

Chinese treat

Business experts say, "Location. Location. Location." Ann and Winston Hu found "the location" for their Tea Garden Restaurant, 12755-B4 Mur-Len Rd., Olathe, almost seven years ago. When they opened their 90-seat operation in the Devonshire Shops, the strip mall across the street from I-35, it must have seemed like being on the edge of town. The decision was fortuitous.

That end of Olathe has grown up around them and the Hu's have flourished with their inexpensive menu from various Chinese regions as well as some of Mr.

Hu's own creations, including the unique seafood-stuffed eggplant called "Purple Moon." On the weeknight and weekend night I dined there, the restaurant looked more than half full with a constant stream of carryout customers coming and going.

The Hu's have kept the dining room simple. Booths occupy most of the brightly lit, cabbage-green room. Photos of contemporary Chinese life cover the walls along with Chinese-motif china plates. The high booths offer plenty of privacy, and combined with the high ceiling, the room is pleasantly quiet.

The appetizer menu contains the usual fare — egg rolls, dumplings, beef teriyaki and Rangoon made with shrimp instead of crab. There's nothing ordinary about their preparation and presentation though. On two visits, Emily the electrician and I tried the Chicken Spring Roll (\$2.55), Pan Fried Dumplings (\$4.25) and Crisp Stuffed Mushrooms (\$3.75).

We found plenty of chicken amidst the shredded cabbage in the flaky crusted spring roll. The spicy pork went well with the earthy mushrooms. Everything appeared to have been made in-house with fresh ingredients and cooked by food preparers who know the importance of clean, properly heated oil for deep-frying.

On the phone, I asked Mrs. Hu about the seasoned-oil dipping sauce served with the mushrooms.

"You want to know about the sauce?" she said with a giggle, "I can't tell you. It's a secret recipe."

The entree choices span the wide selection found in most Chinese restaurants. But the Tea Garden's offerings also span a number of Chinese styles; Hunan, Mandarin, Pekinese and Szechuan among others. And, although it's not noted on the menu, many are Mr. Hu's creations. If the five entrees we sampled serve as an example, they apply the same delicate touch to entree preparation as with the appetizers.

The Purple Moon (\$9.50) proved the most unique. According to Mrs. Hu, they brown the eggplant, and stuff it with shrimp, scallops and vegetables before deep-frying it. The eggplant pieces look like purple moons and taste delicious in the brown sesame sauce combined with the added pungency of oyster sauce.

Mrs. Hu told me the Mr. Hu also created the Mandarin Duck (\$10.50) as a boneless alternative to the classic Tea Smoked Duck. They roast the duck after marinated it in an

aromatic, sweet marinade and then serve it under a tangy brown sauce with pea pods and bamboo shoots. The tender meat shredded easily when I poked at it with my fork. The sauce had enough potency to nicely flavor the steamed white rice. Fried rice can be an option.

Crispy baby corns, water chestnuts, mushrooms and carrots added crunch to the ample portion of plump shrimp in the Shrimp with Lobster Sauce (\$8.95). The rich, garlicky sauce accentuated the light-flavored shrimp and the vegetables.

The Tea Garden also serves Mongolian-style dishes called

"Hot Platters." The selections include a black pepper beef dish; a combination of beef, shrimp and chicken and

another of flank steak and scallops.

I tried the Duet of Scallops and Beef (\$10.50). The grilled meat and scallops came in a brown Szechuan sauce, described as spicy on the menu. After a taste, Emily said, that the sauce wasn't "hot hot" — as in being overly spicy — but the hint of spices pleasantly enhanced the tender beef and rich scallops to an accompaniment of vegetables.

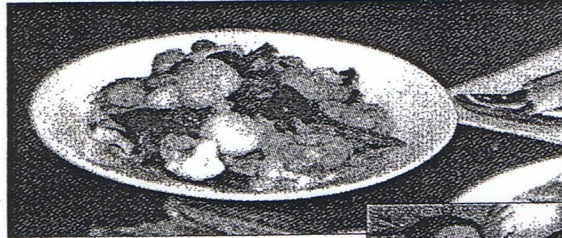
Fish with Mala Sauce (\$10.95), described on the menu as a classic Hunan-style dish, had some heat. The fiery bite in the light sweet sauce heightened the deep-fried fish file and the accompanying al dente vegetables.

The servers come from the ranks of college students at the Hu's church. They're earnest and efficient. Both times I was there, the appetizers arrived just about the time I started wondering how long they were going to take.

There can be communication problems. On one visit, I tried to ask a server which of two dishes she recommended. She served us both of them. Not one to shy away from leftovers, I tasted both and enjoyed the remains several days afterwards.

As for extras, the Tea Garden doesn't serve alcohol or desserts.

When it was suggested I review the Tea Garden, I had to wonder if the drive from Midtown to the edge of Olathe would be worth it. After tasting the Hu's thoughtfully conceived, well-prepared dishes, very tasty dishes, I can say the I-35 jaunt was worth it. This is a special restaurant despite its strip mall location.



Shrimp with Lobster Sauce (above). Ann Hu (r) with staff.

photos by Justin McBee



Tea Garden Restaurant

12755-B4 Murlen Rd.,
Olathe, KS
913-397-0057

Lunch: Mon-Sat., 11 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.
Dinner: Mon-Thur., 5 p.m.-9 p.m.; Fri., 5 p.m.-10 p.m.
Sat., 2:30 p.m. - 10 p.m.

Ratings: (out of four stars)

FOOD ★★★★★

SERVICE ★★★

ATMOSPHERE ★★★

PRICE \$-\$\$

KEY: \$-under \$10 • \$\$-\$10 to \$20 • \$\$\$-over \$20