

China House A Memorable Chinese Restaurant at The Oriental

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by Michael Moore

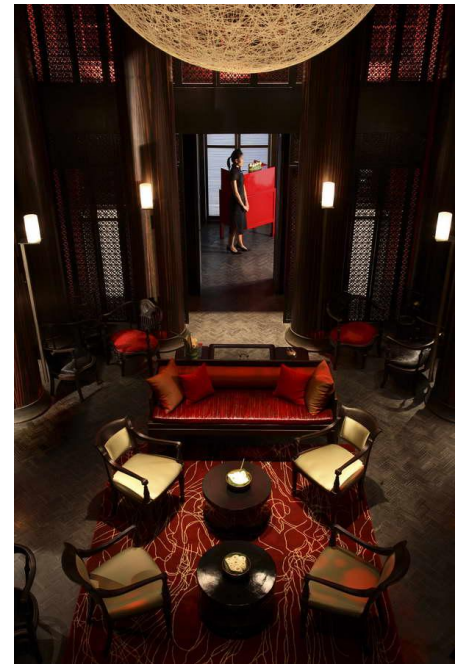
Bangkok has more than its share of Chinese restaurants. Virtually every major hotel has a restaurant serving Cantonese-style Chinese food and there are legions of independent places serving a mix of Cantonese and Teochiu dishes. Frankly, eating in these restaurants can become a bit of a bore. The food is frequently bland and quickly becomes monotonous, particularly to those who enjoy the spice and verve of Thai food. On top of this, the décor of the restaurants is often a tacky-tacky melange of mirrors, plastic knick-knacks, faded New Year's ornaments and a bedraggled lantern or two.

Not so at China House, The Oriental Bangkok's Chinese restaurant. But, of course, this is to be expected. The Oriental is Bangkok's most famous hotel and synonymous with taste and high quality. Before considering the food, let's look at the remarkable building housing the China House.

The structure is a two story, "colonial-style" building located adjacent to the hotel. Since 1990, it has served as home for the China House. Although the décor never resembled the excesses described above, neither it nor the food at China House were very exciting. With the advent of the new millennium, and the success of the Mei Jiang in the Peninsula Hotel across the river, The Oriental, decided it was time for a change.

Neri and Hu Design and Research Office, a medium-sized firm in Shanghai established in 2003, was charged with designing the structural renovations. Lyndon Neri was born in the Philippines, received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Architecture at the University of California at Berkeley and his Master's in Architecture at Harvard University Graduate School of Design. His partner, Rossana Hu, who was born in Taiwan, holds a Bachelor of Arts in Architecture from the University of California at Berkeley and a Master's degree in Architecture and Urban Planning from Princeton University. Given their strong academic credentials, it's no surprise, Neri and Hu use historical and cultural research as a major component in their design processes.

Aside from a coat of yucky river water green paint, the exterior wasn't changed, except for the addition of an entrance area that has drawn a lot of criticism. It is awkwardly appended to the building and – to be charitable – doesn't match the original architecture. The interior, however, is a different matter. Inspired by the 1930's Art Deco period in Shanghai, it is exciting – stunning is a better word – and makes even the most jaded ooh and ahh.



The centrepiece of the building is a central area reminiscent of the nave of a cathedral. Surrounded by columns sheathed in shimmering black Macassar Ebony and numerous screens, it serves as an area to enjoy tea. At the front of the room is a magnificent copper and bronze “apothecary” where the tea is prepared. To one side is a small bar with blue lacquer panels with mirror insets for enjoying both before and after dinner drinks. The second floor overlooks the central area and is reached by a beautiful staircase surrounded by red lacquered panels and silkscreen images of court ladies. The second floor has more dining tables and several private rooms with circular tables and heavy carpets featuring Chinese court scenes.

Lighting throughout the restaurant is subtle and dim and the colour black is used extensively. Dark red also features predominantly, and other colours, when used, are also deep and rich. Period furniture upholstered with horsehair, velvet and cowhide and carefully selected artwork reinforce the 1930s Shanghai theme. Elegant calligraphy with Tang poems describing the significance of fine dining, and black and white photos of Shanghai’s famous Bund area, dot the walls.

To add excitement to the cuisine, The Oriental appointed Jereme Leung founding chef of Hong Kong’s acclaimed lauded Whampoa Club as consultant chef. Kong Khai Meng, a Leung’s protégé with extensive Hong Kong and Shanghai experience, heads China House’s culinary team. Although Cantonese items are still found on the menu, Chef Kong has introduced a host of other items, many of which are from Shanghai and western China. This new dimension adds culinary excitement and a host of flavours not often found in the Big Mango’s Chinese dining spots.

Dim sum, always a favourite with Bangkokians, is served daily at lunchtime. If you are tired of the minced shrimp and pork featured in virtually every dim sum served in the city, get ready for a treat at China House. Dim sum is meant to have a variety of ingredients, flavours and textures and this is what Chef Kong and his team provide. Siu Mai, those little steamed shrimp and pork dumplings served on Bangkok street corners, are taken to new heights with the addition of X.O. sauce. Our party found the seafood filled deep-fried long spring rolls both visually exciting and delicious. We also found the deep-fried mango fritters with shrimp a real treat. Ditto for the pan-fried radish cake with Chinese sausages. If you take your kids out for lunch, China House even has a “Kids’ Dim Sum Series” with a set of items decorated to appeal to the younger set, including steamed buns shaped like rabbits. In short, dim sum dining at China House is as it should be – intriguing, exciting and never boring.

Chef Kong was introducing some new items to his menu when we dined at the restaurant. Our favourite was “Wok-baked lamb chop (B400++) marinated with ‘Xin Jiang’ cumin spices.” The lamb is sensational; marinated overnight, it is about as far from typical Cantonese dining as one can get. Imagine, lamb with cumin in a Chinese restaurant! Another dish that had us doing flip-flops was the “Pan-seared tenderloin with pistachio nuts” at B550++. Another pertinent example of how a few spices can add new dimensions to Chinese food is the B450++ “Fish fillet and tofu dumpling in a pickled plum consommé.” On the surface this looks like typical Cantonese fare, but the spicing and a bit of chilli add new dimensions and take it into the realm of the extraordinary. There are, of course, numerous other items, including lots of succulent (and pricey) seafood on the menu, but we simply didn’t space in our tummies to try everything. We did, however, manage to find room for the

China House version (B280++) of fresh mango and dragon fruit pudding. Served in a hollowed out dragon fruit, it is as delicious as it is attractive.

If you prefer to order your Chinese meals from a set menu, China House has them available at both lunch and dinner. The B980++ “Tasting Menu” at lunch features six different items, including a brace of five assorted dim sums. At dinner there are three different “Tasting Menus” available, ranging in price from B2500++ to B6800++.

The service at China House, as it is at all The Oriental outlets is exemplary. What particularly impressed us at this restaurant, however, was the ability of the staff to describe the items on the menu. They really know the menu and are happy to describe in detail what is in each dish and how it is prepared. For Bangkok, this is an extraordinary departure from the norm.

China House at The Oriental provides some of Bangkok’s most exciting and delicious Chinese dining. If you are tired of the city’s run-of-the-mill Chinese restaurants, by all means head for China House. We guarantee you’ll be glad that you did.