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SPRINGFIELD. Mo.--

Springfield, Mo. is an unchampioned player on America's musical landscape.

Country Music Hall of Famers Porter Wagoner and Brenda Lee got their starts on the Ozark Jubilee radio and television show, broadcast live across America in the 1940s and 1950s from downtown Springfield. The great Chet Atkins was a staff guitarist for the Ozark Jubilee.

While Springfield is just starting to gain recognition for its musical heritage, there's an equally eclectic history with cuisine.

Springfield is "The Cashew Chicken Capital of America."

Springfield's population is approximately 150,000 people. And nearly 100 restaurants serve cashew chicken. People go nuts for this stuff.

Springfield's cashew chicken roots date back to the end of World War II, when Pensacola, Fla., chef David Leong moved to this town, which is known as the Queen City of the Ozarks. In the early 1960s Leong was a chef at the now-defunct Grove Supper Club on Old Route 66, which slices through Springfield. The Grove was a cool place, with low ceilings and comfy booths imbedded with flamingo prints.

"I saw the Drifters there," says Lou Whitney, songwriter and bass player for the Morells. Whitney moved to Springfield in 1970. "The Grove brought in big bands during the 1940s," he says. "In the 1970s my ex-wife Maralie, an original Morell was playing there, doing a duet. It had gone through a series of owners and the last burning had been investigated for arson, although nobody was arrested.

"By virtue of David Leong's Asian heritage, he had a few Asian dishes on the menu. You could get pepper steak, some kind of fried rice.

"And cashew chicken."

Leong conjured up his own style of cashew chicken. He cut the chicken into small nuggets, dipped them in batter and spun them through a deep fry. That gave the cashew chicken a fried chicken flavor. Leong then covered the chicken with Chinese oyster sauce, and over that, he sprinkled chives and/or chopped scallions. Salted cashews were applied as the finishing touch.

In 1998 Leong told the Associated Press, "Everywhere I looked, restaurants were serving fried chicken, fried chicken, fried chicken. So I made American fried chicken with Chinese gravy."

A semi truck once plowed off Route 66 into the kitchen of the supper club during the late 1960s. To demonstrate what happened, Whitney, 57, stands up from behind a desk in his Springfield studio and throws himself against a wall. He apparently enjoys telling the cashew chicken story.

Still standing, he says, "David was pinned against the wall and suffered minor injuries. He ultimately got a settlement"

Leong took the settlement money and opened his own restaurant - Leong's Tea Room - on the then-unsettled far south side of Springfield. "That was Springfield's first Asian restaurant," Whitney says. "Of course, he took his cashew chicken recipe out there. And people started flocking to Leong's."

The tea room closed on New Year's Eve, 1997. But imitators such as the Bamboo Inn, 948 S. Glenstone Ave., the Canton Inn, 205 W. Sunshine St., and the Dragon Inn, 625 S. Kimbrough, carry on the cashew chicken tradition.

Fayetteville, Ark., is about 130 miles from Springfield. At the end of the Vietnam War, Fort Chaffee near Fayetteville was the nation's largest Vietnamese refugee center (50,797) and the last to close (Dec. 20, 1975).

Area dioceses helped with resettlement of the mostly Catholic Southeast Asian refugees. Many refugees settled in Springfield.

Guess what business they got into?

"It was BOOM!" Whitney says, resettling in his chair. "All of these carry-out Asian places started opening up. Every place had the cashew chicken. The people in Springfield were conditioned to cashew chicken. These

Asian families came here, looked around and went, 'We can buy a nice house in the Southern Hills. Have Trans Am cars, nice clothes. And all we have to do is work? Not a problem!' Now, you go to Dallas, Texas or Kansas City, Mo. and see - 'Cashew Chicken: Springfield Style.' "

Of course everyone needs something to wash down cashew chicken. That's where the Ozark Mountain Daredevils come in.

The Daredevils are the biggest commercial act to break out of Springfield with their national mid-1970s hits "Jackie Blue" and "If You Wanna Get to Heaven." The Daredevils album that spawned those hits was recorded in England under the auspices of rock 'n' roll producer Glyn Johns (the Who, the Faces). The Daredevils are still active today, led by co-founder and guitarist John Dillon.

"When we went to London we met Thomas and Frances Bissell, who were friends of my brother's," Dillon says in an interview from Springfield. "For years Frances was the cookery editor for the Times of London. Thomas is a wine writer from the States."

The Bissells invited Dillon and a couple of Daredevils for dinner at their flat in London. At first it was a strange match: the sophisticated foodies and the Ozark hippies. "They asked us, 'Do you know anything about wine?' "

Dillon says. "We answered, 'Not really. Ripple. That's what we know. Thunderbird.' They go, 'There's a whole new world out there.' Thomas had this incredible collection of French Bourdeaux and Burgundies. She prepared stuffed squid. She had gone to France to get it that day. It was unbelievable.

"Over the course of the evening we broke through. The veil lifted. We learned about the pleasure of food and wine. We became students. All of a sudden we're studying wine and buying it."

A year later the Ozark Mountain Daredevils went on the road to promote their self-titled debut record. Their record label, A&M, provided tour support.

"Every time we go to a city the A&M rep shows up in a limo," Dillon says.

"We're in jeans or who knows what else and they say, 'We want to take you to dinner. Where do you want to go?' Well, we've done research. So we say, 'The Mansion on Turtle Creek,' or whatever was cool at the time, akin to Charlie Trotter's today."

If that wasn't highfalutin enough, the Daredevils knew how to pick the finest items from the wine list. "Before you know it the bill was zillions of dollars," Dillon says. "A&M couldn't believe we knew where we wanted to go and what we wanted to order."

"So after about eight months of this a memo went out from the main office in Los Angeles: 'DON'T TAKE THESE GUYS TO DINNER.' They can have their limos, but don't take them to dinner. They thought we were a bunch of hillbillies."

There's more to Springfield than meets the eye.