

Foursome makes Hong Hua a hit

Inventive menu, affordable prices pack dining rooms



MOLLY ABRAHAM

Next month, Hong Hua will mark the 11th anniversary of the date four partners transformed a former Bill Knapp's location into what has evolved into the best Chinese restaurant in Metro Detroit.

It's quite an achievement, remarkable in the fact that the same quartet is still together after more than a decade, running the restaurant in ensemble fashion.

All four — Danny Yu, Seto Shetwai, Gary Yau and executive chef Peter Chan — are on hand in the handsome free-standing building just about every day.

That's certainly one reason for the remarkable consistency in both food and service, and it also shows in the smooth and efficient way the dining room, or more properly, dining rooms run.

The main room at the entrance, sophisticated in its simplicity and completely free of cliché decorations, is augmented by two more that have lazy Susan-centered tables for large parties. The front room includes the small cocktail lounge with just a handful of seats, and a nice selection of wines that team well with the fare, contrary to the myth that wine does not go with Chinese food.

The special menu at lunch, when crisp white paper covers the white linens on the tables and light streams through windows on both sides of the room, is particularly notable for its affordable price structure. Complete lunches, beginning with a choice of hot and sour, wonton or eggdrop soup, a spring roll or fried or steamed rice and the chosen entrée, are no higher than \$9.95.

Notable dishes include wok-fried shrimp, with fresh asparagus in a subtle garlic sauce, and grilled shrimp served as a salad with fresh greens.

The dinner menu is more elaborate, with more than 100 choices, about a quarter of which feature seafood, some plucked live from the tank in the kitchen.

A recent dinner, on a week-end night when all three dining rooms were packed, began with a complex and elegant crab meat and fish maw soup, to which aficionados of the dish add a splash of vinegar, followed by thinly wrapped rolls of finely chopped mixed seafood and vegetables, deep-fried and served with mayonnaise.

Main courses included what the menu calls "lobster duo," wok-fried lobster tail and deep-fried lobster legs, set off by the complete contrast of a tender fillet of sea bass.

Then came ribeye steak sparked with Maggi sauce (the fermented wheat condiment that enhances the flavor of the beef), and stir-fried snow pea



Photos by Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

General Tao's Chicken is one of the signature dishes at Hong Hua.



The spicy noodle dish Zha Jiang Lo-Mian is another house specialty.

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leaves with garlic sauce and king mushrooms.

A very light fried rice dish, made with brown rice, egg whites and vegetables, completed the array, all handsomely served on white plates.

At the next table, a group was sharing one of the house specialties — a glistening Peking duck, its crispy skin wrapped in pancakes and the meat sliced and teamed with Asian vegetables. (Next time, Peking duck for sure.)

A couple of visits to Hong Hua can only scratch the surface of what chef Chan's kitchen can do.

A loyal return clientele of both Asians and non-Asians happily testifies to that.

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Hong Hua

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Rating: ★★★★★

Hours: 11 a.m.-10:30 p.m. Mon.-Thurs., 11 a.m.-midnight Fri.-Sat., noon-midnight Sun.

Prices: Lunch specials \$8.95-\$9.95; appetizers \$1.95-\$8.95, soups \$2.95-\$4.95, dinner entrees \$10.95-\$29.95 (market-priced items higher)

Credit cards: All major

Liquor: Full bar

Parking: Large attached lot

Wheelchair access: No barriers