

taste buds

chef Larry Janes

Szechuan is hot stuff at eateries

Forget the chop suey. We're talking potency here.

Anyone who has ventured into the realm of the food characteristics from the culinary regions of China know that Szechuan cooking is not for the "faint-of-tongue." Chinese restaurants are a dime a dozen and can be had on just about every block in most major cities.

Szechuan cooking, on the other hand, is a regional specialty that demands its participants sit up and take notice.

Prepared in local restaurants that can be counted on one hand, the hot, spicy recipes have a tendency to throw the tasteless, bland, basic stir-fry that are so much a staple of "Westernized" palates out with last night's rice. After a visit to one of my favorite Szechuan eateries, I decided to do a little research and find out just what it is that makes these unique additions to Chinese cuisine sizzle. And I do mean sizzle.

The Sze-Chuan Restaurant, one of metropolitan Detroit's premier west side eateries, owned and operated by Pallas and Sonny Wang, has been in operation for almost seven years.

The owners have observed the growing need for a spicy change in the culinary taste buds of many Detroit area residents. So much so, that the Wangs have recently expanded what used to be a hole-in-the-wall, no bit bigger than a three-bedroom, brick-ranch, living room type restaurant into a modern, sophisticated and classy Szechuan restaurant that can seat and serve almost a hundred guests with the likes of Kung-Pao Chicken, Hot and Sour Soup and Scallops in Szechuan Chili Sauce. Has your brow begun to sweat yet?

SZECHUAN CUISINE was derived from an area meaning "four streams" and "high on the mountain." Because of the abundance of water and the area being classified as "wet," the local folks began intensifying their basic Chinese foods with hot and spicy dishes to rid the "wet" from their bodies. And rid you of sweat, it does.

Of course, that's not to say that all Szechuan foods are hot and spicy. If you are lucky enough to dine at this restaurant, you will notice that the menu includes foods from just about every province of China, with the hot and spicy dishes noticeably marked with an asterisk to denote their spiciness.

In addition, you can order any spicy dish four different ways, from the basic but tasty "spicy but not hot" all the way to the incendiary "full strength" that in my opinion, should be served with a side of bicarb.

The Szechuan Restaurant utilizes two main cooking principles when preparing its cuisine, the ever-present wok and the steamer. Next time you're in and the place isn't packed, ask to see the state-of-the-art Chinese kitchen that incorporates the use of six woks and various steamers. Don't be surprised to see the chef chopping what seems to be a hundred pounds of green onions or, if your timing is perfect, you might be able to observe the traditional "blowing up" of the Peking Duck.

This dish, a culinary feast to enjoy as well as behold, is a house specialty. It incorporates blowing up a balloon inside the duck's cavity to "press out" as much of the duck fat as possible, making for a crispier and less fatty product. (Yes, the balloon is removed before cooking and serving.)

All the sauces used to garnish and flavor the spicy dishes are prepared by Sonny and his talented kitchen crew. One of my favorites is the extraordinary spiciness of the champagne sauce used to flavor the crispy shrimps.

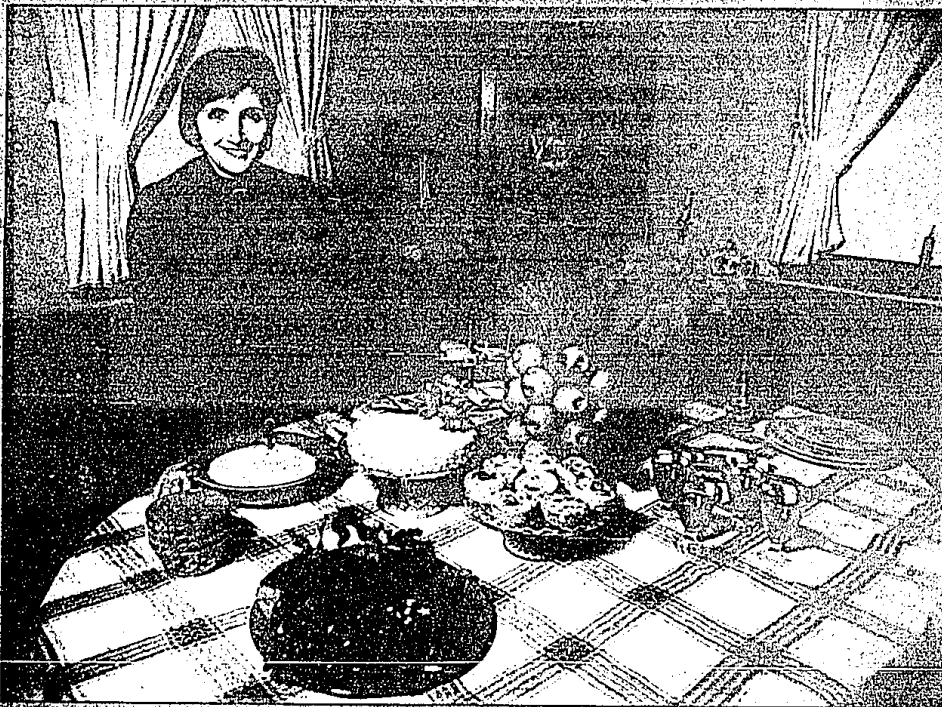
LOOKING FOR something a little out of the ordinary? The kitchen crew is very adaptable to preparing specialty dishes not normally seen on the menu but requested by patrons who frequent the restaurant.

Pallas and Sonny Wang came to the States while Sonny was still employed with a Big Three automaker. It was at the restaurant in Canton that they helped family members (who also own the Szechuan West in Ann Arbor) in the kitchen during peak periods.

Business took off and Pallas and Sonny purchased the eatery, little knowing that one day they would be reopening their doors with a newly remodeled nook that not only includes some of the best Szechuan food in the area but also a full bar and cocktail area.

Pallas is quick to mention that guests travel from all over the metropolitan area to savor a meal of Szechuan cuisine. On my last visit, the kitchen was busily preparing for a wedding party that was to take over part of the restaurant. Talk about a switch from the usual roast-chicken-and-mashed-potatoes type of wedding food!

TWELFTH NIGHT



Gourmet cook and teacher, food writer Geri Hirschler of Birmingham displays some of the traditional English or Scotch foods that may be served at a Twelfth Night buffet dinner party. In the foreground is a rare roast beef.

JOHN STORMZAND

Holiday party revives old customs

By Geri Hirschler
special writer

As the Twelfth Day of Christmas approaches, many European families are planning a holiday party.

In Belgium, England, France, Italy and Spain, Jan. 4 is a holiday of feasting and gift giving. In France, Twelfth Night is celebrated with a custard-filled pastry, Gâteau Des Rois (Cake of the Kings). The cake is baked with a small ceramic figure of a king or shepherd inside. Whoever finds the king in his or her slice of cake is king or queen for the day.

In Spain and Portugal, children leave their shoes on the doorstep with hopes that when the three kings pass by they will fill their shoes with treats. Historically, the most elaborate Twelfth Night celebrations have taken place in England.

In the early 16th century, Twelfth Night or the Feast of the Epiphany was considered the climax of the English Christmas season. The 12th cake, which was elaborately decorated with the focus of attention at the dinner table. It was decorated with all kinds of confetti, flowers, with almonds, figs, raisins, and other fruits. It was a very rich and delicious cake.

The cakes were so popular that competition grew amongst bakers. The cakes were often decorated with the names of the kings and the shepherds. The cakes were often decorated with the names of the kings and the shepherds. The cakes were often decorated with the names of the kings and the shepherds.

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Volta! O'Brien came up with a solution — tasty pizza, complete with all the trimmings yet containing far fewer calories than the average one.

O'Brien calls his creation Calorie Counter Pizza and describes it as "the first low-cal pizza in America."

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OFTEN AT MORE formal Twelfth Night parties, guests were given tickets bearing names of fictional characters such as Jerry the Joker, for Arthur Argus and Sir Simple Simon. Guests were to look for these identities while making their way through the feast.

Confederate characters of the cakes were later replaced with Santa Claus. The cake was served on Christmas Eve and most Twelfth Night parties became a thing of the past in England.

Although the English Twelfth Night custom may be as deeply rooted in this country as it is in England, Pennsylvania and Virginia, which had strong ties with England, the custom was the tradition into the colonial period. Most of the cakes are now dried and are full of party, not more time, to the Twelfth Day of Christmas is marked only by taking down the Christmas tree and decorations.

But there seems to be renewed interest in the old Christmas customs and foods of England. Many parties are now held in the Western communities of England, and the cakes are now dried and are full of party, not more time, to the Twelfth Day of Christmas is marked only by taking down the Christmas tree and decorations.

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After six years of effort, the product is expected to line area supermarket shelves in early 1988 under the brand name of Gilardis.

CALORIE COUNTER pizza eliminates calories by half, reducing a normal 12-inch round, complete with toppings, from the typical 2,500 or so calories to a mere 1,200, O'Brien said. A slice of Calorie Counter contains 300 calories.

The product comes in three varieties, pepperoni, sausage, or cheese — a pepperoni-sausage combination with onion and red and green bell pepper.

The key to less calories lies in the dough. O'Brien has cut back on the use of fat and salt and has totally eliminated the use of sugar in his crust.

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Low-cal pizza

It's coming to area supermarkets

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

In 1981, Mark O'Brien, a six-foot tall pizza entrepreneur who weighed 280 pounds, decided it was time to do something about his weight.

"Here I was, eating pizzas all the time, nibbling, tasting, eating them every day. Sometimes eating two or even three a day. If someone didn't pick up an order late at night, I just ballooned up," said O'Brien, 30, who has owned the Pizza Maker pizzeria in Union Lake since 1978.

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Mark O'Brien of the Pizza Maker Pizzeria in Union Lake slimmed down when he came up with Calorie Counter Pizza, which contains half the calories of regular pizza.

DAN DEANWORTH PHOTOGRAPH