



LIFE. STYLE. CHEFS.

TASTE OF CHINA IN CLINTON IS EXACTLY THAT

Authenticity is the antidote to saucy pretenders

BY TOM SOBOLESKI | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM HOPKINS

From the moment you enter Taste of China in Clinton, it's clear this is not the typical "American version" of a Chinese restaurant. Dark wood paneling below soft yellow, mutely lit walls, a section of plush, brown, faux leather booths, shelves displaying pottery, and no kitchen in sight. You are stirred to wonder: Will your taste buds be as pleased as your eye?

When Jonathan Dolph and Hu Ping opened Taste of China in the winter of 2000, people were skeptical of their higher prices and unusual dishes. Hu Ping refers to them as "American Chinese restaurants," where, "for 10 plates you might have seven with the same sauce. There's no sauce here," she says. "Here, 10 plates all have different flavors."

To persuade some skeptics, she says, "We would give free samples in the beginning to get people to see the difference."

Actions like that have built loyalty beyond coming back for dinner. After extensive renovations to their Clinton restaurant, "We received flowers from a customer thanking us for putting pretty stonework on the front," Dolph recalls.

Upon being seated, two beverage menus are quickly presented, along with the dinner menu. The diversity of the beer list is striking; how many restaurants (Chinese or otherwise) offer Italian IPA, Scottish rum cask ale, seven Belgium beers ranging from malty, peppery, or honey, to a 10.5% IPA, or a German brew with hints of caramel and cloves?

The wine list is equally mixt, with choices ranging from New Zealand sauvignon blanc to German Riesling, Australian shiraz, Argentine malbec, along with several California reds and whites.

Pairing their food with apposite beverages is a passion for Dolph. Belgium beer, in particular, "works with our Chinese spices," he says, "and pairs fantastically with our food." While the complexity of Belgium beer defies simple classification, many of them can have subtle degrees of tartness, sourness, or acidity. Paired with the spice rack here, Dolph says, "it enlivens your mouth. Sweet wine like Riesling also complements some of our spicy food."

Though this international variety doesn't extend to the dinner choices, you have an array of options. House specialties include seared sea bass, fire-lit lamb chops flavored with fermented black soybeans, and brussel sprouts with smoked tofu. The main menu ranges from slow simmered sliced beef with napa cabbage and

leeks in a chili broth, to pork meatballs with baby bok choy, bamboo shoots and shiitake mushrooms in simmering broth served in a clay pot, to pork belly slabs simmered in spices and stir fried with leeks, peppers, ginger and black bean paste. Add to these a variety of shrimp, scallop, and chicken plates, and you have many savory selections.

The variety and depth of the regular menu is supplemented with seasonal specials that are dictated by available produce, fresh herbs, spices, and fresh fish. Their fish comes from local suppliers, and Chinese produce is delivered three to four days a week from Chinatown in NYC.

Consider their cod with red potatoes. Within 10 minutes of ordering, a large plate arrived stacked high with golden wedges of fried cod and discs of potatoes. The cod wedges were plentiful, and coated with a tasty yet light crispy batter that was not the least bit greasy.

The most pleasant surprise was the generous bed of shredded red cabbage underneath. Perfectly seasoned with tiny dices of onions, red and green peppers and scallions, dressed with distinct yet mild vinegar, this tasted like the perfect companion for the fish and potatoes.

After coming to the shoreline with Dolph in the late 1990s, Ping noted that the Chinese restaurants all seemed too similar. "I never knew what General Tso's chicken was," she says. "The American people like crispy and sweet, but it's not authentic

Chinese. I wanted to show people real Chinese food. We want you to taste the flavors."

Dolph and Ping's obvious passion to please their customers may only be exceeded by their apparent affection for each other. Hu Ping's eyes sparkle when she relates how she met Jonathan. As an anxious 28-year-old yearning to explore the world beyond her native China, Ping wanted to visit France. But because "the lines for a visa to France were very long, I decided to go to Singapore instead." While there, she enrolled in an English class.

Dolph, a native of Madison, went to Asia in the mid-90s to teach English. After a stint in Taiwan, he moved to Singapore. Being a British colony, he was told he wasn't qualified to teach British English, but when an opening came up, he was given two weeks to fill in. Hu Ping was in his class.

"After a month I was ready to go home," she says, "when suddenly Jonathan became the teacher." She felt such an attraction to him, she says, that she just had to stay.

"The American people like crispy and sweet, but it's not authentic Chinese. I wanted to show people real Chinese food."



Gan Shao Da Xia (Sweet-and-Sour Prawns)

After his assignment in Singapore, the couple returned to Ping's home in China and were soon married.

With so much variety in all other offerings, dessert is not a big focus at Taste of China. The server explains that the ice cream is in just two flavors: chocolate or mango. Thinking that this would be a plain small scoop, I couldn't have been more surprised when presented with a plate of four wedges that were cut from a softball-sized round of mango ice cream and coated with vanilla icing drizzled with lines of chocolate. The texture was more sherbet-like than creamy, and was a delightful end to a filling, flavorful meal.

Chinese New Year's is the major holiday of a complex culture. In China, it is part of the Spring Festival. Falling on the second new moon after the winter solstice, next year it will be February 8. Celebrations are highlighted by a traditional family reunion dinner lavish with chicken, fish, and pork. At Taste of China, an additional

menu will be offered, with symbolism attached to certain dishes. "The rice ball means we stick together," Hu Ping says. Meatballs denote family unity, and dumplings and fish offer hope for a good year ahead.

Taste of China is firmly outside the mold of American-style Chinese restaurants. That has been Hu Ping's goal all along. "I don't just want to make money, I want to share. My personality is to show people my culture, my food," she says. "If I do something, I want to do the best. Our food is always evolving."

Taste of China now has two locations: Route 1 in Clinton and Chapel St. in New Haven. Visit tasteofchinaus.com for details. ●

Tom Soboleski is a freelance writer with a focus on human interest and cultural perspectives. He resides in Ivoryton.