, and Hong Kong fried rice. There were 12 students in the class. After they made and tasted the food, they all said, “Wow, this is great! You mean that’s all it takes to make these?”

I gave them my Colonel Sanders’ smile, and said, “There ain’t no secrets, are there?”

Next thing I knew, the congregation has decided to go ahead with the project. Yes, serving a Chinese banquet to raise money for the church and also for improvement for the local swimming pool.

“How do I pull this off?” I asked myself. Cooking is the easy part, but how to market the event, the setting of the room — the music and the ambiance, and how to serve the food? A thousand questions indeed.

They picked a date and they decided to serve 200 guests. Two hundred guests, in a town of 420? You’re nuts, you’re crazy, and you’re absolutely out of your mind! I told myself that over and over. But it was my idea, so who’s to blame?

The committee sold 200 tickets! Yes, we told people who called that day wanting to attend that we’re sold out!

The dining hall was turned into an elegant restaurant, with lanterns hanging above, black table clothes with red napkins setting on a china plate; and a homemade coaster with our name “HOPE” imprinted in Chinese. I was speechless!

I created a prep list for all to follow. By gosh, we did it. We prepped the food, cooked and served the food on time, and our guests loved it!

“This is the best Chinese meal I ever have,” I heard that over and over. And I thanked them with a smile. I was standing by the front door, taking praises when the guests were leaving, but what a joy. I couldn’t sleep that night, so energized by all the positive energy from everyone involved.

No one complained, they all gave what they could to make the event a memorable one! A memorable one indeed. Now they are planning on another one.

Goodness, I’d better get some rest!