

DINING

Mei Ling serves vegetarian dishes with Chinese flair

BY JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

Tom Lin's sauces are a closely-guarded secret.

The owner of Mei Ling, a vegetarian Chinese restaurant that opened in February in West Bloomfield, wants them to stay in the family.

So before dawn each day, his brother Eric goes alone to a private kitchen where he prepares such sauces as ginger garlic, spicy Szechwan, black bean brown, crystal white, and one so intricate it's called Mei Ling Special. They are then transported to Mei-Ling, and Lin's two other restaurants: Szechwan Empire in Livonia and Szechwan Empire West in Walled Lake.

Opening Mei-Ling (Mei is for his wife, Megan, and Ling is the Chinese spelling of Lin) was a natural outgrowth of the success of his two traditional Chinese restaurants and the Lin's own eating preferences. Megan is a vegan, which means she eats only plant products. Tom is careful what he eats, but isn't that strict.

"In the previous two restaurants, we saw clientele who were vegetarians," Tom says. On a trip to New York, they sampled a number of vegetarian restaurants and contacted a Chinese company that imports vegetarian products. "We found ingredients so high in protein and so low in fat. They are pure soybean with a unique flavor."

Although some dishes are built solely around vegetables, such as sautéed artichoke with basil or eggplant in special ginger garlic

Mei Ling Vegetarian

Where: 6175 Haggerty, north of Maple in West Bloomfield, (248) 928-6711.

Menu: Vegetarian Chinese.

Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; 11:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Friday & Saturday. Lunch prices in effect from 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Cost: Dinner entrees range from \$10.95 to \$12.95; lunch entrees \$8.55 to \$7.55.

Reservations: Taken for parties of five or more. All major credit cards accepted. Carry-out and delivery available.

sausage, many feature vegetarian versions of ham, chicken and beef.

Of the "meat" dishes West Bloomfield residents Sandy and Larry Altman tried, the honey sesame vegetarian chicken was a universal favorite. The vegetarian counterpart had both the flavor and consistency of chicken. "What they call 'substitute' was very satisfying," Sandy said.

This was confirmed by Sheila Sokol, also of West Bloomfield, who stopped by the table as she was leaving the restaurant. "I loved the food," she said. "The honey sesame was the best."

For appetizers, the blini-sized scallion pancakes were delicate and mouth-watering. And the pan-fried vegetarian dumplings were tasty.

Stir-frys, with your choice of vegetables and sauces, and lo mein, one with three kinds of mushrooms, are among the most popular dishes, Megan reports. A separate menu of Mei Ling Specials includes fish dishes such as basil whitefish topped with julienne vegetables and halibut

with Asian citrus glaze.

All entrees come with spinach wonton soup, rice and either Mei Ling pancakes or vegetarian spring roll and brown rice. Prices are about \$4 higher at dinner than lunch. For example, the Tofu Delight, made up of vegetables and soy protein in a black bean sauce is \$6.55 at lunch and \$10.95 at dinner.

No orange sherbet for this Chinese restaurant. Try Tofutti or green tea ice cream or homemade cherry crunch for dessert. And if it's that orange flavor you're craving, the mandarin orange cake with fluffy frosting containing pieces of pineapple and mandarin oranges is delicious.

Lin's heritage is the restaurant business. "My family, we have lots of restaurants all over the country," he reports. He began as a youngster, cutting up vegetables in the kitchen of a family restaurant in New York City. "My recipes are from the upper generation. You need to use good products and fresh vegetables."

When his parents ran into hard times, they moved to Ann Arbor where they worked "in other people's restaurants" for 10 years. By the time he was a junior at Eastern Michigan University, he had saved up enough money to open the Livonia restaurant.

"I scheduled all my classes early in the morning. My customers became friends. I have a lot of people's support."

One customer became better than a friend. He met Megan a couple of years ago when she came in to eat. "This is the first time I date my customer," he said. "When you work 6 1/2 days a week, you can't have a life. You don't have lots of dates when you have restaurants." Their two-week honeymoon to his native Taiwan was "my first vacation in eight years."

Fortunately, they had his brother, sister Michele Lin, and mother Nancy Wu, who are involved with the other two restaurants, to take over.

Mei-Ling features contemporary lighting and a blue color scheme as the backdrop for art objects they brought back from Taiwan. Tables feature glass-topped white cloths, many adorned with graceful flowers and butterflies.

Tom meticulously drew the interior plan. Megan did the decorating. And Megan's dad, a builder, helped construct it. They will follow the same strategy when they relocate Szechwan Empire West to a strip mall planned just south of Mei-Ling.

On June 16, Megan and Tom



Family: Tom, Megan, and one-month-old Asher at Mei Ling, a vegetarian Chinese restaurant. Mei is for Tom's wife, Megan, and Ling is the Chinese spelling of Lin. Megan is a vegan, which means she eats only plant products. Tom is careful what he eat, but isn't that strict.

had their first child, a son Asher. And as much as they already love him, it could happen that Tom withhold those family recipes from his first-born.

"I wouldn't recommend owning a restaurant," he says, because of the hours involved. He hopes if tiny Asher chooses to go into a family business, he'll join Megan's dad, the builder.

"I enjoy the atmosphere, the decor, the whole package," says Dawn Ulain, a regular from Walled Lake. A vegetarian, she always orders either the Famous General Tso's Chicken ("cooked in our World Famous Unique House Sauce with Broccoli") or the honey sesame chicken even though she eats in or carries out every other week.

WHAT'S COOKING

BY ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

Brothers and executive chefs Louai Sharras (formerly at Oakland Grill, Royal Oak) and Sam Sharras (formerly Colangelo's, Pontiac) have teamed to open Napolitana Classic Italian Take-Out and Catering at 6640 Drake Road, West Bloomfield, on the corner of Drake & Walnut (248)788-2500. Hours are Monday-Thursday 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m.; Friday and Saturday until 10:30 p.m.; Sunday noon to 9:30 p.m. Menu includes soups, salads,

pastas, pizza, sandwiches, entrees and desserts are reasonably priced. Portions are sized larger than restaurant servings and easily serve two people. Pastas including freshly-baked focaccia and Parmesan cheese range \$7.50 to \$9. Classic round deep dish pizzas with fresh plum tomato sauce and cheese are \$8.50 for a 12-inch and \$12.50 for a 16-inch. Additional toppings are 95c each. Chicken, ribs, steak and shrimp entrees served with side of pasta and homemade focaccia bread range \$8.50-\$13.50 for

most items.

Desserts at \$3.75 per person include Creme Brulee, Tiramisu and Cannoli. With 24-hour notice Creme Brulee can be baked in your soufflé dish or ramekins for any number desired.

Unique Restaurant Corporation's restaurants (Morels, No. VI, Northern Lakes Seafood, Flying Fish, Fortabella, Fusion Duet) recently introduced the URC Wine Card. If you want to remember a wine you enjoyed while dining, the wallet-size card is the perfect cheat-

sheet for handy reference. If you like to dine with wine, you'll find the card useful when dining anywhere. With a short list of area wine purveyors on the back, it becomes the perfect reference for retail shopping. Ask for one the next time you dine with URC.

Big Rock Chop & Brew House, 245 S. Eton, Birmingham (248)647-7774, 7 p.m. Tuesday, July 20, Cuvaison Wine Dinner with John Thacher, Winemaker & President, \$75 per person including tax & gratuity. Reception and

four-course menu. Each course paired with a current-release Cuvaison wine. Limited seating; reservations required.

Morels, A Michigan Bistro, 30100 Telegraph, Bingham Farms (248)642-1094 is the site of Master Sommelier Madeline Triffon's monthly "Wednesday Wine Bar." Upcoming dates for

wine enjoyment in an unpretentious atmosphere with the most upbeat, unpretentious wine expert are July 28 and Aug. 25. Served with eight featured wines are a couple of cold and one hot appetizer along with cheese, fruit and bread for \$35 per person. Be advised, last month's Wednesday Wine Bar sold out well in advance.

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