



# restaurants

**Stephen Downes**  
the food critic  
with bite

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Like fruit juices, some restaurant dishes need labelling “no added sugar”. Or “added sugar” in Cina’s case. There seems to be a trend to oversweeten savoury concoctions. Cina, which specialises in Malaysian and northern Chinese cooking, has many merits. Of course, it’s customary to add sugars to many savoury Asian dishes, but I thought it was a little overdone here.



**eat 11/15** CINA bills itself as the first Melbourne specialist in modern Malaysian and northern Chinese offerings. That might be so, but you’ll also notice scores of familiar items on its very long list. And what do far north China and Malaysia have in culinary common anyway? It’s not explained. Nor does it matter. There are, at any rate, 111 savoury dishes listed, beginning with multi-course “banquets” at \$35, \$48 and \$58. And denying its speciality somewhat, Cina covers most of Asia: ingredients and spices come from Thailand, India and Singapore. Fourteen house-made “dumsims” give way to six cold entrees, 16 hot entrees, nine soups, offerings classed by protein (poultry, beef, lamb, pork and so on), curries, seafood, tofu turns, and rice and noodle concoctions. You’ll find something you like. Technically, Cina’s cooking was fine and fresh, flavours and textures lively. Three of “chef Lao’s” dumplings (\$6.90) had regulation, white spongy softness and a terrific (if a little too sweet) filling of small pork cubes — and doubtless many other things.



**Cina**  
1183 High St, Armadale  
**Ph:** 9824 4102  
**Chef:** Steven Lao  
**Open:** Noon-3pm, 5.30-10.30pm, seven days  
**Parking:** In street  
**Cards:** AE, DC, MC, Visa  
**Seats:** 70  
**Liquor status:** Licensed  
**Cost:** About \$35 for three courses

**39**  
out of 50

**Would I go back?** Without hesitation, but I’d choose fewer sweet savoury dishes. We were told the braising takes five hours. Dilly-bags of translucent thin paste, “laksa juicy dumplings” (\$7.90 for three) contained a terrifically perfumed — if again sweet — ball of flavoured pork mince. Fresh and wonderful, they came with a refreshing and refined light curry and coconut sauce. Finely minced coconut featured in several things we tried. But I liked the way it was restrained and

**So stylish:** (above) everything about Cina tells you they take your comfort seriously.  
**Beef heart:** (above) Assam beef curry proved the dish of the night.  
Pictures: ANDREW TAUBER

that its essential blandness was used as a canvas for spices. Ten deep-fried crustacean tails (“My choice your choice fried prawns” \$28.80) were lightly battered in “coconut sand”, for instance, which, despite its light and fiery complexity was again sweet. An Assam beef curry (\$17.80) was the dish of the night, big chunks of high-quality stewing steak arriving in a dark sauce of alluring flavours. Blending lemongrass, tamarind, garlic and chilli, I could have spooned this fresh slurry up as a soup. Four little pillows of almond pudding (\$8.80) were bright yellow. Barely crisp on the outside, their interior gluey oozy starch was subtly perfumed. I’m trying to think of ways in which Cina’s drinks offerings fall significantly short but can’t, though a choice of sherries and half-bottles would complete the picture. A wine list like Cina’s — and the option of BYO — is what all restaurants should aspire towards. First, it’s huge and prices are reasonable; 11 magnums are listed. Half-a-dozen table whites and the same number of reds come by glass, and a dozen beers are offered.

**value 8/10** In all respects — and if you don’t mind added sugar in your savoury dishes — Cina offers astonishing value. These are the days, we shouldn’t forget, when some greedy restaurateurs are charging for a main course what it costs to have a filling meal at Cina. And the drinks list with a BYO option is a terrific trump.  
**staff 8/10** Apart from minor problems understanding one of the female waiters, Cina’s service was impeccable. Amiable serving staff were versed on the array of food and drink that they were selling. I made my usual mess on the tablecloth — and my shirt; ask my wife. But it was cleaned up without fuss.

**style 3/5** Yes, its glass front on to High St has the take-away menu stuck up on it, and, yes, the lists come in plastic pouches. The tables have white cloths (more white fabric for your mouth) and you sit on padded dining chairs. Overall, you’d have to say Cina is modestly stylish, its charcoal ceiling, lichen-green feature wall, framed Chinese characters and uniformed serving staff all saying they take your comfort seriously.

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