

FRIDAY, JANUARY 31, 2014
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Celebrating cultural crossovers

Is Richmond inching its way to a greater blending of cultures as Chinese New Year kicks off?



SCAN PAGE WITH LAYAR TO SEE VIDEO OF CNY DRESS REHEARSALS

By Philip Raphael
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The long string of lion dancers swirl in series across the stage in colourful and traditional pageantry, delighting the audience crammed into Aberdeen Centre's cavernous atrium.

It's Chinese New Year once again.

But dotted in between the mainly ethnic Chinese onlookers is the odd non-Chinese face.

Is it a sign of cultural blending as the celebration inches slowly more into the mainstream of the Lower Mainland's cultural melange?

Talk to Joey Kwan and she nods yes, with a smile.

"We think that the Chinese New Year celebrations is not only for Chinese. It's for the whole community to celebrate together and is becoming a bit of a cultural breakthrough as more people outside the community come celebrate with us," says Kwan, spokesperson for Aberdeen Centre, site of the Lower Mainland's largest Chinese New Year celebrations.

"It's been gradually picking up. More and more non-Chinese people have been coming out to see how we celebrate and have a better understanding of our culture."

The result fulfills the mall's stated philosophy to not be an exclusive Chinese realm — something emphasized by its signage rules that ensure English is the dominant language, with others playing a smaller, supporting role.

"That is one of our missions here, and gradually we are seeing a cultural blending," Kwan says. "It is happening."

The efforts have also attracted a smattering of non-Chinese businesses setting up shop for the New Year period.

Catherine Hendrix, owner of High End Resale, a consignment shop with two locations in Vancouver, says she decided to come to Aberdeen Centre this year for the first time because of the high number of Asian clients she has built up over the years.

Business has been so encouraging at the mall that Hendrix is contemplating opening a permanent location there.

"That's a goal I have, and one of the reasons I came here this year," she says.

Over at Candy Meister which sells naturally made German confectionery, Elisa Koeppen says she was looking for a high-traffic location and her products fit in well with the tradition of buying



To help celebrate Lunar New Year at Richmond City Hall, Coun. Chak Au shows off the traditional mandarin orange tree and laisee (red envelopes) used to gift money during the celebrations.
Photo: Philip Raphael
Richmond News

candy for Chinese New Year.

Among the top sellers is her spicy ginger.

"Everyone seems to like that one, as well as the sweet and fruity stuff," she says, adding based on encouraging sales to date she's definitely coming back next year.

Blending cultures

The small crossovers between cultures is exactly what Richmond city councillor Chak Au wants to see.

A longtime advocate of building bridges between communities, Au says one thing which could enhance the process is less emphasis on the new year events as being exclusively Chinese.

That's why he has suggested the city refer to it's own new year events as Lunar New Year to include other Asian cultures who are

also celebrating at this time of year.

"The Lunar New Year is being celebrated not only by the Chinese people, but those others in Asia who were using the lunar calendar for many years like the Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese," Au says. "Among ourselves in the Chinese community, we will still refer to it as Chinese New Year because it is our celebration. But in Richmond, on the public side, we should use the term Lunar New Year because we are not referring to just one group of people." The hope is to create a more inclusive society, and, in turn, foster better understanding and acceptance of other cultures.

"I always encourage the Chinese community to be inclusive, added Au.

Signs of change are already becoming more apparent away from the retail environment, said Au, referring to a recent variety show at the River Rock Casino Resort, hosted by the Chinese community leading up to New Year's festivities, which featured a marquee performance by an Indo-Canadian dance group.

"That was very telling," Au says. "It's a sign. It's growing."

Lunar akin to Happy Holidays

Decreasing the emphasis of Chinese New Year is akin to the debate surrounding the move to eliminate Merry Christmas in favour of Happy Holidays and Seasons Greetings, said Richmond resident Richard Liew, the past president of the Malaysia Singapore & Brunei Cultural Association.

"Chinese New Year is something more people can relate to," Liew says. "Lunar is another general name for the festive season. Changing things would just lead to confusion. It's better to keep things the way they are."

Western face of festivities

Unconvinced is the "Western God of Fortune," better known as Coun. Bill McNulty who for the past 18 years has been the Caucasian face of the traditional Chinese "God of Fortune" at Aberdeen Centre's celebrations where he greets the crowds and hands out the laisee — the traditional red envelopes containing money.

"I consider it a great honour to be able to work on bringing groups together through this kind of role," McNulty says. "It shows that we are all-embracing in our community, and we value all cultures. It only augments harmony."

"The world is a very small place. And the sooner we continue to think that way, the better off and more knowledgeable we all are. And we will have fewer problems by doing that."



Coun. Bill McNulty gets into the spirit of Chinese New Year by playing the 'Western' God of Fortune, a role he's taken on for the past 18 years.
Submitted Photo

YEAR OF THE HORSE

Horse people clever, talkative

Graeme Wood
Special to the News

Today marks the first day of the Year of the Horse. The horse is the seventh creature represented in the 12 year cycle of the Chinese zodiac. Each creature is said to have attributes that exude a spirit on those born in the creature's particular years.

People born in the years of the horse are described as communicable, clever, talkative, cheerful, perceptive and friendly. These people like to entertain and enjoy large crowds. They



are true of real horses. "I would say that's a pretty close vision of what it's all about for horses," chuckled Graham. Graham says horses are fickle characters that frighten easily. "A horse won't take any crap from anybody and the moment it feels restraint or restricted it bolts."

But he reminds us that horses, like humans, also have an infinite number of differences. "I can show you cranky old mares and cranky old boys. But for the better part, that describes the horse quite well," said Graham.

Some of

Richmond's most famous athletes are horse people, which falls in line with horse people's affinity to entertain others and their appreciation for large crowds. Among these athletes are Scott Hannan, born Jan. 23, 1979, a professional hockey player for the San Jose Sharks, Kyle Hamilton, born Feb. 26, 1978, an Olympic rowing champion, and Jason Jordan, born May 30, 1978, a retired professional soccer player who played for the Vancouver Whitecaps. Another famous horse person from Richmond was Harvey Lowe, a radio personality and world yo-yo champion, born Oct. 30, 1918, passed away 2009.



Local actor and chef, Colin Foo, whips up a dish full of red and gold to bring good luck in the Year of the Horse. Photo: Gord Goble, Richmond News

Good food brings good luck

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Food is a central theme to most cultural celebrations, and Chinese New Year is no different. Although, meals made during this time can take on increased traditional significance. So, to mark this Year of the Horse, local chef and actor Colin Foo prepared a dish fit for the occasion.

Since the Year of the Horse is considered to be symbolic of a time filled with good fortune personally and in business, Foo cooked up his recipe for Hot Orange Pepper Chicken which emphasizes the dish's deep red and gold colours which are associated with luck.

"The Year of the Horse is also called the money year," Foo said. "And red is a very lucky colour in the Chinese culture. So, too, is gold. That's why the pineapple in the recipe is very important."

Hot Orange Pepper Chicken

Ingredients:

- 1 cup fresh orange juice
- 1 tsp tomato paste
- 4 tsp tomato ketchup
- 1 Tbsp vinegar
- 2 Tbsp brown sugar
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 1/4 tsp Tabasco Sauce
- 1 tsp tapioca or corn starch (Mix all of the above in a bowl)
- 1/2 pound of sliced chicken breast
- 1 tsp oyster sauce
- 1 tsp light soya sauce (Marinate chicken in the fridge overnight)
- 1 tomato, finely chopped
- 1/2 onion finely sliced
- 1 tsp chopped fresh garlic
- 1 tsp chopped fresh ginger
- 1/2 cup sliced red pepper
- 2 or 3 tsp vegetable cooking oil

Directions:

Heat a wok until hot, add in the vegetable cooking oil, then add the fresh chopped garlic, ginger and orange zest. Stir, then add the sliced onions and fry until slightly golden. Add the marinated sliced chicken and stir fry until cooked. Add the remainder of the vegetables, lower heat, cover and simmer for a few minutes until it starts to steam. Add orange and tomato juice mixture and mix in well, cover and let simmer. As soon as it starts to bubble vigorously, it is ready. Garnish with fresh chopped pineapple and serve with steamed rice.

Foo said most Chinese families will gather on New Year's Eve (Jan. 30) and share a meal before heading out to New Year's countdown celebrations later in the evening much in the same way western cultures convene as midnight approaches.

"Sharing a meal at new year's with family is a time to bond," Foo said.

Food also plays a prominent role on New Year's Day (Jan. 31) in the Chinese culture as tradition calls for not using knives when eating.

"If you use knives or anything sharp that's seen as cutting relationships," Foo said. "And you don't want to do that. It would be bad luck. That's why most Chinese prefer to eat out on New Year's Day."

Tradition also discourages sweeping or cleaning up on New Year's Day. "If you do, that would be sweeping away your good luck," Foo said.