

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

August 27, 2006

Tai Pan offers Chinese delicacies geared to all tastes

By Michael Bauer

Tai Pan owner Jeannie Lee, elegantly dressed in a handkerchief-hem dress, a Mandarin-style top and Tahitian pearls, gazes disconcertingly at our table, eyeing the steamed chicken.



Chronicle / Darryl Bush

“You didn’t like the steamed chicken,” she says. It’s a statement, not a question.

“Oh, no,” I protest. “It’s excellent. We just ordered too much food and I’m full. I want to take the rest of it home.”

I wasn’t just being polite. The chicken was perfect, the texture as delicate as velvet and the flavor so deep that the accompanying pungent ginger paste was superfluous.

By the time it had arrived we’d already consumed a dozen or so prawns (price varies). Pulled from the tank fighting, they were quickly steamed and served whole with a light dipping sauce made of soy, garlic, scallions, sesame and ginger.

We’d also downed a generous portion of somewhat greasy chow fun noodles with beef and yellow chives (\$12), light minced chicken in lettuce cups (\$8) and crispy vegetarian goose rolled up like a burrito and filled with carrots, onions, black tree fungus and other ingredients (\$8). We’d also polished off a vibrant shrimp dumpling soup (\$8). Lee was unconvinced.

When I had ordered the chicken, the waiter had looked surprised and tried to steer us to the fried version, but I was adamant that I knew what I wanted. The staff knew I didn’t.

Like a kindly but firm schoolteacher, Lee said, “I’ve already got the veal chop coming out. You’ll like it much better.”

Full as we were, we had to eat it, and in fact it did look beautiful. The meat was sliced thin across the bone, napped in a lightly sweet soy sauce that she knew would please a wide variety of palates. After all, she not only works the dining room but is also in charge of the kitchen and creates many of the recipes with chef Kai Hing Wong.

Lee and her husband, Christopher Chan, who was an architect and now works in the restaurant alongside his wife, took good care of us, but we still felt a little cheated out of the really good stuff. That’s the dilemma of eating in a Chinese restaurant that caters to Western tastes. Dishes, while fresh and good, are often modified to please what the owners believe is the prevailing palate.

That’s also probably why there’s a confusing array of menus -- a “short” one that has a mere 59 savory dishes and a prix-fixe version that features six-course (\$39) and four-course dinner (\$29) menus. Then there

is a multi-page book with more than 100 selections, including the steamed chicken (\$18 whole), abalone maw and shark's fin soup (\$12), live shrimp and lobster sashimi (price varies), sauteed squab with lily pods (\$16) and steamed frog with lotus leaf (\$15), all specialties management thinks might not appeal to the non-Asian diner.

As with many Hong Kong-style places, the 168-seat restaurant is designed for private celebrations and on many nights the back room is filled with diners celebrating birthdays, anniversaries and other events.

It's little wonder that Tai Pan has become a special place. Patrons enter through the bar that features a marble floor and an impressive backlit marble slab. The walls of the elegant, carpeted dining room are painted French vanilla, accented with a gleaming white molding that gives a high-toned Western feel.

Beautiful Japanese paintings, Chinese ceramics and carved screens separate the kitchen door from the dining room. Tables are clothed in white, with fully upholstered chairs, and are spaced wide enough apart that conversations are kept private.

The food reflects this refinement, with multiple shark's fin, abalone and whole steamed fish selections, but the long menu nonetheless seems conservative. Lots of organ meats and other body parts that are often rejected by many Westerners are missing.

Just about every table seems to head to the flounder two ways (\$19), in which the carcass is deep fried and formed to arch over the sauteed fish below. The flesh is cut into bite-size pieces and stir-fried with snap peas, and carrots cut to resemble dragons, and glazed judiciously with a light sweet-and-sour sauce. The bones are edible, and little pieces of the fried skeleton add a salty, crisp highlight.

Lee and Chan also recommend the honey-smoked



Chronicle / Darryl Bush

sea bass (\$22), which has a deep red hue and a subtle sweet and smoky flavor, arranged on a bed of baby corn (unfortunately, canned and tinny), snap peas and bok choy.

One of the must-order meat dishes is the oxtails (\$12), with red wine sauce perfumed with five-spice powder and set in a clay pot with bright chunks of carrots and other vegetables.

On other visits, four in all, we made only a slight dent in the menu. It would be impossible to try everything even if I went a dozen times, so we tried to ferret out the gems. Those include Jai Buddha's Delight (\$15), a taro basket filled with stir-fried lotus root, mushrooms, snap peas, carrots, lily pods and white fungus; sweet pea shoots with garlic (\$16); crispy salt and pepper sea bass (\$8) in a panko crust, topped with a mince of chiles, bell peppers and garlic; still-crunchy but blistered green beans stir-fried with minced pork (\$7); fried frog that is both crispy and goey (\$15); and a pleasantly rubbery jellyfish salad with marinated daikon and carrots, served with half moons of exceptional pigs' feet terrine and five-spice-marinated slices of beef (\$15).

Shanghai crab (\$32) is designed to impress guests. The claws and legs are given the salt and pepper treatment and are deep-fried. The platter contains a cloud-like mound of crab meat sauteed with egg whites with an

egg yolk in the center, which the waiter stirs in table-side. The dish carried a slight sulfuric tinge of overcooked protein that overpowered the crab. As we were eating, the host came over and scooped out the interior of the disk-like shell and gave us each a little portion, drizzled with vinegar.

The best egg dish was the seafood with egg white (\$15), which seems to appear and disappear from the menu depending on the night. If it's not on the menu, ask for it. A pillow of steamed egg whites, lightened with milk, formed a cloud-like bed for the shrimp sauteed with scallions, coins of asparagus and a light chicken stock tinged with the sea.

However, while the owners go out of the way to be accommodating, the staff doesn't necessarily follow their lead. If not told, they don't change out plates as often as they should and they can sometimes show an irritable edge. On our final visit, when we again ordered enough for the entire dining room, Chan brought out mango pudding (\$4.50), orange-tinged pudding served in a stemmed flute glass and topped with a froth of coconut milk. It's one of the most delicious, delicate desserts I can remember eating in a Chinese restaurant.

It was a grand parting and, despite some of the blips in service, we left feeling good. After I'd been there four times within a month, I had become a regular at Tai Pan, which will make subsequent visits seem a little more special.

Focused wine list at Tai Pan

Chinese restaurants aren't known for their extensive wine lists, but Christopher Chan is clearly trying to change that.

He's created a collection of more than 100 wines, including a dozen half bottles and 19 by-the-glass selections, that covers the spectrum.

While the range of varietals and countries is broad, most wines seem to be in a narrower spectrum as far as tannins and weight. They're well suited for the light, delicate nature of much of the food.

Still, it's an uphill climb, because when I looked around the tables, very few had bottles of wine. That may be the reason that the markups are high. In ad-

dition, the waiters don't know the wine, but Chan is usually around and can help guide the process.

The list includes all the expected names -- Trimbach, Pine Ridge, Jordan and Robert Mondavi -- along with a few surprises such as 2004 Kerner Abbazia di Novacella from Alto Adige (\$35).

The beer selection is minimal, but there's a full bar with some well-made specialty cocktails and a few dessert wines and ports.

If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$15.

– M.B.

Michael Bauer is The Chronicle's restaurant critic. E-mail him at mbauer@sfgate.com. Read his blog, Between Meals, on SFGate.com.

Tai Pan

560 Waverly St. (near University Avenue), Palo Alto; (650) 329-9168.
Lunch 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. daily; dinner 5:30-9:30 p.m. nightly. Full bar.
Reservations and credit cards accepted. Free lots nearby.

Overall: ★★½

Food: ★★½

Service: ★★

Atmosphere: ★★½

Prices: \$\$

Noise Rating: 📢📢

Pluses: Dishes such as seafood with steamed egg white, shrimp dumpling soup and steamed prawns are delicious. Pretty, elegant surroundings. Congenial owners help make the dining experience special.

Minuses: Some dishes seem Americanized. The service staff doesn't have the same sense of hospitality as the owners do.