

# THE PLAIN DEALER

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## Cooking at the bar

### Restaurants gave start to career for Cleveland immigration lawyer

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PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

CLEVELAND

Margaret Wong got her first, and perhaps most important, lesson in business as a college student working summers in a Catskills hotel.

Working her way up from chambermaid to head waitress, Wong remembered guests from season to season. She knew who was nice and who tipped well, and that they weren't always the people in the best rooms.

Street smarts have continued to serve Wong well in the 20 years since she left the mountain resort for the real world. Streetwise and scrappy, Wong's resume boasts a hand in founding three Chinese restaurants, a pharmacy and a growing immigration-law practice.

"It's like a window to the world," Wong said of her work with aliens.

As a pair, Margaret Wong and Rose Wong are a well-known sister act in Cleveland.

Rose Wong, 39, is the affable restaurateur, a driving force behind three family properties: the Amethyst Grille in Shaker Heights and Pearl of the Orient restaurants in Shaker Heights and Rocky River.

Margaret Wong, 42, is the frenzied older sister whose career has lit off in more directions than Chinese lanterns blowing in a lakeside breeze.

Wong's drive, and the labels she wears (officially, she's a female Asian-American liberal Democrat), have made her a familiar fixture in civic organizations, including the Greater Cleveland Growth Association, the Greater Cleveland Roundtable, the National Conference of Christians and Jews and the Chinese Association of Greater Cleveland. She declined an invitation to serve on the board of Gateway Corp.

But loaded resume aside, Wong is as enigmatic as the wispy fortunes served in dessert cookies in the family business.

The parties she gives—like the bon-voyage bash for former BP America Inc. Chief Executive James Ross—at her Shaker Heights home are attended by Cleveland's toniest denizens. But she's not a "player" in the local power structure in the traditional sense.

Wong talks easily, and fast, with occasional whiplash-threatening stops to politely inquire what the interviewer thinks about whatever topic is under discussion.

Clearly, Wong enjoys whatever recognition follows her efforts. Plaques and framed certificates line her office walls, tilting as if to offer physical evidence of Wong's frenetic pace. An eclectic mix of trinkets from grateful clients jockey for attention in a jammed china cabinet, and dolls perch in a row on an overstuffed sofa, dutifully awaiting visits from children of her alien clients.

Wong herself is an immigrant. She came to the United States in 1969 from Hong Kong to attend a small Iowa college, then earned a law degree from State University of New York in Buffalo. She practiced law and taught college in New York before moving to Cleveland in the late 1970s to work for the former Central National Bank.

With her Catskills know-how as her guide, Wong founded the first Pearl restaurant before settling down to practice law in 1980. Then, she bought a \$25 desk, rented a phone and hung out a shingle. She passed out cards on buses and at the West Side Market.

Slowly, Wong gravitated to immigration work, which she and three other lawyers now practice exclusively from the 11th floor of the Standard Building. They take turns making those middle-of-the-night telephone calls to accommodate time zones of their clients' native countries.

Wong's string of successes has yet to slow her down. She still pushes hard, beginning each 13-hour-plus workday by 6 a.m.

The lone exception to the regimen comes each Wednesday, when she knocks off by 3 p.m. to be with her family—by which she means the entire Wong clan. Wong and her husband, Kam Chan, a pharmacist who runs the family drugstore business, have two children, Steven, 7, and Allison, 6.

It's no wonder business is booming. With the shrinking world and companies' growing international operations, Wong is often called in to solve employee immigration problems for companies such as BP America, Nordson Corp., Ferro Corp., MK Ferguson and Ohio's state colleges and universities.

But Wong said about half her practice is representing people whose personal stories put a face on legal treks through the labyrinth of immigration law.

"This way, it's fun," she said.

Or at least interesting. She recalls the Yugoslav beauty who pined for her lover in her homeland though she had sealed her



PHOTO BY DAVID I. ANDERSEN

**MARGARET WONG:** "I represent the companies that want to bring people over to the United States and the aliens who want to stay."

future in the United States by marrying another man—and was grateful nonetheless to be living the American Way.

Or the prominent Russian scientist whose wife cleans houses while he struggles to find a job in Cleveland. And the Polish seamstress whose pending deportation order ruffled Cleveland's tailored set.

Even after the legal work is finished, Wong keeps working. She'll make a quick trip to the Chinese grocery store to post a job notice or place a call to an employer to look over a resume of a job-seeking client.

David Baker, a research scientist at Upjohn

Co. in Kalamazoo, Mich. said Wong works with a confident efficiency. She cuts to the chase, quickly choosing and executing the strategy she deemed would bring the fastest desired result: a green card. The native Englishman had spun his wheels for more than a year before hearing of Wong from a friend of a friend.

"Within a 10-minute conversation, (Wong) was coming up with approaches which I had never heard from our local attorneys," said Baker, who recently cleared the first hurdle to permanent status. "She's very confident that everything's going to go OK."