

BALBOA



ISLAND LIVING

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**Meet Your
Balboa Island
NEIGHBORS
THE DELLAR FAMILY**

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history

By **Pete Weitzner** – Balboa Island Resident and Co-Producer, “The Golden Age of Newport Harbor”



Wing & Fam Regale Museum Crowd

‘Heartwarming to Hear the American Story Retold’



The Restaurateurs: Wing Lam (Wahoo's), Lee Cheong Kwong (Shanghai Pine Gardens), and Youlen Chan (Phoenix Bakery) and The Cake

STORY GOES SOMETHING LIKE THIS ... NEW MARINE-AVENUE BUSINESS OWNER SPIES A CROWD ACROSS THE STREET, GATHERED AROUND A TALL MAN. HE RECOGNIZES THE MAN AND TELLS **JOHN WAYNE** ABOUT HIS NEW RESTAURANT. TURNS OUT, THE DUKE'S PUBLICIST WAS LOOKING FOR A VENUE TO HOLD A BIRTHDAY DINNER. WAYNE'S ASSISTANT CALLED THE PROPRIETOR OF **SHANGHAI PINE GARDENS** THE NEXT DAY, BOOKED THE WHOLE RESTAURANT, AND DUKE AND ENTOURAGE ENJOYED A DELICIOUS CHINESE MEAL – UNIQUE IN 1970 NEWPORT BEACH – AS WAS THE VERSION OF “HAPPY BIRTHDAY” THEY WERE TREATED TO BY PROPRIETOR, **LEE CHEONG KWONG**.

And no small thing, from that night on, Mr. Lee's restaurant became a rousing success on Balboa Island, where Mr. Lee and his wife, **Lee So Ching**, still call home. It's a lesser-known story of the now-fabled Lee family, which includes sons **Wing Lam** and his brothers, who built the global franchise, **Wahoo's Fish Taco**.

Wing Lam, his parents, and fellow Chinese émigré, **Youlen Chan**, whose family founded the famous **Phoenix Bakery** in Los Angeles, were the featured guests on a February evening at the **Balboa Island Museum Newport Beach**. The Museum staged a joint celebration of these families who had emigrated from mainland China ultimately to Southern California and of the Lunar New Year, celebrated in China and other Asian countries in February. 2022 is The Year of the Tiger.

The Museum decorated its gallery with hanging red lanterns and showcased photos and stories of the Lee family, including an iconic photo of Mr. Lee and Mr. Wayne from The Dinner.

“Most guests we ever have had in The Museum. Says a lot about Wing Lam and his family,” **President-Emeritus Shirley Pepys** said.



The event echoed that magical dinner with The Duke 50 years earlier. Wing Lam took some 40 friends to the Shanghai Pine Gardens before heading over to the Museum, where Wing and Youlen Chan held court in an informal conversation with a rapt gathering of over 100.

What stories they heard.

“The great American story,” **Museum President Paula Castanon** said. “So uplifting, these families, not from much, came here and worked hard and found success.”

The fast-casual chain that Wing Lam and brothers started in 1988 in Costa

Mesa has grown as far as Japan to around 50 stores in the U.S. and was a favorite from day one with the surf crowd. But the business, Lam told the audience, should be noted for “old-fashioned hard work, everything we learned at my parents’ (300 Marine Avenue) restaurant.”

Youlen Chan's family emigrated from mainland China about the same time as the Lee's.

“No Chinese bakeries in Los Angeles. So, we started one,” said the owner of the famed **Phoenix Bakery**, now in its third generation, and selling one of Chinatown's most iconic pastries, the “not so Chinese” birthday cake.

To bring the event full circle, **Lee Cheong Kwong** summoned up an encore of “Happy Birthday.”

“When Mr. Lee came up and sang that song ... amazing,” **Museum Member Michelle Lovendusky** said.

“An opera, just beautiful,” **Museum Member Sandy Ranier** said.

Youlen even baked a traditional Lunar New Year cake with strawberries and whipped cream, decorated with a tiger. To say the crowd left with smiles would be an understatement.

“Wherever Wing goes, he brings joy,” Pepys said.

Visit Balboa Island Museum Newport Beach. We're open daily. Free general admission. Become a member. balboaislandmuseum.org/become-a-member