



Duck and Savour

Surveys show Chinese to be one of the UK's most popular cuisines, but there's a vast gulf between the takeaway on the corner and the nation's top Chinese eateries. Giselle Whiteaker dines at one of the best.

Chinese restaurants in London date from the 1880s, when stalls sprang up around London's docks, where Chinese sailors had settled. It's only in the last few decades, though, that it's come to mean more than sweet and sour pork. Just as every Londoner should know hotspots for fish and chips and Indian, they should also be able to

recommend a good Chinese. In my books, Orient London is the place to start.

I'll be the first to admit I've had mixed experiences with Chinese cuisine, both in the UK and in China itself. My cheap Chinese takeaway experiences have mostly ended

in indigestion, so it's with some trepidation that I follow my boyfriend Elio through Soho into Chinatown to sample Chinese fare from the top of the food chain. The streets, as always, are bustling and red paper lanterns flutter in the breeze. Right below the magnificent Chinese gate on Wardour Street, we find the entrance to Orient London and slip inside, warmly greeted by Kenny Yeung, Customer Relations Manager for the restaurant. He guides us around the corner to a table by the window and hands us a rather extensive menu.

"I don't know where to start," I confess to Elio as I flick through the pages, packed with delicacies ranging from dim sum to barbecue. Orient London bills itself as a dim sum and seafood restaurant, but the menu offers so much more, from the lush-sounding steamed diver giant scallop with garlic and vermicelli to the intriguing braised duck palm with Chinese mushroom and fish lips. The old favourites are there, too – Cantonese-style sweet and sour pork is within the 23 pages, along with hot pot dishes, soups and a broad selection of vegetarian options. There's an entire page devoted to tofu.

When Kenny returns to the table we ask for help. "The Dover sole is one of our specialty dishes," he says. "The chef fillets the fish, lightly fries it to firm up the flesh, then cooks it in the wok. After that he cooks the bones as a frame." Elio is nodding keenly. We'll have that.

"Of course, dim sum is our specialty too," adds Kenny. "Our dim sum chefs come in at 5am and work through to 5pm. We still run out of some pieces. We have no wastage." We order that too.

I haven't had Peking duck for years. "That would be a good intermediate dish," says Kenny. It is added to the rapidly growing list.

"And perhaps the Szechuan chili prawns," I suggest, keen to see how one of the more common dishes stacks up.

"You should have some vegetables, too. How about the Chinese broccoli?" Kenny suggests, drawing a line under our mammoth order.

Nibbling on roasted peanuts and pickled cucumber, we watch the constant flow of pedestrians eyeing the menu outside, peering through the window, and being enticed inside. Our attention soon turns as a bamboo steamer is delivered to the table. Kenny removes the cover to unveil the paired delicacies: orange-hued mixed mushroom parcels, moon-shaped prawn and chive, rounded scallops, and prawns. We swipe each tidbit through the chili oils provided, biting into the soft rice noodle coating, which gives way to the delicate flavours within. "Your favourite?" I ask Elio when the steamer is empty. "Mushroom," he says decisively. "Prawn," I counter.

The debate ends as another steamer arrives, along with half a duck, the crispy skin a deep chestnut colour. It sits on a bed of prawn crackers and is accompanied by the traditional hoisin sauce, shredded spring onion and cucumber. This is Elio's first Peking duck experience. I open the steamer, gently separate the paper-thin pancakes, and instruct him on loading the elements. Half a duck is a generous serving, especially with the large amount of meat under the crispy skin, but every bite is so flavour-packed it makes us want more.

"We still have three dishes to come," I groan as the empty plates are removed. My dismay quickly turns to delight when the Dover sole lands, the fish skeleton shaped into a frame, tail high in the air. The fish pieces mingle with snow peas, carrots, Chinese mushrooms and peppers. It's a beautifully light dish, the sweet sole the star. The Szechuan prawns are equally mouth-watering, the chili sauce giving just the right amount of kick, and the vibrantly green al dente broccoli is the perfect accompaniment.



"Room for dessert," asks Kenny after a decent post-feast pause. I hesitate. I'm very particular with desserts. If it's not chocolate or caramel, I'm not interested. "I'd really like to try the pan-fried red bean pancake," says Elio. I hide a grimace. Red beans are a long way from caramel. Elio is looking at me expectantly. "Okay, I'll try the black sesame balls," I say, with no idea of what they are.

Three orbs formed of glutinous rice flour sit in a row on the plate. I push gently on one with my finger to watch it bulge. Cutting into one side, the dark sesame paste dribbles onto the plate. I pop a piece into my mouth and am pleasantly surprised by the sweetness.

I trade one of the balls for a square of pancake. The crepe-like outer is wrapped around a thin layer of the bean paste, which has none of the coarse texture I'm accustomed to. It's slightly syrupy and definitely palatable. I'd go so far as to say delicious. Perhaps chocolate is not the only dessert worth trying.

We've not had a meal; we've had a feast. Orient London is a large leap from Chinese takeaway. This is Cantonese cuisine as it should be – packed with flavour and presented with panache.

To book a table at Orient London see www.orientlondon.com.



Orient London's Chicken Chow Mein

Serves 4

Ingredients:

2 skinless chicken breasts, diced
1½ tbsp Chinese five-spice powder
30ml (2 tbsp) light soy sauce
200g (7oz) medium egg noodles
15ml (1 tbsp) sesame oil
5cm (2in) piece root ginger, sliced
3 peppers (1 red, 1 yellow, 1 green), deseeded and diced
300g (10oz) Chinese-style stir-fry vegetables
60ml (4 tbsp) oyster sauce
1 spring onion, shredded
2 tbsp freshly chopped coriander leaves
½ tbsp sesame seeds

Method:

Season the chicken with 1 tablespoon of Chinese five-spice powder and 1 tablespoon of soy sauce. Cook the noodles according to the pack instructions.

Meanwhile, heat the sesame oil in a wok over a medium to high heat and stir-fry the chicken for 5 minutes until golden. Add the ginger, peppers and remaining Chinese five-spice and stir-fry for 2 more minutes. Add the Chinese stir-fry veg, cooked noodles and remaining soy sauce and the oyster sauce and stir-fry for 1 minute. Check the meat is cooked through with no pink showing.

Stir through half the spring onions and half the coriander and divide between four plates. Serve scattered with the remaining spring onions, coriander and sesame seeds.