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Full transcript of an interview with

**CHEONG LIEW**

On 12 December 2000

By Catherine Murphy

Recording available on CD

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**Interview by Catherine Murphy with Cheong Liew on December 12, 2000, at the Grange Restaurant in the Hilton Hotel in Adelaide for the Central Market project.**

(static interference on tape?)  
Tape 1 Side A

**Cheong you've been working as a Chef in Adelaide for about 20 years you said?**

Cheong: Since '73, so that would be 27 years.

**Did you come here from Sydney?**

Cheong: From Melbourne

**So you didn't train as a Chef here?**

No, I wasn't trained as a Chef and I started working in pubs making sandwiches and in Greek restaurants before I had my own restaurant on Hutt Street, which is called Neddys.

**Which one did you start at? The first one you worked at in Adelaide?**

The first place I ever worked in was a pub in Sturt Street called the Rose Inn Hotel. Yeah, I remember that. I worked there as a sandwich maker and lunch time turned Grill Chef. That was my first taste of working in a commercial kitchen.

Which Restaurant was the first one?

The first restaurant was the Iliad Restaurant.

**On Whitmore Square. That might have been about the first Greek restaurant in Adelaide.**

There were Greek Club and.....things like that, but that would be the first trendy Greek restaurant.

**Greek dancing and music.**

Oh Bazouki music (interruption and tape stopped)

**So you were cooking Greek food?**

I was cooking Greek food. In fact I was - - - my brother who is Ky (sp?) who has got the Augusta Antiques on Glen Osmond Road, he was a waiter at the Iliad Restaurant at that time and it was his summer holiday job. Then he came back one evening and says 'Cheong they need a Grill Chef'. So, I said 'OK, I'll do it' and that's how I started on the first night. I just loved the energy of that restaurant at that time. With all the bazouki music and plate throwing and the food was so different then or me. That it's a lot of food in crock pots, they are grilled. There are lobsters, trays of fish that were cooked and so I thought 'this is wonderful'.

**Who were you learning with or were you teaching yourself?**

I taught myself. When I looked for any work at that time I was buying Greek cook books from the Penguin collection and you read about it and to remember the names of things that is on the menu and at least I have a better description when I buy a cook book and read about it. So that's how I got interested in cooking – for really getting further into the depths of cooking – into other cultural cuisine is by buying as many cook books as I can and working in restaurants and what the books tells me to. In some cases I went to look for- - - and the Greek restaurant was one of the first. After I become a Grill Chef at the Iliad and it's only six weeks down the track, the Chef decided to throw in his towel, so I became the only person that is cooking for that restaurant for the next six months.

**It was there for a good while wasn't it?**

Yeah I was there for 18 months.

**So, Cheong, you and your brother are working in food.**

No, he's working in furniture.

**In furniture. Where did your interest in food come from?**

Well I guess, it's from my family background. My grandmother in our family used to cook or all the three families of her sons. All her three sons lived with her. All the in-laws and all the grandchildren.

**Malacca Corner told me that story too.**

Yes, same thing?

**Yes**

And she also cooks for the staff that works in the shop as well. So every day, there are at least 30 people for lunch and 30 people for dinner.

**You were growing up with her?**

Yeah, we were growing up with her. Eventually after she died, my father had a restaurant- - - turned that building into a restaurant as well, so we had a restaurant as well as a farm, a poultry farm. We had a Chinese restaurant in Malaysia.

**Which part of Malaysia were you in?**

Kuala Lumpur.

**Oh they (ie Malacca Corner) are not far from Kuala Lumpur, a little village near there.**

Working around or hanging around in my dad's restaurant kitchen after school you tend to pick up a few things and generally think we've got a fair idea of what needs to be done, but we might not have it in practice yet, but the theories have gone into the head. In those days we were indoctrinated by how to handle certain ingredients and we'd certainly learned how to eat well when we were kids.

**Having the connection to the farm you would have learned about what was fresh and what was seasonal?**

We've got our own vegetable garden. We also grow a lot of bananas and pawpaws. We've got our own fish farm on the farm as well. And we had a pig farm that is grown somewhere else, but not on the same property. We even had a little teaching by my grand-uncle who is a herbalist to look for certain herbs that he was picking and telling us the stories about what they're for and how you go about picking certain herbs.

**So you had the great advantage of growing up in a rural setting with a lot of traditional knowledge that was handed on through the generations and you learned that stuff naturally because it was part of your family life. Did you even find any need to go and do a cookery course? (laughs)**

I haven't been to one yet! (laughs) As an Engineering student you tend to think everything laterally for yourself and analyse things for yourself as well. That's how, I guess, when we pick up a cook book and 'what are the things I'm missing here? OK I'm cooking this, what are the things that are missing. I think the fish I'm cooking is superb, it's just cooked, or the meat I'm cooking is perfect how I want, but is it Greek style food or not?' Of course some of the Greek waiters would say: 'Yes, but my mother cooks better' they always come back to the same thing. Then one day when I had my own restaurant at Neddys, they invited their parents over and says: 'Look Mum, this is not as good as yours.' And it was really good that their mothers said 'except they were even better!' (laughs)

**Their mothers thought yours was better?**

Oh yes, mine was better. Oh, OK. I think it is the flavour of things...how much salt you put in, how much sugar you put in, how much oil you put in, how much oil you put in and of course each mum and everything is different and how far do you bring this- - - for example, cooking tomato. How far do you really bring it up to - - - I've seen people that have got tomato sauce to almost this dark colour instead it is a rosy red colour, so things like that. So, different mums have got different ways of dealing with things and the Chef as well.

So whole families are brought up in the taste environment of their parents?

**So your grandmother was special?**

Well my grandmother was the matriarch of the family.

In terms of her taste buds?

Oh yes, she's the one that probably brought her cultural- - - - Chinese cultural cuisine from her own village in China, which she still maintained. I keep remembering some of the things that she does and nobody sort of practises any more because it is not commercially viable to do those kind of practices, but I did remember some of those practices. In some cases I've experimented myself to do things like that. To make your own gluten balls for example. I know these days you can buy gluten, mix with water and fry, but it's not the same as kneading your flour and grating in the bone of a cuttlefish. You know how the cuttlefish has a bone that they use for birdseed, well you add that one into the flour and it gives it a special effect.

**And very good for you. Very nutritious.**

That's right, yeah. The gluten balls are entirely different altogether from the ones that you buy outside. So those are the things that you learn from- - - or you learn to separate the gluten from the starch. How to wash it- - - -

**In term so that tradition of fresh food and fresh produce and probably particularly styles of cooking, what did the Market- - - what was your impression of Adelaide Central Market when you first came to Adelaide and went there and saw what was there?**

My impression was of course- - - I have come to accept anything that is available. It's available, it's all you can get. Of course, coming from Malaysia where you have those wet market and the chicken are killed on the spot for you and you can buy a large piece of fish from a large fish and you can buy portions of it or you can have a piece of pork cut any way you want. Whereas in Adelaide it's all- - - - it's different rules over here than in Malaysia. While I see that the fruit and vegetables then was very limited in variety, same as the fish. But, I was happy to say that the fish while it is lacking in variety, but they are quite fresh and it is fantastic to be able to buy

squid in those days for 60 cents, octopus for 60 cents a kilo and lobsters were only \$6.50. So it was great in terms of price and the variety was really- - - what you had in those days was whiting, snapper, bream and mullet, garfish. These are the standard. And prawns? You can only get cooked prawns in those days and green prawns you seldom have it.

**Green prawns is recent.**

It took a long time for green prawns to come in. Every time you have to buy prawns you buy cooked ones and if you want to buy a green one, you have to buy it in blocks for restaurants. Those are the days that they are selling it that way.

**It was partially to do with methods of refrigeration wasn't it?**

Probably.

**Travelling distances and keeping them fresh and all that.**

I don't think a lot of people knows how to deal with green prawns in those days. Yet, a lot of people were quite happy to buy some cooked prawns and put it onto the plate

**With some sauce!**

With some sauce and some salad. That was wonderful.

**Yum, those were the days! (laughs)**

For example if you wanted to- - - during my holidays in Adelaide, we have to eat economically, because we don't have very much money and our staple diet, not staple, but the popular things we always buy is either belly pork or lamb flaps because it was the cheapest and most of the time they give it away and say 'what you want it for, is it for your dog or something?' and I say 'yes!'. So, we either make curry out of lamb flaps, which I still do at home now, I still love the-

**Yeah, it's different tastes.**

Yeah. And you can have curried - - - My brother and I used to have some lamb curry on the bone on the racks and the belly pork. But these days belly pork is probably more expensive than the prime cut of your loin.

**Why is that? Appreciation?**

Yeah, I think the Adelaide people have really come to appreciate food. In Adelaide and in Australia as a whole as well. To appreciate food – incredible in the short space of 20 years, they have been able to eat so many varieties of fruits, vegetables, fish, meats of all cuts and all types, it's getting to be - - - Say twenty years ago, I don't think- - - lambs kidneys or lambs fry for breakfast- -

**I remember- - -lambs fry and bacon**

I love lambs fry or breakfast.

**I haven't had that for a long time.**

**In terms of- - there's so many things, because we could talk about the way that's changed and the Market's role in that and also I'm interested in what you said about Australians tastes- - opportunities for tasting has changed and that's partly been because of travel, migration and Chefs. So can we talk a little bit about that?**

I think one of the most - - -one thing in the early '80s when we heard that the Vietnamese boat people first arrived, that's when we started getting a lot of Asian vegetables coming in, herbs coming in and so there is a lot more variety of vegetables started coming in. At the same time the fish is getting improved, because some of them must have been fishermen and gone in there and provided some of the long awaited ingredients that the Chinese restaurants have been dying for- - -

**Like what?**

Like getting fish to a certain standard without bruising, using a lot more green prawns and squids and so those are the things that are starting to - - - they are moving into the workforce and getting into- - -

**That's very evident at the Market isn't it?**

The Market, yes- - -

**You must have been excited when the first Asian grocery started. I went down to talk to her and she said that Australians used to be aghast that there were ducks hanging from the ceiling and the smells, they weren't used to the smells.**

The only place where you can get some Chinese dried goods is from Athens in those days.

**Yeah, isn't it funny.**

Yeah. And then where Lan Hing is now.....(can't hear name) has got the Grocery Shop called The World.

**I don't remember that.**

Yeah, that was the first.....

**I thought Asian Kitchen was the first one, down near Lana Langs (shoes).**

Yeah, Asian Kitchen was the first or second one. The World could be the first one.

**Who ran that?**

I think they're the people who had the tofu brand called Sam Wah noodles and tofu. They've sold the shop and now they've become the sole provider for Sam Wah noodles and tofu. I think they're the first one that was there.

**Are they in Adelaide?**

They're up on Hanson Road.

**I've seen the sign.**

I think they must have been the first one who came in and did the grocery shop.

**Where were they from?**

From Vietnam. They were the first. When we first came out- - - they have really affected the- -  
- have really improved the Market a great deal by showing other people- - I remember in those  
days when I was still working at Neddys and I come to the Market and do my vegetable  
shopping and some meat shopping, which I did most of my shopping in the Market here when I  
had my own restaurants and just walking along and there was some Polish ladies in the Chinese  
shops asking ‘what do you do with these vegetables?’ and they were really interested. And at  
the same time walking around I see a Chinese woman looking into another store picking up a  
celeriac and saying: ‘what is this, what do you do with this?’ and asking the stall people what  
they really are.

**Celery was uncommon?**

Yeah. So there was a huge learning experience for everybody and I think that’s the beauty about  
the Central Market. At the moment it’s still a learning centre about ourselves in the Central  
market.

**Brilliant.**

It will continue to do so for generations and generations to come.

**Because food is a perfect way to start to appreciate and learn about difference, about  
different cultures and different people and tastes and things like that.**

I think it is some how or other, I think spiritually, if you think down to that level, you can  
almost have yourself thinking that- - -(pauses)

**You take in culture**

You take in culture inside yourself and you’re looking at the ground level, you can even  
understand how people live, what are the benefits of their greens and these greens, their sauce  
and this sauce, so you can- - I think spiritually, because spiritually doesn’t have to have any  
religious connotation, but rather that human beings take in and make themselves at peace with  
everybody- -

**The earth**

The earth, exactly.

**What would you have learned about the Greek culture in those early days, cooking with  
the food.**

I think the Greeks know fish very well and for example they know this fish tastes like chicken  
and the octopus is a poor man’s lobster because that’s where all the- - - and red mullet is one  
of my favourite fish and not many people buys it because it’s too bony, but I still think it is one  
of my favourite fish. Whereas everybody goes for garfish and bream.

**Garfish is bony.**

But garfish is nice. I like all sorts of- - to really appreciate all the different textures of fish, the mussels, the cockles- - -

**And how well you know that because generations of people have- -**

I guess when I was working in the Greek restaurant, even when I was there, I was learning about Mediterranean food which I thought was very- -I thought that cuisine was so appropriate for this city as well. That style of eating, the fish, the tomato, the oil *and* they're not shy about meat as well.

**The grapevines. That's what Dunstan was talking about wasn't he?**

Yes. I thought working at the Iliad was good fun, it was relaxed and it doesn't make a restaurant to be such a stressful place to work in. I've never stressed in a restaurant.

**Good on you.**

I want to enjoy working in a restaurant. I'm not in it- - - if it is hard, that's part of the fun, that's how I enjoy working in the restaurant.

**The Market as a learning environment for cultural exchange and taste and food and difference in food as being a way of imbibing different culture and an appreciation of different culture, I love all those idea. I'm just keen to explore other things you remember about the Market because when you mentioned the Athens, I mentioned Connie and she said and Maria and Nicki (from Lucias) said there was a group of Chef, Ann and Belinda and you and Gabriel**

Gabriel Gate. And they were on one side and on the other side me and Phillip Searle will be sitting at Asian Gourmet having Laksa and restoring a hangover on this side (laughs). That's how it was in those days. There's the Europeans and then there was - - - (laughs) Me and Phillip Searle, restoring our hangover at Asian Gourmet having a bowl of Laksa.. Those were the days when all the chefs- - - and you'd see Nick from Chloes walking about buying his.....and Alan.....(name?) It was almost like a chef's- - - -but I don't know where they all are these days, they don't come out any more.

**What do you remember about the change, the availability of produce, the sophistication, the local pressing of olives, the bread, everything changed didn't it?**

I think the Market is- - - you've virtually got the world in the whole Market running from Eastern European or Germanic to Mediterranean from Vietnamese to Thailand to Malaysia to China- -

**I'm going to get a list.**

It is so handy because the worst thing- - I mean every time I do a promotion in Sydney or in Perth, I have to run from 20 minutes here and 20 minutes there all around the city to look for my ingredients, whereas in Adelaide I can get it within half an hour, I walk around. It is **wonderful**.

**And you're next door (at the Hilton).**

One of the main attractions of working for the Hilton is the Market.

Tape 1 Side B

**....set out your menu and then go and buy it or does it work both ways?**

No. For example today, my chef came up and says: 'There's no way I can get any fresh blue swimmer crabs, the blueys.' Well, I said: 'Why don't we go to get the muddies from Darwin' at Kim Wang (?), which is the big Chinese supermarket. ' Then I walked down there and I wanted to make sure they cover all outlets of the fish places. My mission is to get crabs these days. So I went to Cappos Brothers and no muddies, but there are sand crabs, so I pull out my mobile phone and ring up the kitchen and says 'they've got sand crabs here, so get them to come down and pick up sand crabs.' That what I did today. How I plan the menu is- - I don't plan the menu and go down to the Market, I actually walk in the Market and get inspiration to do my menu.

**You know what's seasonally available- - - do you work seasonally?**

Yes, I work seasonally and I would get inspiration and I would walk into a small goods shop and suddenly one particular item would click into my head and it says: 'Oh, I want to do one dish. Maybe an eastern European dish, or maybe I use Swiss chard and cook until it's very soft and confit some lambs tongue and then a little bit of rabbit (?) into the leaves (?) and then gratinate it with some bechemal sauce and a little bit of cheese, very European...

**That's so eclectic- - -**

So you just click in my mind that I'm going to bring in a little bit of Eastern European into my grilled dishes, so I go for it. That's how I do it.

**That was about four or five different cultures in that recipe, wasn't there.**

That's right. That's how you walk through the Market. Of course you look at varying (?) ingredients and 'Oh, jackfruit is in season now, so what I really like to do is a fruit soup with jackfruit. Boil up the banana and Pandan leaves with champagne.

**Wow. You're kidding me. No you do!**

Then we have a really, really nice, clear aromatic broth and I chill it down and that's all I use for a soup.

**Yum.**

So we do those kinds of things. Of course, all the vegetables that we use depends on the season. You might have summer .....(?) or winter.....(?). You can have the summer or winter version of one Chinese vegetable. You can have it almost all year around, or some of them you can't have it, it's only just for winter and some of them are only for summer.

**Do you have relationships with growers?**

Not as much as I used to. During Neddys days- -the growers in these days they are- - - during Neddys days there were a lot of people who comes to Neddys because we use (interrupts)

**I remember having shark lips or something!**

Yes, we have everything, because everybody comes in- - - like Des Delain (?) who's got the venison farm would come in with- - - try this. I got another friend who is having a garage full of pigeons and partridge who wants me to try it. I got strawberry growers and herb growers in those days in just small patches for a bit of pocket money.

**Was that like a way of growers expanding their market? Showcasing their food- - - and you would cook it and a lot of people would taste it. Then their market grew.**

Yeah. In those days they were hobby farmers in those days, they might have become big growers, I don't know. Now, there are two types of growers as well. There are some Asian growers who join in with the Italian and Greek farmers and they grow their vegetables

**I've heard that**

And there are a lot of hobby farmers in the Asian community as well.

**Can you put me in touch with any of these people?**

I think the best person to talk to would be the lady from Lan Hing, the vegetable lady. She would be the best person, because she knows all the contacts.

**That's on the corner of Gouger?**

No, just next door to Asian Gourmet.

I used to have a lady who has been in Australia for more than about 40 years now and her name was Madam Choy. Choy in Chinese means vegetable. She used to come to Neddys all the time and pull out all these things she would grow in her backyard. Snow pea shoots, choy- - - those were the days when I first got my Chinese vegetables was through her.

**Where was she?**

Up in Payneham. I think she's in a home at the moment.

**I tried to talk to the woman at Lan Hing, it's hard because I'm Australian, and she's going what do you want?**

I think it has to be explained to her properly. She and her daughter is the best person.

**She's the older woman.**

Yes, she's the one who sits on the pile of vegetables. Or the other person would be Linda.

**The Koo Chi. She's nice. She was an early- - -**

She would be about no 3 or 4 , the grocers shop she picks there.

**Then the big one near the Centre for Performing Arts on Grote Street.**

Is it the Hong Kong is it? If you want the details of the Market is Graham.

(some chatty details here not transcribed)

Even the Victoria Market is not as good as this one. This one is small, it's such a small place with so much variety. It's intense isn't it. Prahran is good, but I still think I can get the best of everything I need in this Market here. I've walked through the Prahran Market a few times; it still repeats itself a lot. Whereas here maybe you have about three shops that look the same, the rest are selling different things. I think to really go through, we need to walk the market.

**The other thing I'm interested in is the way in which the chefs interacted with the Market in those early days where there was a lot of growth of interest and knowledge about food.**

**I'm interested in the fact that Dunstan was a gourmet, and even Playford before Dunstan**

**was a market gardener. I'm interested in the role that the market and the multicultural**

**community in that market - - the contribution that's made to Adelaide and South**

**Australia.**

I think the Adelaide market is like any wonderful market around the world. You can smell all the cultural influences in the Market. You can walk through the market and smell- - - I think the best thing is to go through and walk around and see some of the things in there.

**It's like a theatre in there.**

Exactly. I think the days when all the chefs were running around in the market, there is a reason for that. First of all they were all learning. We were in a learning process, so we are reading books and say: 'what is a salsifier?' So you go to the Market and ask them. Of course a lot of them never heard of it, except when you hit a European- - - there were a couple of European ladies and they say: 'Yeah, but it's very hard to grow it here and we get it some time, but it is hard to grow it here in Australia.' Or in those days we are looking for artichokes or things like that. So there is a both (mutual) learning process going on between the stall people when all these chefs are demanding a different variety of herbs, vegetables and fruits. So there's a constant demand from chefs who are looking for different sorts of fruit and veg. In their role they have to meet the demand or create the demand, so that is a very interesting process in those days. It's even more wonderful when you're there, noticing it is happening.

**Is it still happening?**

It will always be happening.

**The young ones are still in there?**

Oh, some of them are looking for particular coriander roots. I want the one that looks like broad leaf with a little bit of age on the top. I want that root and that is a special one I want. They carry on - - - but I must say we got to the stage where we don't have to do that too often any more because a lot of the new things come up, the stall people would bring out any way. Anything that is special they bring it up.

**How do they know?**

A lot of them are very food savvy. By travelling and reading about it. The young ones. The generation have changed in the market. It's a change for the better. I remember the first time I ever went to the East End Market. Four o'clock in the morning, me and my partner we went down there and look at all this pile of food. Well, first of all, nothing happens at four o'clock. Nobody, so we're all going to the Producer's (Hotel) and all the truckies having a cup of coffee with a dash of whisky and a beer chaser. Oh year, I'll have one of those and then you walk across. At six o'clock you can walk around and say: 'I want fresh artichokes, I want these few bunches of celery, I want that eggplant. You can go around and make a choice first. Very often you come to some of the stalls and they say, 'sorry I can't sell it to you' because they're selling it to their regular customer and because we're just a newcomer coming in.

**They're loyal.**

They're loyal. Most of them have the boot of the car open and sell whatever they have inside. It's really wonderful to see that. Now we have them so far- -

**Pooraka!**

I remember they might just have a small little ute or small little truck with a few bags of vegetables they have and dispose of them in the morning and that was it. You'd have the six o'clock siren that blows which says: 'Yes, trading starts now.' And you see a mad rush with everybody with their cars loading up whether they're from the Castle Hotel or the sandwich shop down the road to the fish and chip shops buying only their tomatoes and cucumbers and onions and restaurants of course and they're all just trying to make a little bit. But these days, we don't do that any more.

These days the supermarket pantehnicos pull up at Pooraka and the fork lift truck loads the pantehnicon and then it heads off to probably Queensland or somewhere!

That's right.

**OK Cheong I think that's a beautiful interview. I'm very happy with that. Thank you very much.**

Pleasure.