

From China to Wingham: How a restaurant owner found a home and built community

When you step into Great China House on Wingham's main street, owner Lini is quick to make a promise: "I can guarantee you, everything's homemade."

It's a philosophy rooted in her upbringing in a town located in China's Guangdong province, where her mother also ran a restaurant.

Food has always been part of Lini's life, but her journey to small-town Ontario was far from simple.

"I grew up in a very small town, about two hours by high speed train from Hong Kong," she recalls. "My mother ran a restaurant there. I helped her in the summers as a teenager."

After finishing high school in China, Lini attended a Canadian Chinese school before making the leap overseas herself. She landed first in Vancouver, where the endless rain matched the loneliness of being far from family.

"It wasn't like TV where it's always sunshine," she says with a laugh. "When I first got here, I didn't even know what a bagel was. I cried because I didn't know how to eat it."

From Vancouver, she moved to Toronto, enrolling in human resources at Seneca College. It was there, through an old high school friend, that she met her future husband Alex, who had also immigrated from the same region of China. The two married and started to build their life together.

While Lini was working in a financial company, Alex dreamed of opening a restaurant. A family connection led them to Wingham, where a restaurant was for sale. The couple partnered in the venture, eventually taking over Great China House themselves.

But starting out was not easy.

"The first time we came to Wingham, it felt like travelling back in time. At six o'clock, the whole street was quiet. We didn't know anyone. We didn't even know who to call if we needed a plumber," Lini remembers.

"It was a very different lifestyle from Toronto. Like, even Toronto is very different from China already because even in Toronto, they close everything early. Earlier than in China. And now in Wingham it was even earlier.

"I had no friends, no other family but my husband. We didn't know anybody in Wingham. When we needed a plumber, we didn't know who we should call. And we didn't have Google or something like that, you had to look at the phone book."

The first few years were hard, and Lini admits the couple considered selling and moving back to Toronto. But life changed when their children arrived. Their daughter was born in their third year, followed by their son soon after.

“We tried to sell the restaurant and move back to Toronto for the first three, four years because the restaurant wasn't doing well. And we did not know anyone. It was very difficult.

“Because of the kids—through babysitters, daycare and school—we started to build friendships and connections. That changed everything,” says Lini.

The restaurant began to thrive, and so did the family's place in the community.

Over time, Great China House became part of local traditions. Lini says many families now include their food in holiday celebrations. With the restaurant open on Christmas, Easter, New Year's Day, and other special occasions, Lini and Alex's cooking has found a place at countless tables across Wingham and the surrounding area.

“That's why I like my job. It's not the 16 hours everyday part. But when the customers are happy, I'm very happy. Those connections are so important. This to me makes me feel like I belong to this town,” Lini says. “Everybody is so nice to our kids and our family, I feel so grateful. We are so happy to live here.”

The community's support was especially evident during the pandemic, when locals made sure to order takeout to keep the restaurant afloat. “Without the town's support, there's no way our restaurant would have survived,” Lini says.

Beyond the restaurant, Lini says their family has also felt support for their children's sports endeavors. When their daughter was selected to represent Canada at the Canada World Cup Dance Competition, the family turned to the community for help with fundraising. Local businesses stepped up with donations and chocolate bar sales to support her dream.

Beyond the dining room, Lini and Alex also give back by donating meals and gift certificates to local fundraisers. They have supported hockey teams, Big Brothers, and countless community auctions over the years.

“That's the only way that I can contribute. I'm happy that I can help, it's not a lot, but a little bit,” Lini says.

For her entrepreneurial efforts and contributions to community life, Lini was recognized this year with an **I Am Huron Award**, which honours immigrants building stronger communities across Huron County.

“Lini is an amazing person, an awesome employer, and a fantastic mother,” wrote Kim Martin in her nomination. “During Covid she was always there helping the community. She is an amazing lady.”

From her mother’s restaurant kitchen in China to the tables of Great China House in Wingham, Lini’s story is one of resilience, generosity, and belonging. And she’s not done yet.

As she puts it, smiling warmly: “Wingham and area is great. Our customers, our staff, our community, we are so grateful. Now, I’m not moving back to Toronto.”