



Fred  
WAH



DIAMOND  
GRILL

10<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY



"Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* is a small gem of a book . . . from unpunctuated prose poems, recipes, and excerpts from research materials, to beautifully detailed descriptions of the restaurant itself, funny and warm character sketches, and philosophical musings upon anthropology and identity."

—*Quill & Quire*

"... a sophisticated and moving text . . . Wah has produced a memorable account . . ."

—*Canadian Literature*

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—*Pacific Reader*

"Intimate, moving, funny . . ."

—*Calgary Herald*

"... Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* serves up a tasty literary entrée—as well as providing an entrance to a world about which we need to know if we're to understand ourselves."

—*The Vancouver Sun*

"What a joy it is to read his beautifully written sentences, filled to bursting with well chosen language."

—Ruth Raymond

SELECTED WORKS BY FRED WAH

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# Fred WAH



DIAMOND  
GRILL

10th ANNIVERSARY



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You were part Chinese I tell them.  
They look at me. I'm pulling their leg.  
So I'm Chinese too and that's why my name is Wah.  
They don't really believe me. That's o.k.  
When you're not "pure" you just make it up.

—from *Waiting for Saskatchewan*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A biotext, perhaps more than other literary genres, seems an innately cumulative performance. This one certainly owes its gratitude and occurrence to a great many friends and relatives. bpNichol taunted me to overwrite my fear of the tyranny of prose. My mother has been a generous companion through many long discussions about our family. My cousin Ray Lyons and my brother Don have been unselfish in their willingness to share their affection for our family history and recipes. Nancy Mackenzie and Nicole Markotic encouraged me with their editorial readings of early drafts. Jim Wong-Chu has been gracious with his informed and friendly advice. Pauline Butling has lovingly given much more than merely the first ears and eyes to these texts and our daughters, Jennifer and Erika, have often offered their intelligence and natural curiosity to this project. Aritha van Herk's writerly and intelligent editing plus her friendship and sympathy has resolved and softened, for me, some of the pain and anger behind these stories.

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After all that, I must take sole responsibility for this text. I wish not to offend any of my family or any of the Chinese Canadians who have known and experienced some of these stories more tangibly than I have. These are not true stories but, rather, poses or postures, necessitated, as I hope is clear in the text, by faking it.



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**J**N THE DIAMOND, AT THE END OF A

long green vinyl aisle between booths of chrome, Naugahyde, and Formica, are two large swinging wooden doors, each with a round hatch of face-sized window. Those kitchen doors can be kicked with such a slap they're heard all the way up to the soda fountain. On the other side of the doors, hardly audible to the customers, echoes a jargon of curses, jokes, and cryptic orders. Stack a hot! Half a dozen fry! Hot beef san! Fingers and tongues all over the place jibe and swear You mucka high!—Thloong you! And outside, running through and around the town, the creeks flow down to the lake with, maybe, a spring thaw. And the prairie sun over the mountains to the east, over my family's shoulders. The journal journey tilts tight-fisted through the gutter of the book, avoiding a place to start—or end. Maps don't have beginnings, just edges. Some frayed and hazy margin of possibility, absence, gap. Shouts in the kitchen. Fish an! Side a fries! Over easy! On brown! I pick up an order and turn, back through the doors, whap! My foot registers more than its own imprint, starts to read the stain of memory.

Thus: a kind of heterocellular recovery reverberates through the busy body, from the foot against that kitchen door on up the leg into the torso and hands, eyes thinking straight ahead, looking through doors and languages, skin recalling its own reconnaissance, cooked into the steamy food, replayed in the folds of elsewhere, always far away, tunneling through the centre of the earth, mouth saying can't forget, mouth saying what I want to know can feed me, what I don't can bleed me.

*M*IXED GRILL IS AN ENTRÉE  
AT THE DIAMOND

and, as in most Chinese-Canadian restaurants in western Canada, is your typical improvised imitation of Empire cuisine. No kippers or kidney for the Chinese cafe cooks, though. They know the authentic mixed grill alright. It is part of their colonial cook's training, learning to serve the superior race in Hong Kong and Victoria properly, mostly as chefs in private elite clubs and homes. But, as the original lamb chop, split lamb kidney, and pork sausage edges its way onto every small town cafe menu, its ruddy countenance has mutated into something quick and dirty, not grilled at all, but fried.

Shu composes his mixed grill on top of the stove. He throws on a veal chop, a rib-eye, a couple of pork sausages, bacon, and maybe a little piece of liver or a few breaded sweetbreads if he has those left over from the special. While the meat's sizzling he adds a handful of sliced mushrooms and a few slices of tomato to sauté alongside. He shovels it all, including the browned grease, onto the large oblong platters used only for this dish and steak dinners, wraps the bacon around the sausages, nudges on a scoop of mashed potatoes, a ladle of mixed steamed (actually canned and boiled) vegetables, a stick of celery, and sometimes a couple of flowered radishes. As he lifts the finished dish onto the pickup counter he wraps the corner of his apron around his thumb and wipes the edge of the platter clean, pushes a button that rings a small chime out front, and shouts loudly into the din of the kitchen, whether there's anyone there or not, *mixee grill!*

**T**HE MUFFLED SCRAPING OF  
THE SNOW PLOW DOWN

on Baker Street is what he hears first. Then Coreen's deep breathing. Warmth. Shut off the alarm, quick, before she wakes up. Four forty-five, still dark, the house chilled. Dream-knot to Asia, dark and umbilical, early morning on the Pearl Delta, light the grass fire under the rice, ginger taste, garlic residue dampened. Here, on the other side of the world (through that tunnel all the way to China), in long-johns and slippers, quietly to the basement to stoke the furnace with a couple shovelfuls of coal and then wash up. Shave. He talks silently to himself (in English?) as he moves through the routine in near darkness: Who gave me this Old Spice last Christmas? One of the girls at work? Think I'll wear that rayon shirt today. Where's that pack of Players? My pen in the shirt pocket. Light brown gabardines. Start the day with less than a buck's worth of change in the right pocket. Clean hanky in the back pocket. The heavy Health Spot shoes the kids shined last night, by the kitchen door. Overcoat. Overshoes. Out the door into the morning that is still night.

Haven't plowed Victoria Street yet. Not too bad, but it's still snowing. The curling broom out of the trunk. Brush the snow off hood and windows. So quiet, he almost hates to start the Pontiac. Purr. Brr! First tracks on the street this morning, so clean. Lightly, lightly—don't lock the brakes down the hill. Good (still talking to himself), Baker Street's done. Guess I'll park out front until they get the alley plowed. Boy, the town's so quiet now. And the lights. Won't get home for a nap this afternoon. Weekend before Christmas'll be too busy for that.

The buzz of his busy day has, as every other day, kicked in through a muffled dialogue of place, person, and memory translated



over an intersection of anxiety, anger, and wonder at the possibility of a still new world. At least another New Year.

As he unlocks the swinging front doors of the Diamond Grill he can see the light in the kitchen at the back of the cafe and he says to himself (in Chinese?), good, Shu's already at work.



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Wah, Fred.  
Diamond Grill.

"In the Diamond, at the end of a long green vinyl aisle between booths of chrome, Naugahyde, and Formica, are two large swinging wooden doors, each with a round hatch of face-sized window. Those kitchen doors can be kicked with such a slap they're heard all the way up to the soda fountain."



Thus we enter the perfectly remembered Diamond Grill, in 1951 the newest and most modern Chinese cafe in Nelson, where Fred Wah serves up the story of his hyphenated identity, the sweet and the sour in tasty, mouth-watering slices. Fred Wah's father was a Canadian-born Chinese-Scots-Irishman raised in China; his mother is a Swedish-born Canadian from Swift Current. Wah senior ran the Diamond Grill, where Fred, the future writer and poet, grew up, white enough to "pass," yet marked for life by a foreign name and a taste for foong cheng and lo bok.

*Diamond Grill* is a rich banquet where Salisbury Steak shares a menu with chicken fried rice, bird's nest soup sets the stage for Christmas plum pudding; where racism from whites for being Chinese and from Chinese for being white simmers behind the stainless surface of the action in the cafe.



"A sumptuous prose platter . . . a brilliant gem of a book."

*The Globe and Mail*

"*Diamond Grill* combines memories, recipes, history and narrative into a mix as savoury and heartwarming as the best bowl of hot and sour soup money can buy and love can cook. . . . *Diamond Grill* sparkles."

*SEE Magazine*



Celebrated Canadian poet Fred Wah is the 1985 Governor General's Award recipient for poetry and the author of many published works. Involved in publishing and teaching poetry and poetics internationally since the early 1960s, he currently resides in Vancouver.

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