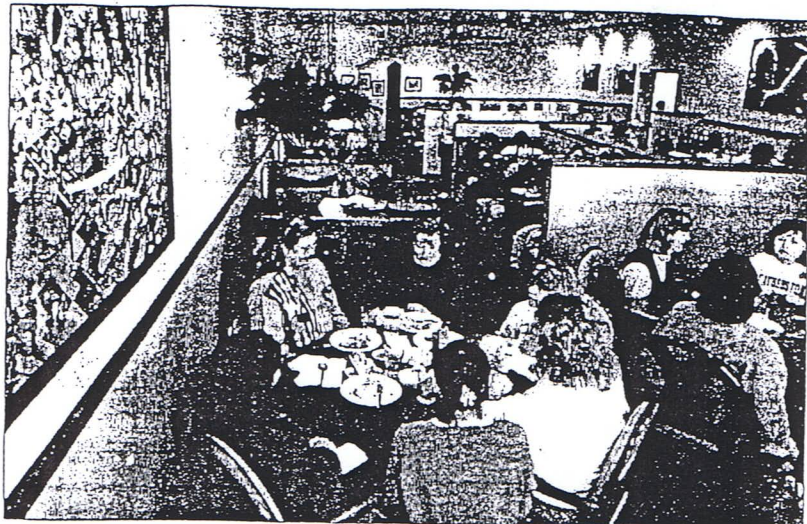


Tea Garden deserves fame



Lunchtime at the Tea Garden

DAVID PULLIAM/The Star

Wonderful Chinese spot is quiet and lovely and serves up unique dishes.

By JOHN MARTELLARO
Staff Writer

For me there's nothing quite like opening a menu and seeing a dish I've never heard of before.

When I can open a menu and find several such dishes; when the kitchen executes these dishes, and more familiar ones, with uncommon skill; and when they're served in a comfortable, tastefully decorated setting — well, you're pushing just about all of my buttons.

When I get all that in a Chinese restaurant in a suburban strip shopping center — not the first place I expect to find it — I'm really impressed.

The Tea Garden made that kind of impression on me.

On the outside it's just another suburban storefront, the kind of place you'd drive by a hundred times without looking twice. Walk in the door, though, and you immediately know you've found something special.

A large color photograph of a Chinese street scene greets you. It fits in well with the contemporary decor. A soft green color dominates, with dark-stained mahogany wood trim, and frosted glass light fixtures with a reddish-brown painted border that matches the mahogany. Several more large color photos are on the walls, along with many smaller, nicely framed black and white photos of pre-revolutionary China.

Paging through the menu, I again found signs that this restaurant is out of the ordinary. Tempura mushroom caps stuffed with pork and scallions; fresh mushroom and shrimp ball soup; eggplant stuffed with minced shellfish; tofu stir-fried with fresh spinach.

But anybody can write a menu. It was the consistently skillful cooking at Tea Garden that made the biggest impression.

Subtlety is the rule here. The food is light and elegant, with no heavy doses of sugar, garlic, ginger or chili. Flavors are natural, complex and balanced, the ingredients and sauces invariably fresh.

So why was this place so empty everytime I went there? Even on a Friday night, I had no

HOW IT RATES

Tea Garden

12755-B4 Mur-Len Road, Olathe
397-0057

Food: ★★★ 1/2 Service: ★★★

Atmosphere: ★★★ 1/2

Entree range: \$5.45 to \$9.75

Entree average: \$7.45

Hours: Lunch, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
Mondays through Saturdays; dinner, 5
to 9 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays,
5 to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

Accessible entrance. Separate non-smoking seating. No bar service.

The star ratings:

★★★★ Excellent — ★★★ Very Good
★★ Good ★ Fair ■ Unacceptable

trouble getting a table. Perhaps the low profile is part of it — the restaurant is in the middle of a row of shops set well back from the street on the southeast corner 127th and Mur-Len, and you really have to be looking for it to see it.

Perhaps the lack of a liquor license has something to do with it, too. But I think the delicately scented jasmine tea served here goes far better with their food than, say, a glass of plum wine or Coors Light.

Certainly the quality of the food and setting deserves a following. Feel free to follow me, because I'll be going back.

And one of the first things I'll order will be the crisp stuffed mushrooms (\$2.95), four plump caps in a tempuralike crisp batter, with a ground pork and scallion filling and a sweet, hoisinlike dipping sauce on the side.

Pan-fried dumplings (\$3.75) are long ovals here, rather than the familiar plump, fat ones, and obviously made fresh to order. The fried side is crisp, the pale side nicely tender, the pork filling flecked with herbs and very flavorful, even without the classic soy-garlic dipping sauce.

Fresh mushroom and shrimp ball soup (\$3.75 for two) is a delightful preparation I've never seen anywhere else. It's a pale, delicate broth with shards of egg white, plump chopped mushroom pieces and soft, quenel-

like minced shrimp balls.

Shrimp rumaki (\$3.45) are plump shrimp and crisp water chestnut slices wrapped in crisp bacon, served with a thick, tangy-sweet dipping sauce. Honey garlic chicken wings (\$2.25) are sticky and somewhat awkward to eat, but very satisfying — certainly a sweet nibble, but still subtle.

The most impressive entree we sampled was the honey walnut shrimp (\$9.25). Large shrimp were fried crisp, tempura style, then tossed in a brown sauce with red pepper chunks and chopped baby corn, then topped with crisp honeyed walnuts.

A lot of restaurants will drown a dish like this sticky-sweet sauce so that it almost tastes like a dessert; here, the dish got a light drizzle of a sauce that was definitely sweet but had some complexity, too. It was the difference between a satisfying dish and a heavy-handed one, and demonstrated that the people in this kitchen really understand food.

My favorite entree, though, was purple moon (\$8.55) — and not just because it features eggplant, the undisputed World's Greatest Vegetable. Chunks of small, sweet Asian eggplant are stuffed with minced shrimp, scallop and water chestnut, then sauteed in a flavorful sesame brown sauce. Yum.

Autumn green (\$8.45) was almost too pretty to eat, too tasty not to. It's crispy cubes of fried tofu tossed with tiny, tender, whole spinach leaves in a tangy, delightful brown sauce. Amazing chicken (\$8.95) is sauteed with zucchini and carrot pieces and more of those tiny spinach leaves, in a lightly spicy, lightly sweet, well-balanced peanut sauce. Sweet-and-sour pork (\$6.55) has never been one of my favorites, but the version served here was as good as I've ever had, with crisp-tender fried pork chunks in a truly restrained sauce that was light and not super-sweet, with definite pineapple tones.

Garden crispy beef (\$8.75) might have been as good as the rest, but it was marred by the only service glitch we encountered over two visits. The dish is thin, crisp shards of beef cooked with julienned carrot, scallion and celery in a sweet-spicy, thick brown sauce. The dish also includes thin rice pancakes for wrapping the mixture, but there was a delay of several minutes between the platter and the pancakes, allowing the beef dish to cool.

Otherwise, service was generally good — not flashy, but nicely attentive and well-paced.