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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### Takeout

**H**ARLEY SPILLER has the right degree of acquisitiveness for someone with a bathtub in his kitchen. He has modest, carefully arranged collections of discarded keys, six-pack holsters, graffiti stickers, and Mr. T memorabilia. Over his stereo hangs an assortment of tone arms, twenty in number and lined up according to length. He has also assembled what may be the largest group of Chinese takeout menus ever seen. Under the title "A Million Menus," his "celebration of Chinese take-out food in America" has just opened at the Franklin Furnace, the downtown performance space and artists' book archive,

where Spiller is the administrative director.

A couple of weeks before the opening, there were stacks of suitcases and boxes stuffed with menus—over five thousand, from all fifty states—by his refrigerator, and baskets overflowing with plastic takeout bags. "It's got out of control," he said, sidestepping around the kitchen while preparing a Sunday breakfast of tea, steamed snow-pea leaves, and Chef Chow's Mandarin Flower Rolls. "I'm still only ninety-two per cent finished with alphabetizing the menus." He added that he enjoyed this task despite the filing complications brought on by rapid turnover and sudden name changes. "I've got China Lady, and then I've got New China Lady," he said. "You want to put those together. But on Second Avenue the Miraculous Mandarin became the Sizzling Szechuan—how do you deal with that?" For one address on the East Side he had menus from a succession of eight different Chinese restaurants, and he expected some critics to accuse him of padding the show. His guideline, he said, was "If they rubber-stamp it 'Asparagus in Season,' I'm counting it as a new menu."

Mr. Spiller said that his could be the first art show in history where "a good ten per cent of the items have footprints on them." He also said that, in the face of anti-menu backlash from apartment dwellers who after a week away can come home to a foyer carpeted with triplicate copies from several local deliverers, he wanted to focus attention on the often invisible role played by the Chinese restaurant in America's daily life. "For most of these restaurants, the menus seem to be their basic means of advertising," he went on. "One owner told me that he prints a hundred thousand at a time and uses them up in two months."

Mr. Spiller began his collection when he arrived in New York from Buffalo, nearly ten years ago. During after-dinner strolls along Upper Broadway, he would yank menus off the strings and bent coat hangers outside the takeout counters, and go home to read everything he had gathered up. "First and foremost, I liked the typos," he explained. "But also the exotica. I was meat and potatoes until I came to New York. I remember when I first ate squid. Now I eat squid like peas." One rainy Saturday, Mr. Spiller

decided to alphabetize his menus. "It took seven hours," he said. "It was dinnertime and I hadn't eaten breakfast. I thought, I've got something here." He began to go out of his way to pick up uncollected samples for his set. Two years ago, he applied to the Franklin Furnace and was granted a show.

"A Million Menus" may actually shed more light on the unusual energies of Harley Spiller than on the history of Chinese food in America. He regrets, for example, that he never consulted the twenty-five thousand menus in the collection of the New York Public Library. "I think they're more interested in hardcover menus—if that's the term—anyway," he told us. He does have a menu from 1916, with fifteen different and shockingly expensive teas, including Head Cone Yam (\$1) and Sun Sen Char, grown on Cloud-Covered Mountain Heights (\$5). A cousin of his came up with that rarity. Mr. Spiller's sister Lora wrote to chambers of commerce all over the country, and

as a result menus from Mobile, Alabama (House of Chin), Bismarck, North Dakota (Jade Garden), and Rockford, Illinois (You Won), are represented. And a friend from Staten Island donated his family's stained takeout palimpsest. "Look, they just kept ordering from the same one for years," Mr. Spiller said, showing us the dishes circled and prices updated in smudged pencil.

A video component of the show features delivery of food from a restaurant to Mr. Spiller's apartment, and in vitrines and along the walls of the gallery can be found sterling-silver chopsticks, five-gallon drums of duck sauce, takeout containers, a lamp made out of dried fish, an original painting of a street corner in Chinatown, and a menu autographed by Ed Koch. The woman who designed Pee-wee Herman's scooter built a five-foot fortune cookie for the show. "She said, 'I'll take a little brown paint and toast the edges,'" Mr. Spiller said. "It's gonna look good!"