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MIDNIGHT CHAMPAGNE TOAST

FOOD

BY TODD SOUTH



Shanghai Bistro serves a Braised pork lion head, two gigantic, “fluffy” meatballs served with bok choy and a savory sauce.
PHOTO/TODD SOUTH

Exotic taste

Recently opened Shanghai Bistro's menu

has plenty of typical Chinese American dishes, though it's strikingly devoid of noodles. The lone noodle dish (vermicelli with spicy minced pork for \$13.95) is on the chef's special menu of authentic Chinese dishes, many of which sounded exotic and enticing.

With my friend and her twin boys in tow, we started with egg rolls (\$5.95, four pieces), crab rangoon (\$8.95, six pieces) and pot stickers (\$8.95, six pieces). The egg rolls were average and a little on the small side. The rangoon's pinched “crown” of wonton wrapper was overly crunchy, and there wasn't any sense of crab in the pouch's cream cheese filling. The potstickers were quite large, crispy and stuffed with plenty of meaty filling—definitely the most satisfying of the trio.

Beef sizzling platter (\$12.95) was the lone entree ordered from the non-special menu. A hot, cast iron platter was brought to the table and then piled with food and covered with a steel cloche. A few minutes later, our server came back to reveal the sizzling, steaming mix of strips of beef with bell pepper, onion and mushroom in a savory sauce. It was delicious and definitely my favorite part of the meal.

Moving on to the chef's menu, we tried a chilled jellyfish salad (\$12.95)—strips of marinated jellyfish mantle tossed with chopped scallion and a sauce redolent with toasted sesame oil. Being a fan of pretty much every bit of seafood I've previously tasted, I really wanted to like it. Unfortunately, for me, the crunchy/chewy/squishy texture was unpleasant, and the sharp, bitter sauce wasn't helping. My friend wasn't new to this dish and really enjoyed it, so it's apparently an acquired taste.

Sweet and sour pork ribs (\$15.95) were unlike the Korean variety, or any other. Cross sectioned rounds of rib bones were covered in a sticky, viscous sauce and topped with sesame seeds and chopped scallion. The sauce wasn't bad, but what meat was on the little bones was tough and difficult to chew off—definitely not my favorite treatment for ribs.

A dish of Napa cabbage, pork and rice cake (\$13.95) included sliced rice cake, mushroom, scallion and shoestring strips of pork, on a bed of cabbage. The savory sauce was good, and most of the ingredients were enjoyable. Apparently I just don't dig on rice cake. Just as with Korean rice cake, I found it to be a weird mix of chewy and gummy and generally flavorless—starchy carbs without any discernible reward, at least to my palate.

Braised pork lion head (\$14.95) turned out to be two giant meatballs—said to resemble a lion's head—ringed by baby bok choy and drenched in a sauce heavy with Chinese five spice blend (cinnamon, cloves, fennel, star anise and Szechuan peppercorn). Seriously, the pair were each the size of a baby's head. The cabbages were perfect, the sauce was a bit overspiced, but it was the meat texture that threw me. Apparently a mix of fatty pork shoulder and belly is ground, marinated, and massaged into a paste. The end result is what I can only describe as “fluffy,” and I've never encountered anything similar. It's definitely not your run-of-the-mill meatball.

Service was excellent, and I'd really like to sample the selection of “hot pots,” wherein you cook a variety of ingredients at the table. Having seen a few folks enjoying it, I regretted not ordering one. □

Shanghai Bistro

2303 S. Virginia St., 622-3098
Shanghai Bistro is open from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.