

GLOBAL FLAVORS GO TO COLLEGE

By Christina Biggs
Chicago Tribune

March 12, 2003 - International food management firm Sodexo brought the authentic flavors of Asia to Northwestern University last month with a month long Global Chef Program, which conducts "chef exchanges" around the world.

"We're really taking advantage of our company's global presence," Sodexo district manager Paul Komelasky said.

NU students, faculty and staff sampled culinary creations by Cheng Hong Wah, Sodexo's head Hong Kong chef, at resident dining halls and other campus locations.

Donning a gold silk jacket, Cheng played to his Western audience as he prepared made-to-order stir-fries of bok choy, black mushrooms and peas.

This showmanship, unusual in Hong Kong, caused initial skepticism among Asian students, who account for more than 7 percent of NU's population. However, many said their doubts soon turned to devotion after trying his primarily Cantonese dishes, which included Korean style short ribs, 1,000-year-old eggs in porridge, and chicken curry.

"I know that students definitely miss authentic food from their homes," Cheng said through a translator. "We have tried to incorporate the style of Cantonese cooking to make students feel more at home here."

Evidence of the chef's sense of humor was seen in the final item on his menu: a basket of garlic bread, which many in Hong Kong seem to believe Americans serve with every meal.

One primary cultural concern for Cheng was how to fuse the ingredients and styles of his homeland into meals that would appeal to a broad palate.

"Stomachs are very popular in Hong Kong," he said. "Pig intestines, chicken feet. When cooking for Northwestern, I wanted to use Cantonese flavors but with an American twist."

Although the program's goal was to share its international talent, Cheng was also able to pick up a few new techniques. "Using a grill has been a learning experience, although the end result of the food is the same," he said.

Sami Signorino, executive chef at Northwestern, said she'll include most of Cheng's dishes in the list of NU options, although many may be modified. "I can mimic what [he] does to get to the heart of the flavors using indigenous ingredients, but I have to keep the students' nutritional needs and the tools I have in mind," she said.

After a full day's work, Cheng himself worked up an appetite. "I'm just like a student here," he said. "I want some comfortable, home-style cooking."

After scouting several local restaurants, Seven Treasures in Chinatown was the spot that won his heart in the end.