

Cheng Du 23 – Sichuan Cuisine

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Last week, I was invited to dine at **Cheng Du 23** in Wayne, NJ to sample some of the area's most popular Sichuan food. I'd heard of the place, near the Willowbrook Mall, but since Chinese cuisine isn't a favorite, I'd not made the effort to go. That was an error on my part as the food was presented nicely and actually had very distinct flavors, which I find to be my number one pet peeve at other Chinese restaurants.

From the outside, the non-descript strip shopping center space could appear to be like many in similar drive-to malls, but as soon as we entered the premises, we knew Cheng Du would be different. First, the place was busy on a rainy Wednesday night with a crowd mostly made up of Chinese diners. Second, peppery aromas permeated the air providing a preview of the food to come and, giant tables with equally large Lazy Susans were filled with creatively-presented dishes.

Green Beans

Eggplant & Salted Yolks

Crispy Scallops



The year it opened, Cheng Du's Chef Jiang won silver in NTDTV's 2009 International Chinese Culinary Competition presented by New Tang Dynasty Television. In 2010, Chef Jiang took home the gold at the same competition. Since then, the restaurant has garnered numerous awards and praise from The New York Times and other local publications.

The menu is voluminous and not something diners will be tempted to "borrow" and take home for future perusing for take-out ordering – it's massive, and heavy! Featured on the menu are Americanized standard dishes like General Tso's Chicken, Shrimp with Lobster Sauce and Chicken Chow Mein, but also authentic Sichuan dishes and a Chef's Specialties section with dishes photographed to make it easier to visualize. The portions, much like the menu size, are gigantic and perfect for sharing.



Pork Shanks

Crispy Scallops

Fuji Beef



Back to those Lazy Susans, why don't more restaurants have those for larger tables? There were 10 invited guests at our table and the Lazy Susan made it so much simpler for us to share dishes with others. While we sampled over 15 dishes, some of my favorites were:

Dry Sautéed Green Beans – not certain what made these blistered green beans so addicting, but they are a must-try.

Crispy Scallops – large scallops coated lightly in cornstarch then fried to a golden brown color and tossed with spicy sauce. The contrast of crispy exterior with the soft, tender scallop was lovely and the fiery sauce was a

surprising compliment to the subtly flavors of the scallops.

Pork Shanks with Bok Choy – the shanks were melt-in-your-mouth and bold in flavor. The crunchy baby bok choy was a nice match to the well-cooked shanks.

Jing Sha Qie Zi – boiled eggplant with salted egg yolks and chopped green pepper. Was this dish visually-appealing, perhaps not. Was it incredibly delicious and comforting on a cold rainy night, absolutely.

Fuji Mountain Beef – sautéed sliced Angus beef with brown sauce, egg whites (acting as the snow on the mountain peak) and baby bok choy. Perfectly-cooked beef in a savory mix of three sauces – Hoisin, oyster and dark soy. Simple and wonderful.

Heavenly Chicken – white meat cut to look like flowers in bloom with in a mild, garlic sauce. The chicken flowers actually look more like baby octopus, but if you can get beyond that, the dish is super.

The only dish I'd stay away from on future visit is the **San Jiao Ji** – dry sautéed diced chicken with triple pepper. I enjoy spicy food but this just killed my palate for a while.

Cheng Du 23 is the perfect place to visit for a relatively-inexpensive meal with friends where many dishes can be sampled. Take out is also available.

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Cheers,

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