

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

Local author's work focuses on courage, strength and resourcefulness



Lafayette author Ying Chang Compestine cooks in her kitchen.

Photo provided

By Lou Fancher

To enter the Lafayette kitchen or the imagination of award-winning author, public speaker, editor and TV chef Ying Chang Compestine is to experience good fortune. An opportunity to observe Compestine wield a wok filled with vegetables, herbs, oils, and an array of other fresh ingredients is to witness sculptural, vibrant, colorful, culinary art-making. With a few prompts and only a little coaxing, it's not difficult while she is cooking to open the window into her imagination and the machinations whirling behind the stories told in her 20 books that include novels, children's picture books and cookbooks.

Compestine's debut novel, 2007's "Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party," chronicled her life growing up in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In addition to receiving 30 national awards, the novel is included in school curriculums worldwide. She holds a degree in English from Central China Normal University and a master's in sociology from the University of Colorado, Boulder. She is widely recognized as a leading authority on Asian culture and cuisine. As a sought-after speaker, Compestine's constant travel schedule came to an abrupt halt in March 2020.

What made the shelter-in-place lockdowns all the more intense for a writer accustomed to being on the road was that Compestine is from Wuhan, China. In early 2020, her bags were packed for a lecture tour in Southeast Asia and she and friends along her journey chatted eagerly on WeChat as they planned reunions. But suddenly, Compestine was forced to cancel her flights and could only watch helplessly from afar as the entire city of Wuhan and much of her family were placed under strict quarantines. Compestine sought solace in work, resulting in three picture books, a novel, and a soon-to-be-completed graphic novel cookbook.

Among the new books released in 2022 is "Little Red Riding Hood and the Dragon," a picture book retelling the fa-

miliar folk tale with a Chinese spin. The titular protagonist lives in a village near the Great Wall in China and trains in kung fu. The story's villain is not a wolf, but a dragon that Little Red vanquishes while bringing rice cakes and herbal medicines to her grandmother. The revamped fairy tale characters and action are vividly illustrated by artist Joy Ang.

Likewise, at a trim 208 pages and with equally compelling interior artwork by Peish Zhang, her new novel, "Morning Sun in Wuhan," revolves around 13-year-old Mei, a young girl grieving over the loss of her mother in a tragic car accident and suddenly separated by COVID from her father, who is a respiratory specialist and at Yangtze Hospital in Wuhan.

Mei turns her passion for cooking into a powerful tool and, fused with her love of computer cooking games and WeChat conversations with two close friends, forms during her father's one-month absence a volunteer delivery group. Under the watchful eye of her Auntie and Chef Ma, Mei joins them in a community kitchen in which she cooks meals for frontline medical workers.

Blended seamlessly into the dramatic narrative passages are WeChat conversations and 10 recipes, with easily followed ingredients and instructions for dishes such as Eight-Treasure Rice Pudding, Pan-Fried Dumplings, Thai Red Chicken Curry, Spicy Egg Ramen, Kung Pho Beef and more.

"With each book you see the writer in the story," says Compestine. "I'm direct. I speak my mind. I don't hold back. I admire women and girls like that. For 'Little Red Riding Hood,' I thought, why does she need someone to save her? Why can't she save herself? She doesn't have to be gentle, passive. That's not me. Asian women are very strong. Why does this Asian girl have to wait to be saved? If I were her, I would find a way to save myself."

Compestine says she wants her books and the characters in them to change the perceptions of Asian women as weak, outdated, or subservient. "We

are not weak. We are strong, successful. Especially in the last couple of years, with the Asian American hate crimes, my friends wanted to go to the streets to protest. I wanted to write books to show we are kind, passionate, but yes, also have weaknesses." Her books' underlying messages include courage, strength, intelligence, families, and the resourceful-

ness of young girls and women especially. 'Little Red,' the message of not to be reliant on others to save you is there, but it also has humor."

"I want to write light-hearted stories, not another COVID book like 'Morning Sun.' That's a historical story with COVID as the background, but it's also about how the darkest times can bring out the best and how one person can make a difference. I don't like a book that preaches to kids and I avoid being preachy by telling a fun story. Like with

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