

RESTAURANTS

High notes from best hits list



John Lethlean

HAVE you noticed how so many of the city's great wine-drinking restaurants these days are those that, culturally, have no strong link at all with the stuff? Chinese restaurants, often, with vino at prices that would have Crown's food and beverage beancounters in a lather — Idea in Chinatown, Cho's in Hawthorn, Little Thai Princess in Malvern.

Well here's another: Cina. It's Malaysian for "Chinese". It's a restaurant with a very fine, all-class wine list. Prices are low and begin at a sensible, sub \$30 point. The regionally selective Australian and New Zealand collection is augmented by clever choices from Austria (Wachau), France (Alsace, Burgundy), Italy and Germany. No wonder it was a wine buff that put me on to the place.

Cina is a mixed bag. There is so much to like. But there are questionable things about the place, too. Some suspect decor accessorising; music that sounds like a Mr Whippy van trying to drum up business at a baseball match; the odd lurid painting and florid table accessory.

These quirky touches are at odds with the rear dining room's delightful Chinese art, soft greens in paint and printed wallpapers, mellow timber flooring and impressive furniture. Cina has the look of a place that has endured a kind of restaurant decor solera system, each successive vintage adding new material to what was there before.

But I cannot for the life of me figure why all this night's diners are sent to the back of the restaurant, away from High Street, when the soft red front parlour scattered with hungry customers would have made a much more convincing advertisement for owner Eric Wong's skills and hospitality.

Wong's a Melbourne veteran; some will remember him from Chinois days.

Here at this relatively new venture



he's in partnership with Stephen Lao, a chef from the Northern Shandong region of China. And Mr Lao's food is very enjoyable. But wait; there's more. His second chef is from Malaysia; hence a rather curious — and lengthy — menu that offers traditional northern Chinese food, Malaysian food, and the occasional dish that brings the two together.

If you think that sounds odd, you haven't tried a handmade, steamed Shanghai-style wheat pastry dumpling filled with minced pork and soupy liquid served with a rich, utterly delicious, mottled terracotta-coloured laksa sauce (\$7.90/three pieces). It's from a dim sum page opening the menu (after the inevitable banquet selections) and it lends weight to the suggestion this would be a good place for yum cha.

Mr Lao's dumplings are very good. Indeed the eponymous "Chef Lao Dumpling" — a steamed, bread-like dough filled with braised, shredded pork (\$6.90/three pieces) — and the Shanghai pot-stickers — slippery pork-filled gyoza-like dumplings served with pan-fried bottoms and black vinegar (\$11.80/six pieces) — remind us of one of the premises'

former lives: Dumpling King.

Everything arrives on fancy crockery; more important, the dishes arrive one at a time. None of that manic nonsense that happens when five hot dishes arrive at the same time for a small table of two, going progressively tepid and gloopy before anything can be properly appreciated.

Wong and staff seem to understand the best way to deliver food.

The smoked fish (\$8.80) is absolutely brilliant, although this Shanghai standard will polarise diners: it is pungent, intensely "fishy" but here is served with an aromatic, sweet and savoury miso-based brown sauce that mollifies the rougher edges of this traditional dish



Fish head curry.

PICTURE: EDDIE JIM

rather well. A standout.

From the hot entrees, everything impressed almost as much, although a flaky pastry, roti-style "shredded pork floss pancake" (\$6.50) — a lighter variation of the ubiquitous Shanghai spring onion pancake — is, for me, a little light-on with the pork floss. Cina quail (\$10.80) has a remarkable moist "glossy" texture, having been marinated, chargrilled and then finished with a Thai-ish lemongrass and chilli dressing. Completely different from the myriad spicy Asian quail variants in Melbourne.

Salt and pepper calamari (\$9.50) is another song from the greatest hits book but, again, done very well: a golden, thin batter, excellent flesh underneath and a wok residue of garlic, chilli, red pepper and crumbs of some kind, along with shredded green fried leaf.

While most dishes get a menu description, they're rarely revealing. My wine contact says the Peking duck is very good; we opt for something less predictable, "Shangtung (Shandong) Crispy Duck", of which the menu says: "Marinated with Chinese spices, wine, ginger and

Cina Armadale

Great cooking, amenable service and a strong wine focus.

14.5/20

Where: 1183 High Street, Armadale, 9824 4102

Web: cina1183.com.au

Food: Malaysian and Northern Chinese

Cost: Typically E \$10 M \$23 D \$8

Wine list: Excellent collection of Australian, NZ and Old World at fair prices

Corkage: \$7 a bottle

We drank: Curlewis pinot noir 2006 (Geelong, Victoria) \$59

Service: Sharp

Value: Good

Owners: Eric Wong and Stephen Lao

Chef: Stephen Lao

Vegetarian: Lots

Outdoors: Footpath

Wheelchairs: Yes

Parking: Street or provided (rooftop)

Cards: AE DC MC V and Eftpos

Hours: Mon-Sun midday-3pm; 5.30pm-10.30pm

Score: 1-9: Unacceptable. **10-11:** Just OK, some shortcomings. **12:** Fair. **13:** Getting there. **14:** Recommended. **15:** Good. **16:** Really good. **17:** Truly excellent. **18:** Outstanding. **19-20:** Approaching perfection, Victoria's best.

shallot. Boneless, succulent and crispy (\$23.80)." You can see why the theatre and accessorising of Peking duck is so acclaimed: what we have here are pieces of duck on a plate with a few non-edible garnishes. The skin's not that crisp and the whole thing lacks drama.

Rice comes out too late, one of the few aberrations to professional service. But, then, the restaurant was very quiet.

We finish on an absolute high note: a Malaysian fish head curry (\$22.80). It's a marvellous mystery dish, this, done properly. A thick, turmeric yellow gravy with power and balance revealing gelatinous and cartilaginous bits of fish, onion, bean, tomato, capsicum of different colours. I think there may have been eggplant, too.

With roti, it's simply one of the finest Malaysian curries I've ever eaten. You could eat here very reasonably and with a lot of style.

As for drinking, well what are you waiting for?

Cina is going to make plenty of people happy. Back off with the bling, change the playlist, and the fundamentals will shine.

SOUTHGATE

How do you enjoy it?

"Dinner before seeing a show. We always make a night of it."



Whether it's fine dining at an award-winning restaurant, supper in a romantic café, or a glass of wine before the show, Southgate is the perfect place to enjoy a special night out.

Southgate on the banks of the Yarra River, Southbank. 24 hour parking located directly under Southgate. For information call 03 9699 4311 or visit www.southgate-melbourne.com.au



Southgate