

NYC Restaurateur

BRINGS **Authentic Chinese**
to South Florida*By Linda Brockman*

Nearly every block in South Florida has a Chinese restaurant and every Broward mailbox has held a Chinese to-go menu – and one looks like another. But when Mainland China Bistro opened on University Drive a year ago, the Chinese clientele said it felt more like being in China than in Coral Springs.

I discovered Mainland China Bistro last year, just after it opened and before my short-term move to Shanghai to teach English as a second language. When my friend Lilly Zhang, who is originally from Shen Yang in China's Liao Ning province, invited me to join her and her friends at a new authentic Chinese restaurant, I jumped at the chance. We found the menu items varied and numerous. I enjoyed the adventure of letting my Chinese friends order, which allowed me to try a little of everything.

The cuisine gets its name from China's Sichuan province (also spelled Szechuan or Szechwan) in Southwest China. Mainland's Sichuan entrees include Kung Pao Chicken and Ma Po Tofu with Minced Pork.

We recently returned to Mainland China Bistro, where our server Ling Jun greeted Zhang and her daughter, Katherine, with a "ni hao" (knee how) and me, with a hello.



We began with appetizers of Steamed Vegetable Dumplings and Little Juicy Pork Buns served in bamboo steamer baskets. The delicate skins encase a pork-based filling and a meat broth.

During steaming the broth poaches the pork in a rich, savory soup.

"You have to eat them just at the right time," advises Zhang, who lives in Boca Raton, "but definitely while they're hot." There is an art to it. Eat too quickly and you may get a mouth full of piping hot soup (ouch), but if you let the dumplings cool, the broth solidifies and the skin hardens.

Zhang and I ordered several main dishes, including Chicken in Black Bean Sauce (yummy but not incredible) and Spicy Sichuan (was it ever!) Cold Noodle with Peanuts, and a side of Scallion Pancakes (delicious the next day too).

I chose two favorites. The Crispy Honey Walnut Shrimp, topped with a slightly sweetened, creamy sauce, was less cloying than the Americanized version. The perfectly breaded shrimp and broccoli comingled nicely with the sauce and nuts – even the leftovers were great (maybe even better). The sautéed bean tips with garlic had such a wonderful flavor – with a bitter edge that made it delicious – although the leaves can cook up tough.

Katherine, 14, loved it all. For kids, anything can be ordered spicy or non-spicy.

The bistro's owner, Tiffany Huang, imports peppers and spices from her hometown of Chong Qing, a famous destination for Chinese Hot Pot. Mainland China Bistro serves hot pot for an individual or the entire table, in which diners cook meats, seafood, and vegetables in a savory broth, accompanied by 10 sauces.

Huang even had an artist flown in to spend two weeks creating a mural to depict the



city. It graces the back wall of the 6,000-square-foot establishment. Zhang, who went to college in Chong Qing, says the decor feels "authentic. It reminds me of restaurants in China – from the outside to the interior to the private party room."

Huang moved to the United States in 1996. She and her husband, Tsu Wang, own three restaurants in Manhattan called Ollie's (one in Hell's Kitchen, two on the Upper West Side) and the Red Bowl Noodle Shop in Queens. Their friends in South Florida complained about the lack of authentic Chinese food, so the couple moved to Boca, taking along their Sichuan-born chef from Manhattan.

Huang says the clientele is 50-50 Chinese and Americans, but at the time and day that we were there, the majority of patrons were Chinese.

Americans will find familiar names such as Pepper Steak, General Tso's Chicken, and Crispy Orange Beef on the menu. The meals are large enough to be shared, ranging in price from \$12.95 for any of the chicken entrees to \$45.95 for an entire Peking duck, served in the traditional style with pancakes, onion, cucumber and hoisin sauce.

Many dishes are made with the Sichuan peppercorns. While I love spicy food, I am not a fan of the Sichuan pepper's tongue-tingling effect that seems to numb my tongue to the flavors that come after it. Zhang loved it, and judging by the popularity of Sichuan cuisine in the States, it appeals to many American palates as well.



Mainland China Bistro is a refreshing change along University Drive that is filled with chain restaurants. When you go, tell them ni hao (hello).