



China Sichuan: one of Ireland's greatest dining experiences
TONY O'SHEA

The great call of China

China Sichuan

The Forum, Ballymoss Road, Sandycroft, Dublin 18
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www.china-sichuan.ie
Chef: Lok Ping Chan

The phoenix rises from the ashes. Well, maybe not quite the phoenix, but rather the China Sichuan. Several great restaurants have closed over the past year, and China Sichuan was one of the greater losses. But now it's back, Lazarus-like, in the same premises, and the doubting Thomas in me decided to head over and poke around to see if it really was as good as it used to be.

I was with a Grande Dame of the food world and, as we took our seats, lesser mortals came and paid homage to her, including Patrick Guilbaud – who just happened to be having his Monday night meal there.

Unable to decide what to have, we went for broke and ordered all around us. This is often an embarrassing tactic, as you end up without any room on the table. But not here, as a handy side table pops out.

The Har Kow, or steamed prawn dumplings (€6), were a delicate, lightly-flavoured starter made all the more fragile by the light rice flour pastry. The pan-fried Waltrip dumplings of pork and chicken (€7) were more robust, being

Food

Reviewed by
Ross Golden-Bannon



steamed then shallow fried; this gave them a smoky edge and a slight caramelised note.

We also shared the Ma Lah spicy cucumber slices (€5.50), a simple and traditional cold salad that is not for the faint-hearted, as the cooling cucumber flavour dances with fiery chilli.

Our surprise order of the Loh Bah Gou, a traditional Chinese turnip cake (€6), had us purring with delight. It was simple, yet so complex to make, as the turnip is slowly cooked with XO sauce, turned into a terrine, cooled, then cubed and flash-fried in a hot pan. A magical dish.

Following a little rest between courses, during which we marvelled at the business of the restaurant on a Monday night, our selection of main courses arrived. If you're going to over-order, you might as well do it in style.

The last time I was in China Sichuan, I had the Sichuan jasmine tea-smoked duck; on the new menu it has been tweaked to a camphor-wood and Chinese tea version

Watching the pennies

Starter: creamy chicken and sweet-com soup €5.50
Main course: fried lamb shreds in Sichuan aromatic sauce €15
Dessert: banana fritters, golden syrup and vanilla ice cream €6.50
Wine: Champs de l'Hort, Vignerons de Benovie, Vin de Pays d'Oc, 2008 €22
Dinner for two: €76

Breaking the bank

Starter: quarter of aromatic duck served with spring onions, cucumber and pancakes €12
Main course: pan-fried monkfish pieces with celery and chilli bean sauce €27
Dessert: chocolate soufflé €7.50
Wine: Les Chevaliers, Jean-Philippe Fichet, Meursault 2005 €90
Dinner for two: €183

Tomás Clancy rates the wine list

If any other restaurants want to see a cast iron reworking of an already award-winning wine list, then here it is. It is still a list in transition, with more to be added, according to owner Kevin Hui, but the basic outline is now in place. Nine wines by the glass are also offered by the 500ml carafe and the bottle. This applies across the quality spectrum and is not confined to house wines.

So, while you can find an uncomplicated crisp chardonnay from Vignerons de Benovie, 'Champs de l'Hort', Vin de Pays d'Oc 2008 at €5 a glass, €14.50 a 500ml carafe and €22 a bottle, equally you can engage with the fine, quite ripe pinot noir of Domaine Simon Bize, 'Les Perrières', AC Bourgogne 2008 for €9.40 a glass, €26.90 a 500ml carafe or €45 a bottle.

The best quality for the price on the white side is easily the superstar grüner of Lenz Moser with his Laurenz V, 'Friendly', Grüner Veltliner, Kamptal, Austria 2008 at €37, while on the red side, the luscious Innocent Bystander, Shiraz/Viognier, Yarra Valley, Australia 2006 at €35 is the standout offering.

The star of the list for me is the Meyer-Fonne, Reserve Riesling, Alsace, France 2007 at €40.

Rating: ***

(€25) served off the bone. The unique flavours initially acted like a cloud-like sheath of savoury flavour around the sweet-tasting duck, and

then reappeared on the wash with a fuller force.

It was an astonishingly accomplished dish, and was ideal with the

fruity spicy notes of the Laurenz V, Friendly Grüner Veltliner 2007 (€37).

The Haozan black-sole fillets (€25) were another revelation, pan-fried as they were with sweet soy sauce, Sichuan pepper, pak choi and chunky, mature asparagus. I thought the sweet mirin would overpower the dish, but the crunchy sesame coating and Sichuan pepper anchored it on the right side of sweet and savoury.

The third dish of tender cubes of mature ribeye (€20) seasoned with black pepper, five spice and Sichuan pepper, was pan-fried with dry chillis and toasted garlic, and softened by some pak choi. This new-style Cantonese dish was lighter than the sum of its parts and fought with the other two dishes for top billing.

We loved the theatre of the toffee apple (€7.50) – deep-fried apple slices dunked in toffee and plunged in iced water at the table for unbeatable crunchiness. My cooling almond parfait (€6.50) was an ideal end to the dizzying symphony of spices and flavours of the previous courses.

If anything, things are even better now at China Sichuan – a new and younger kitchen team has been given a freer rein, and the nuanced changes sing of talent.

If you haven't yet eaten there, you are missing one of Ireland's greatest dining experiences. If only all restaurant stories had such happy endings.