

**\$50 and Under**

# Friendly tip leads to intriguing find

■ *Chinese: For inexpensive fare in a modest setting, Szechuan Cafe's offerings are amazingly good.*

By DAVID MICHAEL ETTLIN  
AND BONNIE J. SCHUPP  
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

On out-of-town trips, the secret to finding a good, inexpensive Chinese restaurant is asking where the locals eat. A reputation that comes by word-of-mouth is hard to beat.

We had been hearing about a little place tucked away in a strip shopping center on the west side of Ritchie Highway in Glen Burnie. A friend positively swore by it — "Try the Szechuan Cafe." And was she ever right.

It was modest-looking, modestly furnished, modestly priced and unbelievably good — with menu choices so intriguing that David reluctantly put aside his recurrent craving for orange chicken.

We were guided by our amiable waiter toward a couple of house specialties — macadamia chicken (\$11) and a beef casserole (\$9.50). We were dissuaded from pigging out on a third entree (David's orange chicken) by the waiter's polite admonition: "You have enough food; our portions are big."

We started with a serving of a half-dozen little crepes, deep-fried with a filling of cream cheese and fresh crab meat — a combination as mouthwatering as it sounds, although (not to be crabby) a tad more crab would have been nice.

Chicken corn soup (a variation of egg drop) and won-ton soup both proved to have rich, flavorful broth, and the latter was well garnished with spring onions and strips of pork.

After a dainty serving of fruit-flavored Italian ice to clear the palate, those big entrees arrived. Boneless slices of chicken breast rested in a tasty brown sauce with plenty of macadamia nuts. The dish was terrific. But it was the beef casserole that truly surprised — stir-fried and served in a covered clay pot.

We were told a bit of the technique: *chopped garlic and the tops of green onions sauteed in the pot, the meat added and half-cooked, then taken out while the vegetables are stir-fried, and put back in to finish.* Delicate rice noodles were added to absorb excess juices and an assortment of spices, to add flavor.

Throughout the meal, we were constantly asked how everything was — by the waiter, the bus girl,

## Szechuan Cafe

**Where:** 7400 Ritchie Highway, Glen Burnie, 410-768-8989.

**Hours:** 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

**Prices:** Appetizers, \$3-\$5.25; entrees, \$6.95-\$20.

**Credit cards:** MasterCard, Visa, American Express, Diners Club, Discover

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**Rating:** \*\*\*½

Ratings: \* culinary wasteland  
\*\*\*\* culinary heaven

and explained his philosophy: "We don't try to be a fine restaurant. We just try to treat our customers right."

Indeed, we were made to feel as special as the food proved to be.

Leung, 38, said he was raised in Hong Kong and found his way into the restaurant business at the suggestion of his father's friend, head chef at a hotel — to learn it as a backup career before going off to college in the United States as a young man.

In the 1980s, when the economy and restaurants were booming, he worked as a waiter, later became a partner in a restaurant and five years ago finally opened his own.

"The first two years is a struggle, but I tell myself, 'If you treat your customers right, you will do all right.' I only try to provide friendly service and good food."

And he did — right down to the orange chicken that David finally ordered as a carryout.

Three days later, David went back to try the Szechuan Cafe's weekday \$5 lunch buffet — a serving style that Leung says is necessary to draw Glen Burnie office workers.

It is smaller than the spreads of other Chinese buffets along Ritchie Highway. Leung says he keeps it small to ensure quality. The half-dozen entree choices were uniformly excellent.

*Editor's note: Once a month, David and Bonnie explore Anne Arundel County eateries in search of a good meal for two, priced under \$50 (before tip and taxes).*

# A change of mind at Szechuan Cafe

**I**t's always nice to have one's preconceptions rattled. It may be hard on the ego, but good for the soul.

So, take all your preconceptions about Glen Burnie strip centers, your preconceptions about Chinese food and your preconceptions about what you want for dinner tonight, package them up neatly and leave them in the car. They won't do you any good at the Szechuan Cafe.

First, a few rules that should be followed rigidly, or at least kept in mind: Do order from the specials menu. Don't order appetizers. Don't bother with the several dozens of familiar standbys like General Tso's chicken egg fu young. Don't be tempted by the exotic-sounding Macadamia chicken, firecracker prawns, Szechuan duck or Jade lobster.

Instead, order the specials. There

## DINING OUT

By GEOFF PEVNER

are nine of them — 10, if the chef adds an extra one to the board — and they include mussels in black bean sauce, Happy Family string beans, curry chicken and sesame shrimp and chicken.

Don't forget the casseroles. They feature covered ceramic pots in which the chef sautees, stirs, mixes and then bakes simple ingredients — beef, chicken, shrimp, water chestnuts, veggies, more than 20 spices and honey — to yield indescribably subtle and complexly interwoven flavors. The covered ceramic pots come to the table sputtering and sizzling, yet they yield shrimp not the least bit

## DINING

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overcooked, tasting lightly of garlic and scallion, and vegetables still crisp to the tooth.

You'll find something approximating a Hunan brown sauce on the nut-nut chicken, along with peanuts and cashews brocolli and miniature ears of corn.

The black pepper steak challenged my preconceptions. Sure, we've all had green pepper and onions stir fried with sliced beef. But take the original meaning of "sweet and pungent," impart just the right burn and just a tad of honeyed sweetness and the slightest hint of citrus. Stir fry that with your beef, and you have a noteworthy and nontraditional meal.

Creative cooking transcends ethnic limits. The language of flavor, when carefully phrased, is easily understood. This is very fine dining.

Thus, the shaved carrot roses that garnish each entree seem appropri-

## WHEN YOU GO

**WHAT:** Szechuan Cafe

**WHERE:** 7400 F&G Ritchie Highway, Glen Burnie

**PHONE:** (410) 768-8889

**HOURS:** 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday to Thursday; 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday; hours vary on Sunday

**CREDIT CARDS:** Yes

**PRICES:** Low to moderate

ate, and the tiny cups of sorbet for clearing the palate seem innocent and unpretentious. The hot towels proffered at meal's end seem nothing more than a gracious gesture by a kindly host. Small touches make this one of our favorite stops.

You really can try the appetizers if you'd like. The wonton is classically traditional. The hot and sour is smooth and beautifully balanced. We opted for the "velvet crab" soup, a variation on egg drop with bits of crab and slices of string bean. Dumplings are light and sweet, eggrolls pleasant, shrimp toast remarkably delicate, and crabmeat and cheese "crepes" actually taste

of crab. In truth, you can't go wrong here, no matter what you choose.

The decor is understated, comfortable, service is friendly and quite efficient, staff is knowledgeable and prices are reasonable and prices are reasonable. Don't come on a Sunday, however, because on that day the cafe is open, the line is around the block. Little

Dinner for four, with appetizers, soup, rice, tea and three entrees slightly more than \$50.

With preconceptions — lines — suitably stre-headed home content.

# MARYLAND & ANNE ARUNDEL

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## THE SUN

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The Sun in Anne Arundel : Sunday, October 11, 1998 : Page 5B

### Szechuan Cafe to say 'thank you' with fund-raiser buffet Nov. 1

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To celebrate its sixth anniversary and thank the community, a Chinese restaurant in Glen Burnie plans a special Sunday opening next month with a \$2.99 buffet — with all proceeds destined for a nonprofit organization helping people with developmental disabilities.

The benefit buffet will be held from noon to 8 p.m. Nov. 1 at the Szechuan Cafe, 7400 Ritchie Highway. It will feature appetizers, soups, and entrees including beef with broccoli, orange chicken, vegetable lo mein and pork egg foo yung.

The Szechuan Cafe usually is open for lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday, but closed Sundays.

Owner Tim Leung had been thinking for months about holding an anniversary event with a worthy cause to benefit from it. He chose the Providence Center be-

cause several of his "steady customers" work there and talked to him about fund raising.

Based in Severna Park, the private, nonprofit Providence Center serves nearly 500 adults at nine sites in Anne Arundel County.

Its programs include vocational and artistic training, sheltered and supported employment, and job development and placement services.

Its mission is "to provide opportunities that allow adults with disabilities to enjoy increased self-determination in leading a more independent, valuable, and functioning role in society."

Leung said that if the benefit is a success — which he figured could be defined by having "no leftovers" in the kitchen — he will make the anniversary celebration an annual event and help a different charity each year.



# Szechuan Cafe a surprising pleasure

**S**trip centers don't get much respect. Uncommonly plain on the outside and equally plain on the inside, they usually offer little in the way of aesthetic merit.

The true artist, however, makes do with simple materials to capture our imagination.

That's the philosophy that inspires the cuisine of the Szechuan Cafe. And "inspiring" is the operative word.

Let's talk decor. Beige wall treatment, milk-glass lamp globes, simple place settings and venetian blinds on the windows — although it sounds spare, it feels opulent.

Customers dress casually. The proprietor is decked in a starched white shirt with sharp tailoring. You've walked into a private club, and the owner himself escorts you to a table. He offers his personal suggestions on the night's specials. Take his advice.

Let's recap: a plain interior with seating for perhaps 50 in a Glen Burnie strip center. Feels like a private club. You're dressed casual but feel like you're dining uptown. How do they do that? Magic perhaps. Sleight-of-hand. Sleight-of-mind. Or a personal touch.

The menu includes a balanced selection of old standards that are reasonably priced, including szechuan, hunanese and kung pao items, sweet and sour, black bean sauces and garlic. General Tso's chicken is here, as is Mongolian beef and double-cooked pork. Macadamia chicken, szechuan duck, orange prawns and jade lobster have a certain exotic appeal. Or how about filet cut into the shape of gold coins?

The main attractions, however, can be found among the casseroles. Covered ceramic pots in which the chef sautees, stirs, mixes and then bakes simple ingredients: beef, chicken, shrimp, water chestnuts, vegetables, more than 20 spices and honey. Ingredients mingle and combine in ways that stir-fried foods

## DINING OUT

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never do to yield a rich and complex overlay of flavors. Simple fare — simply prepared in a humble clay pot — yields complexity. Sleight-of-hand. Sleight-of-mind. Fine dining.

The casseroles and other chef's specials appear on their own menu. A special is posted on a board by the door. Each comes with soup and a fortune cookie. No appetizers. Your host will advise against it. "That's too much food," he said. Listen to him.

The soup will treat you well — far better than you'd expect. Take the hot and sour. You'll note the difference before you even dip your spoon. The color is a deep, rich mahogany with the texture silken. Only imported rice wine vinegar will do, your host explains. It is smooth to the tongue and so delicate in contrast.

Where does hot leave off and where does the tart begin? Why is there a sweet undercurrent and how do all those savory undertones get there? Hot and sour become one — more than one. The ingredients are simple but only of the finest quality.

Between soup and entree, we have a tiny goblet of cherry sorbet to startle your palate back to attention.

There are egg rolls, if you feel you must. You'll find them light, crisp and delicate. Dumplings won't disappoint, nor will crab "crepes." I won't order them next time, however. They're a distraction.

If you have the option, listen to your host and try the mussels in black bean sauce. This features large, plump New Zealand

## WHEN YOU GO

**WHAT:** Szechuan Cafe

**WHERE:** 7400 Ritchie Highway

**PHONE:** (410) 768-3889

**HOURS:** Monday to Thursday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.

**CREDIT CARDS:** Yes

**HANDICAPPED ACCESS:** Yes

**PRICES:** Low to moderate

**BEVERAGES:** Full bar

**KIDS MENU:** Not offered during our visit

**SERVICE:** Excellent. It's warm, personable, helpful and efficient.

mussels delicately seasoned with a sweet and mildly spicy brown sauce. It's an unusual combination, deftly prepared. My mouth kept expecting lemon-butter and was pleasantly confused with each bite. I wished for bread to mop up the remaining dabs of sauce.

The lemon chicken proved far better than any I'd had elsewhere, with tidbits of fried chicken breaded in a fine-grained batter accompanied by a sharp, sunny lemon sauce. Not my choice, nor one of my favorites, but I helped eat far more of it than I expected.

Our host worked the quiet room gently, intently making recommendations to patrons and suggestions to the waiter.

Dinner came to a shade over \$50 for four entrees, four soups, two eggrolls, tea and soft drinks. We took several containers of leftovers with us and wandered out into a Friday night in a downtown Glen Burnie center. In the most unlikely places, one can find a moment's pleasure.