

Cheng Du 23 review: Spicy surprises at Wayne restaurant

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Tim Farrell/The Star-Ledger

Owner Kevin Lin has distanced Cheng Du 23 from typical Chinese restaurants by offering authentic Szechuan cuisine.

There are menu dishes that are must-tries on name or novelty alone.

“Ants Climbing a Tree,” for example. If that doesn’t pique your interest, you apparently have seen, or tasted, it all.

The Szechuan vegetable dish at Cheng Du 23 does not contain real ants (which can be quite tasty, take my word for it) but consists instead of minced pork in cellophane noodles (it requires some imagination to visualize the pork as the ants and the noodles as the tree).

In any event, it’s a delicious little side dish, one of many spicy surprises at Chengdu 23, squeezed

into West Belt Plaza in Wayne, near where routes 23, 46 and 80 meet. It’s by Willowbrook Mall and down the street from the Hooters, if that helps.

Cheng Du 23, not related to the popular Chengdu 46 in Clifton, is just three years old, and already has distanced itself far from the neon-lit Chinese takeout joints found just about everywhere from High Point to Lower.

Skip the Chinese restaurant clichés (General Tso’s chicken, moo shu pork, chicken with broccoli, etc.) and proceed directly to the menu sections titled “Chef’s Specialties” and “Authentic Szechuan Cuisine.”

Under the latter you’ll find prawns with minced pork and pickled vegetables and scallion in chili sauce (C5 on the menu, \$19) — eight fat prawns in a sassy little sauce and my favorite dish of all those sampled.

Close behind is the Fire House Chicken (C7, \$15) — chunks of chicken mixed with a bewitching assortment of ingredients (mushrooms, bamboo shoots, celery, garlic, leek, king oyster and hot bean paste sauce). It’s alarmingly good — make that three-alarmingly good; you’ll feel the heat on the first bite.

Chicken with Jingling Bells (CS8, \$14) gets its name from the supposed sound of the crispy dumplings when the chicken, mushrooms, snow peas and water chestnuts hit them. I didn’t hear any jingling, but those dumplings are crispy little delights, and the dish overall a winner.

Also recommended: Spicy Volcano Chicken (CS10, \$14); Sichuan Seafood Delight (jumbo shrimp and sea scallops with scallions, water chestnuts and Szechuan peppers in a mildly fiery sauce, \$19) and Tea-Smoked Duck (C3, \$17).

Ox tongue and tripe with roasted chili peanut vinaigrette (AC7, \$7) may be for acquired tastes only. The ants have it beat.

The egg drop soup (\$4 large, \$2 small) is light and lustrous.

My fortune cookie read, somewhat improbably, "Hallelujah!"

A visit or two to Cheng Du 23 may have you repeating those words, no fortune cookie required.

Cheng Du 23

6 Willowbrook Road, Wayne. (973) 812-2800, chengdu23.us.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., every day.

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