



A Szechuan Adventure Behind a Shopping Mall

By DAVID M. HALBFINGER MAY 6, 2011

SQUEEZED next to a Home Goods store behind the Willowbrook Mall in Wayne, Chengdu 23 looks like little more than a place for weary shoppers to get a quick pick-me-up of moo shu or kung pao. But something happens when you take your seat, scan the menu and inhale scents of jasmine, garlic and others, harder to name, that waft by with every passing plate. Your appetite swells, as does your adventurousness.

Go with it.

The jasmine, for one, infuses the crispy tea-smoked duck, marinated for three days and air-dried for 10 hours before being wok-smoked for a good hour. Garlic is piled high atop bowls like the shui zhu niu: sliced and braised Angus beef, first softened to succulent in a marinade of egg whites, then cooked with romaine hearts in Szechuan pepper, salty bean paste, chili and ginger.

Then there is the gan shao da xia: prawns, cooked in their shells, beside minced pork and scallions, all in a Chengdu chili sauce, along with yacai, pickled mustard greens with a musky flavor.

Chengdu 23 opened three years ago, reuniting a chef, Jiang Yong Yi, and a manager, Lin Qing Xiang, who had worked together at Dragon Palace, a well-regarded Szechuan restaurant in Edison. Mr. Lin went on to open a takeout place in Woodside, Queens, and Daruma Hibachi, a short-lived Japanese steakhouse in Montclair, before taking over what had been a Taiwanese noodle joint.

Mr. Jiang, meanwhile, unassumingly carries the mantle of an elite culinary line. In an interview after my visits, he said his teacher's teacher had been a chef for Deng Xiaoping and cooked for President Richard M. Nixon; his own teacher cooked for President George Bush in the 1980s, he said. (There is at least a master's thesis in

the fact that he now labors in a strip mall for people whose minivans are piled high with bags from Banana Republic and Macy's.)

Adhering to the tradition involves being finicky about ingredients, many of which are imported from places in Szechuan province in China, like Hanyuan (peppercorns) and Yibin (yacai, which also flavors the delicious dan dan noodles). It also means cooking to order: even the cold noodles are made à la minute, arriving firm and rich in the flavors of peanut and sesame, vinegar and peppercorn, soy sauce and sugar.

Szechuan food is famed for its heat, but Mr. Jiang's dishes have a range: Heavenly chicken, cut into flower shapes, for example, is mild, sweet with sugar but pungent with soy, vinegar and wine.

Textures vary, too. The chewy ox tongue and tripe appetizer has the consistency of cold corned beef but tastes of chili, peanut and vinegar. Chilean sea bass, lightly coated with corn starch and soybean powder and sautéed in pickled chili and bean paste, is so delicate that it threatens to fall apart before it reaches your mouth.

It is Mr. Lin, the maître d'hôtel, who prepares Chengdu 23's xiao long bao, the steamed soup buns that originated in Shanghai. He cooks down pork leg and tendon, which he says are rich in collagen, so they form a jelly when chilled, then mixes that with ground pork, chicken broth and a ginger-scallion blend. Wrapped in dough and steamed just so, it's a messy, decadent delight.

But it is the bean paste — spicy and salty, made from fermented broad beans — that now stands out in my memory: paired with garlic in the volcano beef, which doesn't so much erupt as ooze across the palate in its own good time; or matched with hot chili in the mapo tofu, a bowl of oily, savory goodness as gorgeous as it is tasty.

Despite my best intentions, on two visits my guests and I never managed to hang onto enough of an appetite to sample the very limited dessert selection (litchi nuts, ice cream or fried ice cream).

There's always next time. There are so many more things on that menu to try.

Chengdu 23

6 Willowbrook Boulevard

Wayne

(973) 812-2800

chengdu23.com

DON'T MISS

THE SPACE Seating for 120 in a comfortable if not especially attractive room decorated with Chinese prints.

THE CROWD Single shoppers, double dates, extended families and big groups, many of them ordering in Chinese.

THE STAFF Good-natured, funny, quick and eager to help the uninitiated.

THE BAR No liquor license; bring your own.

THE BILL Dinner entrees, \$10 to \$36, but mainly in the \$14-to-\$20 range. Visa, MasterCard, American Express and Discover accepted.

WHAT WE LIKED Everything we tried, including xiao long bao (here called “steamed juice bun”), dan dan noodles, Chengdu cold noodles, ox tongue and tripe with roasted chili peanut vinaigrette, shredded pork and pickled cabbage soup, tea-smoked duck, heavenly chicken, volcano beef, braised beef and romaine lettuce with roasted chili sauce, prawns with minced pork and pickled vegetables, mapo tofu, Chilean sea bass in Chengdu garlic sauce.

IF YOU GO Lunch and dinner daily, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. (but the xiao long bao sell out early). Reservations suggested for large parties. Plenty of parking in the shopping center.

RATINGS Don't Miss, Worth It, O.K., Don't Bother.

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