

The Worst Waiter in History

May 26, 2014 · 76,023 views



San Francisco in the late 1960s was a place for lovers, poets, and peace-makers. Positivity and goodwill were as omnipresent as the fog, and people were greeted with open arms and rosy cheeks. Unless, of course, you were on the second story of Sam Wo Restaurant in the heart of Chinatown.

Past steaming woks and chopping blocks and up a narrow, creaky staircase, Edsel Ford Fong -- the world's most insulting waiter -- greeted patrons with a "*sit down and shut up!*" Routinely, he

cussed out his customers, sexually accosted female companions, and unapologetically spilled soup across laps. According to one [diner](#), he was so malicious that he “made the Soup Nazi look like the Dalai Lama.”

But Edsel’s antics also made a legend: people would come to Sam Wo’s just to experience his wrath. In [1982](#), *The Chronicle* even deemed the man “San Francisco’s Worst Waiter.” Through oral histories, we’ve recounted who this man was, what it was like to be served by him, and the legacy he left behind.

The Edsel Ford Fong Experience



By the time it closed in 2012, Sam Wo Restaurant had been in business for nearly 100 years. In its prime, the dingy four-story Chinatown joint was legendary -- partly for its curry noodles, but more so for the antics of its wait staff. A [regular](#) who frequented Sam Wo’s in the 60s recalls the ordeal just to get to the building’s dining room:

“You'd pass through clouds of steam rising from big soup and noodle cauldrons, climb a flight and a half of steep stairs and find a stool at one of the tables in the long, narrow dining room. It was more like the galley on a Liberian registered tramp freighter. No armchair dining here.”

It was a cultural hotspot: celebrities, gamblers, musicians, beatniks, and hippies mingled with Chinese immigrants, and those who didn't speak the language resorted to pointing to others' plates and nodding. Plastered on each table, the house rules spelled out the establishment's no-nonsense attitude -- *"No Booze, No Jive, No Coffee, Milk, Soft Drinks, Fortune Cookies."* Beside the authoritative words, a stern caricature of Edsel Ford Fong stared you in the eye with a look that negated everything about the restaurant's literal translation (“Three in peace,” after the original founders).

Edsel, the son of Sam Wo's owner, began as a waiter and soon became the restaurant's coming attraction -- and for an unlikely reason: he was the rudest, most despotic waiter to ever walk the earth. At 6', 200 pounds, Edsel sported a military crew cut, a long, perennially-stained white apron, and an omnipresent scowl. When it came to insults, recalls one [customer](#), “he took no prisoners:”

“Mao said everybody eats from the same pot of soup but Edsel let you know he was an ardent supporter of Generalissimo Chaing Kai-Shek.

If there was a line and you weren't a regular, even if you were at the head of it, you'd have to wait. If you asked questions about the food, Edsel would point to menus tacked to the wall, all in chinese. He would slide your bowl across the table, not minding if some of it messed your pants or shirt along the way. He'd throw the chopsticks onto the table like they were a pair of dice. And to make matters worse, he'd laugh about it, right in your face.”

[Joe Franco](#) recalls his first visit to Sam Wo in 1981 and, consequently, his first Edsel experience. “Sit down and shut up!” he was told upon entering. When he made the grave mistake of attempting to order sweet-and-sour pork and a diet coke, Edsel was not pleased:

"You [stupid]? No coke!! Tea Only!! No sweet and sour!! You see on menu?!! You get house special chow fun...No fork, chopstick only...What you want, fat man?"

Another customer, [Lou Sideris](#), once tried to order the “fried shrimp,” an item nearly double the price of anything else on the menu. “No! It’s a rip-off!” yelled Edsel. Sideris and his friends would return many times over the years, each time attempting to order the shrimp, and each time being furiously denied by Edsel.

Even if someone did manage to place an order approved by the waiter, he’d often confuse it with another table’s food, or write down a different item altogether. There was no complaining with Edsel -- you ate what you were given, regardless of whether or not it was what you wanted. If you took too long reading the menu, you’d receive a dose of Edsel’s first-class abuse: “*What is this, a library?!*”

Unless you were a VIP, your meal would be over the second your spoon hit the bottom of the bowl: Edsel would come by with a broom and literally sweep you out. Only one diner -- who bought him a “weekly ration of free X-rated movie passes” -- was permitted to enjoy a post-meal cup of “Edsel’s Special Tea” (pure ginseng extract). When another customer saw the drink and curiously inquired about it, he was kicked out. This wasn’t unusual: often, Edsel would forcibly remove seated patrons in the middle of a meal, “just to remind them who was running the show.”

For kicks, Edsel would parlay his waiting duties to unsuspecting guests. A [first-timer in the mid-seventies](#) learned the hard way.

“You want to sit and eat? You clean the plates from the table!”

Edsel yelled. For the next 15 minutes, the diner and his party stood at the sink rinsing dishes -- just in order to be served. Afterward, in the middle of the party's meal, Edsel demanded they give up their chairs for some regulars who'd just walked in. They obliged, and ate the rest of their meal standing up. “It was one of the best dining experiences of my life,” recalls the diner. “If you went to Sam Wo's for anything other than this type of madness, then shame on you.”

Gregory C. Ford, another patron in the late 70s, recalls similar treatment from Edsel:

“Upon entering, Mr. Fong instantly made me wipe the table get water and even fill water for the other tables. Then, he threw the order ticket on the table and had me write down the orders. I handed back the tickets and he threw it down and said ‘ADD IT UP!’ When the food came up from the kitchen, Edsel ordered me to deliver it.”

At the end of your meal, you'd always receive Edsel's famous line: “small check, big tip!” If you left anything less than 20%, you'd be verbally berated. Edsel put on a show and expected to be compensated like a Hollywood star.



Edsel was also known for his crass “flirtation:” an entire wall at Sam Wo was dedicated to Polaroid photos of the waiter in various degrees of groping unsuspecting young females. “A charming first date destination if you never want to see your date again,” [wrote](#) one reviewer in the late 70s. “My ex-wife ended up on the wall. The groping part was the only time I ever saw Edsel smile. She was not amused.” (The pictures we’ve included in this article confirm Edsel's perennial smile in the presence of ladies -- we don't condone his behavior.)

On numerous occasions, Edsel attracted the attention of local authorities. [James Flower](#), a diner in the late 60s, recalls one particular incident:

“He was serving a tourist family, looked down the young teen daughter's dress, and said, ‘Hmm, nice little apples!’ They stormed out, returned with a beat cop, who gave Eddie a stern talking to and assured the parents that whatever he was saying in Chinese meant, ‘I'm sorry,’ though he didn't seem particularly contrite. Edsel was certainly not what you'd call politically correct.”

At times, he'd even make physical contact. A [guest in the 80s](#) recounts his sister-in-law's discomfort:

"Once I was there with my sister-in-law, who is a very proper sort of person. Edsel could really tell when he was pushing someone's buttons, and he really lit into her. It ended with him thrusting his sweaty, grizzled face right against hers while taunting her with, "Give me a kiss, baby!" Needless to say, she didn't relish her visit."

Yet another diner [recalls](#) a time Edsel kissed his mother, but brushes it off as an inherent part of the man's character. "If you knew Edsel, he kissed everybody and even got in a few back during his nightly repertoire!"

Legacy



Edsel passed away in 1984, at the age of 55 -- but not before securing an eternal space in San Francisco's folklore.

Herb Caen, the Pulitzer Prize winning San Francisco Chronicle

writer, was a regular lunch customer at Sam Wo's throughout the 60s and would often publish Edsel's remarks in his columns. In turn, Edsel would proudly march around the dining room, pointing to his name in the paper; if strangers inquired, he'd "unleash of volley of expletives."

Edsel was also memorialized in Armistead Maupin's novel series *Tales of the City*, where he appears as a no-less-vicious fictional version of himself. In the book, the protagonist is berated by a waiter at a Chinese restaurant for not washing her hands after leaving the restroom: "*Hey, lady! Go wash yo' hands! You don't wash, you don't eat!*" Flustered, the protagonist returns to her table, where her seasoned companion lets her in on the waiter's secret: "*He specializes in being rude. It's a joke. War lord-turned-waiter. People come here for it.*"

"*Gold Mountain*," a San Francisco mural depicting Chinese contributions to American history, prominently featured Edsel (the mural has since been painted over). There is also a club-level Chinese bistro in The San Francisco Giants' AT&T Park that bears his namesake (though the service isn't nearly as disarming).



Time after time, Edsel's customers came back for more abuse: clearly, there was something about this man that transcended his awfulness.

On Saw Wo's (now defunct) Facebook page, fans leave behind their favorite memories of the restaurant. Jan Bielawski recalls an experience from the 60s that could only be linked to Edsel: "A guest asked to change an order...the waiter screamed 'You order it, you pay for it, you EAT it!'"

But when she returned in the early 80s, she recalled an Edsel quite removed from his usual bitterness: "I was leaving and for some reason I felt I had to turn around: there he was, at the back of the kitchen, smiling at me. Then, he bowed. I never knew if his anger was genuine or an act, but it was always an experience."

This post was written by Zachary Crockett. Follow him on [Twitter here](#), or [Google Plus here](#).



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JIM THE BOSS • a month ago

PEEPLE CAMME TO THIS GUYS REATSRATRAUTNT BECAUUSI
TREET CSUTOMERS I USE SMIILAR STYLE AS MANNGER AND
SUCKSESSFUL

18 ^ ▾ • Reply • Share ›



kokoro dudu • a month ago

Fuck Edsel

23 ^ ▾ • Reply • Share ›



Heina Dadabhoy • a month ago

"an entire wall at Sam Wo was dedicated to Polaroid photos of the w
groping unsuspecting young females."
And we wonder why people feel justified in murdering women who
The sense of entitlement to female bodies is disturbing and the idea
is disgusting.

31 ^ ▾ • Reply • Share ›



Trappp → Heina Dadabhoy • a month ago

Do you really think any normal person will view this dude as
must be incensed at Bill Clinton, too.

12 ^ ▾ • Reply • Share ›



Heina Dadabhoy → Trappp • a month ago

A *whole wall* dedicated to him and a fawning article
his known history of sexual assault totally counts as p
somewhat positively.

15 ^ ▾ • Reply • Share ›



mcg1969 → Heina Dadabhoy • a month ago

How about *an entire Presidential Library*?

9 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Heina Dadabhoy → mcg1969 • a month ago

Yep, that's a problem too. Agreed.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



BuckRogers → Heina Dadabhoy • a month ago

Suuurrreee it is. You're probably a diehard Clinton fan. In the 90's the Clinton administration wanted a piece of him too. This is all a

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Trapp → Heina Dadabhoy • a month ago

Bizarre. I made a polite, good-natured reply here and an F-bomb below blew right through. Weird.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Rohin Dhar **Mod** → Trapp • a month ago

Hi Trapp, sorry I meant to leave you a comment that was deleted. F-bombs are fine, comments calling people names aren't (I recognize you could have meant lots of things, but I want to err on the side of keeping it civil here)

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



ekwyn → Rohin Dhar • a month ago

Robin, for goodness sake, have a little sense of perspective. First of all, fruitcake is not a slur or insult to think it is. It's simply a way to call someone stupid. You know, bats are people, too, Robin; do you really think that? Being used to describe someone being "nutty as a fruitcake?").

You really are pushing the PC envelope though. The language is disappearing beneath a tidal wave of opprobrium coming from people who, well-meaning as they may be, are contributing to the bowdlerization of the language by inexpertly expurgating words according to some guide which only they know, to the everlasting detriment of the English language.

I know of no other site that would cut out the words because of what or whom it might refer to in s

And that is key, Robin: context. If you ignore c
contribute to the downfall of crisp conversatio
hamstringing your own website. I mean, who wa
word as innocuous as that is censored?

23 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



HelldeskMinion → ekwynn • a month ago

Be careful talking about the Bat to someone n

6 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Gerard Vaughan → ekwynn • 25 days ago

maybe a "fruitperson" would be acceptable ?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Trapp → Rohin Dhar • a month ago

(head spinning thinking about a website wher
letter word, and fuck isn't)

17 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



HelldeskMinion → Trapp • a month ago

Well, it's also about a **restaurant** in SF...

Some people are just paranoid about those wh
misunderstand others.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Andrew R → Trapp • a month ago

So glad civilized society is only made up of normal pe
impacted by normal people.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Nathan_Brazil → Heina Dadabhoy • a month ago

Wow, that is quite a leap there. I don't think I would ever loo
and think "hmmm...I should abuse or kill some women".

But you go with that...

11 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Heina Dadabhoy → Nathan_Brazil • a month ago

I didn't say that someone would do that. The wall rep
seriously we take violence against women: society as
worthy of a write-up.

9  • Reply • Share ›



Michael R Lukacs  Heina Dadabhoy • a month ago

I'm sorry, did I miss something? If the whole & photographs, you'd probably have a good reas pictures aren't they point, they are mentioned the times were. You certainly wouldn't be able nowadays, especially with the PC thugs runnir 'fun'.

1  • Reply • Share ›



Heina Dadabhoy  Michael R Lukacs • a month ago

Sexual assault = "fun". Opposing it makes me

9  • Reply • Share ›



Dianne  Michael R Lukacs • a month ago

This should be one of the rules of the internet: complains about people being "PC" are whiny are the ones ruining peoples fun.

4  • Reply • Share ›



Andrew R  Nathan_Brazil • a month ago

It's not about someone looking at the wall of polaroid women are objects for their pleasure.

It's about a man flaunting his sexual assault accompli let off the hook and allowed to continue because "that celebrated.

It's not about Fong's Wall. It's about society's reaction society's reaction to Fong's Wall, from what I gather,

11  • Reply • Share ›



Nathan_Brazil  Andrew R • a month ago

But that is my point....Society's reaction is NO complaints come in it might have been a differ you do that you get punished, or fired, or rebu society showing its disapproval. The fact that because many of his customers probably did N offensive show. The fact that you can point to the rule is NOT to allow this and we tell scand

behavior.

So this wall IN NO WAY shows why a guy in S Heina was undoubtedly alluding to) feels just who wont have sex with him. This wall did not behavior. That guy had his own unrelated mer existed as an exception to the norm. Not every society gets on just fine anyway.

4 ^ | v | • Reply • Share ›



Trapp → Andrew R • a month ago

God got him. He's dead.

And I don't know how familiar you are with S the more out of the norm a person is, the more they gain from the rest. There are a few other Springs, Arkansas comes to mind. But most pl who appreciate things like good customer serv fellow is lauded with such glee out there in the to 99.9% of the rest of us.

2 ^ | v | • Reply • Share ›



HelldeskMinion → Trapp • a month ago

God got him. He's dead.

Or the Other guy. Or maybe he is back for ano lower lifeform. Depending on religion, YMMV

^ | v | • Reply • Share ›



Trapp → HelldeskMinion • a month ago

I didn't think of that. Perhaps Steve Ballmer w criminal in his previous life. Hmm...

1 ^ | v | • Reply • Share ›



JEFFRAIDER → Heina Dadabhoy • a month ago

didn't waste any time linking this to a mass murder, nice

5 ^ | v | • Reply • Share ›



OrionElectra → Heina Dadabhoy • a month ago

Always someone who's got to find a special interest angle to]

3 ^ | v | • Reply • Share ›



Heina Dadabhoy → OrionElectra • a month ago



Always someone not offended by sexual assault.

For the record, I'm not offended. I'm appalled, disgust

8 • Reply • Share ›



James The Chimp → Heina Dadabhoy • 24 days ago

Look at all the exchanges that follow your post Heina. Go Heina.

1 • Reply • Share ›



OrionElectra → James The Chimp • 22 days ago

@James the Chimp People want to ENSURE I don't jack up the legal system by overstating c desensitizing society by doing so. Go moe-raw vote O-Bama!

^ • Reply • Share ›



James The Chimp → OrionElectra • 22 days ago

Oh, and to add to that though (thoughts are th inside of brains, but don't be jealous, there's a life of naïveté and thumb twiddling, such as y been elected twice, which makes it constitutio us to vote Obama again. But I would, if I could (I hope I didn't use too many big words for yo

^ • Reply • Share ›



James The Chimp → OrionElectra • 22 days ago

Tell me, poor Orion, is it as difficult going thro hat size? You have my pity, poor lad.

^ • Reply • Share ›



OrionElectra → James The Chimp • 22 days ago

You know you've defeated a liberal at his own turn tail and attempt personal attacks. My wo for the nation that your numbers decrease tho

^ • Reply • Share ›



James The Chimp → OrionElectra • 22 days ago

Liberal? What are you smoking Orion? Get a l dispensary? With that you have proved your c see clearly, and have leapt back and forth acro

argument. Plus, every one of your responses is an attack, which, using your logic, means that you're liberal. So take that, moe-rawn. Come back when you're ready to vote.

^ [v] • Reply • Share ›



OrionElectra → Heina Dadabhoy • a month ago

Only one problem with that. You find offense in everything. Stay with it.. it's the primary mode of liberalism. Using that angle to get the US to fund my "Creative" idea!

1 ^ [v] • Reply • Share ›



Heina Dadabhoy → OrionElectra • a month ago

Sexual assault = nothing. Gotcha.

4 ^ [v] • Reply • Share ›



OrionElectra → Heina Dadabhoy • a month ago

No, your math is off, but that is typical for an idiot. You've greatly misdefined sexual assault.. perhaps you're doing your sisters a VAST...VAST injustice. When someone brushes up against your boob, it carries the same TITLE as brutal rape. This is not unlike the way we treat RACISM when really none occurred. Then, when it occurs, society is so burned out from your exaggerated justice no longer gets served. To put it more bluntly, feminazi propaganda has clouded your judgment. It's as serious as sexual assault happened.

1 ^ [v] • Reply • Share ›



Heina Dadabhoy → OrionElectra • 25 days ago

He didn't brush up against anything. He *gropped* you. Sexual battery at the very least.

2 ^ [v] • Reply • Share ›



OrionElectra → Heina Dadabhoy • 25 days ago

In this situation, he didn't brush up against anything. You, on the other hand, you'd readily, EAGERLY in fact, claim a battery. Again, it's YOUR kind who ruin things for you by being so exaggerating and spazzing out over things early. REAL crimes. A grope indeed is more than a h

REAL crimes. A grope indeed is more than a crime in your society's (YOUR society's) propensity to redefine it's now a jailable offense. I think you should reprimand the boorish people on the spot and not waste time or resources.. saving them for the REAL crime they will endure all too often.

^ [dropdown] • Reply • Share ›



Heina Dadabhoy → OrionElectra • 24 days ago

I didn't say it was rape, I said it was sexual assault

2 ^ [dropdown] • Reply • Share ›



OrionElectra → Heina Dadabhoy • 22 days ago

Look at today's media reporting. Sexual assault is rape. Wouldn't be the first time the media distorted the truth. Look at how they cover Messiah Obama's deviant acts as glorious acts of leadership.

^ [dropdown] • Reply • Share ›



James The Chimp → OrionElectra • 22 days ago

Looks like your caps lock keeps sticking, or are you angry at me?

1 ^ [dropdown] • Reply • Share ›



Dianne → OrionElectra • 25 days ago

One person throwing a pen at someone is the same as throwing a brick at someone (throwing a dead animal doesn't make the first one not a crime because the animal exists. There are degrees to crimes just for this reason.

^ [dropdown] • Reply • Share ›



Dianne → OrionElectra • a month ago

Nothing occurred? So repeated sexual assault is not a crime you feel this way if a 300 LB line backer, grabbed you around and kissed you? Yeah, I thought not.

2 ^ [dropdown] • Reply • Share ›



OrionElectra → Dianne • a month ago

Dunno.. that doesn't seem that bad to me. But I'm not a reactionary, low threshold wuss. See the reply above for more details.

[dropdown] • Reply • Share ›

^ | v | • Reply • Share ›



Dianne → OrionElectra • 25 days ago

"that doesn't seem that bad to me." hmm so it immoral action? Duh. One person committing threat of force and force itself) is a crime. Peri

^ | v | • Reply • Share ›



OrionElectra → Dianne • 25 days ago

The end of the story was before you said it was one-track mind of professional victimhood that bothered me in your scenario. Now you're blaming crimes against humanity took place when they the leftist way. Period, end of story.

^ | v | • Reply • Share ›



BuckRogers → Heina Dadabhoy • a month ago

If you're referring to Elliot Rodger, that was an issue of psychology. I agree with Mr. Ronnie Reagan there. Seems like many are just promote how oppressed women are when we're missing the point about the mentally ill, or keeping them away from guns.

2 ^ | v | • Reply • Share ›



Heina Dadabhoy → BuckRogers • 25 days ago

Your armchair diagnoses are not germane.

^ | v | • Reply • Share ›

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