

China Star's spectacular Sichuan cuisine a pleasant find in North Hills area

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By China Millman, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Lake Fong/Post-Gazette

Julie Zhu shows the authentic Sichuan cuisine served at China Star in the North Hills' McIntyre Square.

When Terri Sokoloff, president of Specialty Bar & Restaurant Brokers, insisted that there was great Sichuan food at a Chinese restaurant in McIntyre Square on the Ross-McCandless border, I was skeptical.

Not because the restaurant was in a strip mall. I was skeptical because I couldn't believe that a restaurant as good as she described, already open for three years, hadn't been discovered by critics and bloggers alike.

Turns out, there are still some real finds in the Pittsburgh area. China Star, a small, nondescript restaurant near the McIntyre Square Kmart, serves authentic, carefully executed Chinese food with a focus on cuisine from the Sichuan province of China. (Note: the China Star in Greenfield has no connection to this China Star.)

Among its classic Sichuan dishes are tan tan noodles, tea-smoked duck, mapo tofu, Chongqing chicken and more.

China Star also has an American-Chinese menu, but I wasn't going to miss out on whole fish or cumin lamb for even the best dish of General Tso's chicken, so I stuck exclusively to the Sichuan dishes.

If you've never experienced Sichuan food before, appetizers are a fiery and delicious introduction to the flavors and complex heat important to many (but not all) Sichuan dishes.

We started with tan tan noodles (\$3.75), one of Sichuan's most iconic dishes. They looked unassuming, just a bowl of thin round noodles, served warm, topped with ground pork and thinly sliced scallions, but then we saw the sauce on the bottom, a bright red slick of chile oil.

It's hot, with sweetness from the pork and a refreshing bite from the raw scallions. Then there's the flavor of the distinctive Sichuan peppercorns. Sour, salty and spicy all at the same time, they are often referred to as numbing pepper. They cause a tingling sensation in the mouth, almost like a mild form of pins and needles.

The peppercorns affects other flavors as well, often making water taste metallic. Don't worry, the effect won't last more than a few hours, and tea and beer are good pairings with the food.

Fresh bamboo shoots in red oil (\$4.95) were a good partner for the noodles. The flavor of the sauce is similar, but these are served cool. The long white shoots almost had the texture of asparagus, but less stringy. They tasted fresh and a tiny bit sweet against the mouth-tingling sauce.

China Star

McIntyre Square Shopping Center
3200 McIntyre Square Drive,
Ross-McCandless border
www.chinasatar-pgh.com
412-364-9933

Food:



3 stars = Excellent

[Ratings explained](#)

Service:



2 stars = Very good

[Ratings explained](#)

Atmosphere:



1 star = Good

[Ratings explained](#)

Overall:



2 stars = Very good

[Ratings explained](#)

- **Hours:** Monday-Thursday 11 a.m.-9:30 p.m.; Friday-Saturday 11 a.m.-10:30 p.m.; Sunday noon-9:30 p.m.
- **Basics:** This nondescript restaurant

Five spice beef noodle soup (\$6.95) was a gorgeous bowl of red-tinged broth, sweet and spicy where the oil hits the tongue. Chunks of beef were super tender from slow braising and redolent of warming five spice -- probably star anise, cloves, cinnamon, ginger and anise. Some variants include Sichuan peppercorns, but they weren't immediately apparent here. Whole baby bok choy were tender and sweet against the lively interplay of flavors.

A sense of adventure was essential to enjoying our meals at China Star, because it was difficult to tell exactly how a dish would be prepared, or even what exactly it would contain, until it arrived at the table.

Bone-in pork shoulder was resplendent, the large cut perched on a platter of braised greens, piled with stir-fried red chiles, the aroma of star anise rising up from the meat.

Double-sauteed sliced pork (\$9.95), one of owner Dan Wang's favorites, came in long ribbons, the thinly sliced pork belly braised then flash-cooked in an extremely hot wok for just 20 or 30 seconds. The assertive flavor of the meat was balanced by large slices of leek. The dark green tops, which I will never again discard, had been braised until tender, and had a sweeter, less onion-like flavor than leek roots.

Mapo Tofu barely resembled the tame vegetarian version that has become a staple of mall and airport Chinese restaurants (\$7.95). Soft chunks of tofu had been gently braised in a sauce of ground pork, red chile oil and fermented black beans with slices of green onion scattered throughout. With each bite, my mouth gently reverberated with the tingle of numbing pepper.

China Star's menu includes various offal such as kidneys and tripe (stomach lining, usually from a cow). Ox tongue and tripe (\$6.95) was a good crossover dish. Strips of tongue were cut very thin, to match the lacy, honeycombed tripe (from the reticulum, for those interested), which captured the now-familiar spicy, oily sauce in every nook. The textural contrast between the tender, yet firm tongue and the slight chewiness of the tripe was clearly an important component of the dish -- challenging, but illuminating, as Chinese cuisine explores and values kinds of textures that can be off-putting to the American palate.

Unable to choose between several whole fish offered on the menu, we asked for a recommendation. Pan-fried whole fish with bean paste, Mr. Wang stated unequivocally (market price). The sea bass arrived covered in a thick, almost gelatinous red sauce -- the hot bean paste, a mix of fermented soy beans and hot chiles -- and a pile of thinly sliced scallions. Moist and not a bit greasy, each bite of fish tasted of garlic and ginger, followed by the complex, earthy spiciness of the bean paste.

No meal would be complete without at least one vegetable dish. Wok fried green beans were wonderful, shrunken and wrinkled, and incredibly flavorful (\$8.95). Pea greens were gently stir-fried with lots of garlic, sweet and delicate (market price).

Squash with dried scallops were a special one evening (market price). The squash proved to be a gourd, in the same family as bitter melon, but not bitter. It was a pale green with large seeds in the center, and, served simply, it tasted quite similar to braised cucumber. The dried scallops added a slight saltiness, enhancing the mild sweetness of the squash.

One of the most noticeable differences between real Chinese food and Americanized Chinese food is a lack of added sweetness. Sour, salty, spicy and meaty flavors predominate, with sweetness coming from the vegetables, seafood and meat itself.

The meal ends with orange slices, fortune cookies and a bill that seems remarkably small, in light of the feast that preceded it.

While the food is exceptional at China Star, don't expect a fine-dining experience. The restaurant decor is exceptionally plain, although certainly clean and comfortable. A TV quietly played against one wall. On an unexpectedly busy weekday, servers forgot several drink requests, and food was a little slow to arrive.

But even when the restaurant was busy, Mr. Wang tried to take time to answer questions and offer help, meeting our enthusiasm for the food with his own delight at our enjoyment. Born in mainland China, Mr. Wang worked in other Chinese restaurants for years before opening his own restaurant.

China Star is a rare find, a restaurant devoted to providing an authentic culinary experience to those in the know, while offering an exuberant welcome to newcomers.

serves up often fiery, consistently delicious Sichuan cuisine (American Chinese menu also available).

- **Recommended dishes:** Hot and sour silk tofu, tan tan noodles, bamboo shoots in red oil, five spice noodle soup, bone-in pork shoulder, mapo tofu, dry sauteed green beans, pea greens, double sauteed sliced pork, sauteed beef bufan noodles, tea smoked duck, pan-fried whole fish with bean paste.
- **Prices:** Appetizers and soup, \$3.95-\$9.95; beef and pork, \$8.95-\$14.95; duck and chicken, \$10.95-\$16.95; seafood, \$13.95 to market price; vegetables, \$7.95 to market price.
- **Drinks:** A small selection of wine and the usual selection of beers. Tsingtao and or tea goes best with Sichuan peppercorn flavored dishes.
- **Summary:** Wheelchair accessible; credit cards accepted; reservations accepted.
- **Noise level:** Low to medium loud.