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A Place To Ray

Lost Los Gatos mainstay reopens in Willow Glen

By Cheryl Sternman Rule

THE economy is tanking and people are losing their jobs, so I shouldn't be shocked that a Los Gatos restaurant open for more than four decades unceremoniously lost its lease and was forced to close. Well, Los Gatos' loss is San Jose's gain. Edna Ray Chinese Restaurant shuttered its doors last July, only to reopen them elsewhere six months later. It's now located in the former Emperor's Garden space on Lincoln Avenue in Willow Glen.

The menu covers mainstays of Szechuan cooking, with various Hunan influences thrown in, so you'll find Szechuan peppercorns sprinkled liberally throughout the dishes. But don't reach for your water glass just yet. While Szechuan food is known for its fiery heat, the spicing at Edna Ray is remarkably conservative and has clearly evolved to meet the needs of less tolerant American palates. Even if you order dishes marked with asterisks (denoting "hot and spicy"), you'd be wise to speak up, loudly, if you truly want to feel the burn. This is Chinese-American food, to be sure.

Tasteful décor includes colorful pendants and tall, fresh orchids on the tables. Glass flowers twinkle across the front windows, and along the back wall hangs a dramatic painted screen. It's a replica of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, a famous 12th-century painting by Chinese artist Zhang Zeduan. Assistant manager Anthony Suen, whose parents Suen and Fong Kwong own the restaurant, calls it the "Chinese *Mona Lisa*."

Regulars from the original Edna Ray's in Los Gatos will immediately notice how much smaller the new space is. Anthony Suen says it's about half the size. Tables are small, too. In fact, sitting at a four-top against the wall posed something of a challenge as our food started to arrive. There simply wasn't room for all the serving plates, flowers, condiments and glasses.

But the food is good. For a large segment of the Western population, Chinese-American food is about quantity, familiarity and reasonable prices. You'll find all three here, and then some.

For \$12.95 per person you can get the "special dinner," which includes soup, a plump egg roll, a giant fried prawn and a choice from 11 entrees. (Five dollars more gets you a seafood and bean curd soup and more appetizers, plus higher-end mains.) I went the special dinner route, and it started out well. The wonton soup's gentle, ginger-infused broth cradled two soft, delicate pork dumplings, and with nothing else but a smattering of scallions the soup's clean flavors shined through. The hot and sour soup at a subsequent meal moved me less, but that probably says more about my longstanding preference for wonton soup than anything else.

A tangerine beef entree sported the asterisk mentioned earlier, and not requesting it spicy was a mistake. The sauce, which brews for several weeks, combines tangerine juice, honey, vinegar and, according to Suen, "several secret ingredients." And it's sweet. Really sweet. The tangle of overly sauced fried beef strips had me searching for lighter, more subtle fare.

I found it in sautéed minced shrimp in lettuce cups (\$12.95). Four huge, crisp lettuce leaves accompany a platter of stir-fried shrimp, mushrooms, bell peppers and crispy rice sticks. A server scoops the mixture into the lettuce, and the diner essentially eats it like a taco. It's another very moist dish, but it's also refreshing. Here the plum sauce's sweetness complements rather than overpowers the other ingredients.

Vegetables shine at Edna Ray. The vegetable delight (\$7.55), a simple platter of bright, al dente broccoli, carrots, baby corn, mushrooms and snow peas was beautifully stir-fried. On another visit, a friend's lunch of asparagus with soft tofu was similarly understated, to its credit. It certainly wouldn't have hurt to throw in some spices, but for a straightforward vegetarian lunch it fulfilled its mission nicely.

Recession (sorry, "near-recession")-friendly lunch specials on weekdays all come with a small chicken and lettuce salad in a bright, vinegary dressing, the soup of the day, rice, tea, fortune cookies and a wide choice of entrees for \$6.45-\$7.85. Service



Photograph by Felipe Buitrago

General Interest: Edna Ray's take on General Tso's chicken.

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at lunch was less mellow than at dinner.

Let's be clear about one thing: Edna Ray was not filled with (any) Chinese customers on either of my visits. But for those seeking familiar dishes prepared in the Chinese-American style, a pretty setting and a reasonable price point, it's worth supporting a business that has been around for 45 years.

Edna Ray Chinese Cuisine

Address: 1181 Lincoln Ave., San Jose

Phone: 408.280.7738

Hours: Lunch 11am-3pm daily, dinner 5-9:30pm Sun-Thu (until 10pm Fri-Sat)

Cuisine: Chinese

Price Range: Lunch specials \$6.45-\$7.85, dinner \$7.85-\$17.95

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