

RESTAURANT REVIEW

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# Cheng Du 23

The grandson of a chef who cooked for Deng Xiaoping, chef Lin Qing Xiang (who answers to Kevin) started his training in the city of Cheng Du at age 13. At his restaurant named for his home city, Cheng Du 23, on Route 23 in Wayne, you can count on consistently excellent Szechuan cuisine.

Reviewed by [Sam Kadko](#)  
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Jammed into a corner of Wayne's West Belt Plaza, the narrow entrance of Chengdu 23 opens onto a world of wonders, starting with a tropical fish tank as big as a minivan. In it, colorful, exotically shaped fish glide lazily back and forth, in contrast to the servers rushing the edible exotica—terrific, authentic Szechuan dishes—from the busy kitchen to the tables.

In 2008, Lin Qing Xiang (who answers to Kevin) bought a Taiwanese noodle shop occupying this space and turned it into a showplace for his friend, chef Jiang Yong Yi, to "make great Chinese food," Lin told me after my visits. The men had worked together at Dragon Palace, a fine Szechuan restaurant in Edison. After that, Lin had opened a takeout joint in Queens, then a Japanese steakhouse in Montclair. But a reunion with Jiang remained on his radar.

Jiang belongs to a long line of distinguished chefs—his grandfather cooked for Deng Xiaoping. Jiang began his culinary training in the city of Cheng Du in China at age 13.

After the partners launched Cheng Du 23, Jiang won silver in NTDTV's 2009 International Chinese Culinary Competition, and took gold the next year. (New Tang Dynasty Television is a New York-based Chinese language network.) It's always reassuring to enter an ethnic restaurant and see lots of customers who look like they grew up on that cuisine. Cheng Du 23 passes that test. But relax—the customers comprise a complete cross-section of North Jerseyans. Everyone feels welcome.

And why not? The large menu offers many well-prepared standards like shrimp with lobster sauce or dry-sautéed string beans; authentic Szechuan dishes and chef's specialties are shown in color photographs; portions are as generous as you've come to expect in Chinese restaurants; and every item is listed in English as well as Chinese. Esoteric choices abound, and with almost every platter priced under \$20, you can experiment with little risk and a high probability of reward.

Sliced intestine with hot chilies and Chinese celery might sound off-putting, but it's quite good. Szechuan cuisine is thought of as synonymous with garlic and chili-fueled heat, but it can be subtle, too. Cold noodles in sweet-and-spicy sesame sauce are easy to like, as are the umami-rich flavors of cold sliced pork in a perfect balance of soy sauce, chili oil and garlic.

Dumplings are delightful, whether filled with ground pork, garlic, scallions and ginger, or with finely chopped black mushrooms, bok choy and scallions in delicate green wrappers. Timid hot-and-sour soup, however, was a rare example of dumbing down a classic.

The crisp skin and meaty flesh of Cheng Du 23's tea-smoked duck can spoil you for the run of the mill. Well-named Heavenly Chicken presented tender morsels of white meat cut to resemble flowers in a mild, spicy-sweet Chong Qing brown sauce. A traditional Szechuan noodle dish, Ants Climbing a Tree, gets its name from bits of ground pork clinging to the cellophane noodles. In chef Jiang's artful Mount Fuji beef, inspired by the two years he worked in Tokyo, tender strips of Angus beef were stir-fried with bok choy in a clever mix of three sauces—dark soy, oyster and hoisin. Playfully sprinkling the dish with chopped hard-boiled egg white, Jiang paid homage to the mountain's snow-capped peak.

Whole sea bass, dusted with cornstarch and fried until crisp, lounged in a pool of sweet vinegar sauce that, while overly thick, paired well with the mild fish. A whole steamed sea bass, sauced with a piquant blend of hot bean paste, chili sauce and garlic, was just as rewarding.

Five kinds of premium hot teas are offered. Desserts are forgettable (red bean ice cream, etc.). The kicky choices—whether to offset spicy dishes or for dessert—are the cold, creamy bubble teas, fruit shakes like lychee or passion fruit and sweet Thai iced tea made with condensed milk.—Sam Kadko

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## Chengdu 23

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DESCRIPTION

Eat in, take out or have food delivered from this casual group and family friendly eatery.

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CUISINES: Chinese

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