

First Taste: Modern China Café

Walnut Creek's North Main Street welcomes a fresh perspective on Chinese food.

BY KATIE CORNELL



The brainchild of Eric Zhang, former co-owner of Zheng Long, and John Proctor, Modern China Café is all about options.

On the drizzly Tuesday evening that a friend and I stopped in, the blue-lit bar was open for an all-you-can-eat dim sum menu, created by Chef Wong from Koi Garden in Dublin, for ten dollars. We opted for a table nestled in the back underneath a lounging Buddha carved in stone. The interior—with freshly painted walls and amber lighting—is sleeker than the overstuffed booths and plastic chopsticks motif that we're used to, begging the question: what defines modern Chinese cuisine?

For starters, it's the shrimp and avocado roll: Crisp jicama and cucumber blanketed between fresh shrimp and diced red onions, all tightly wrapped into a rice-paper roll. You can move on to a staple like won ton soup or be more adventurous with the egg-custard tart served off the regular dim sum menu (which is still less than four dollars per dish).

For main courses, the menu is broken down into four categories: land, water, grain, and greens. The generously portioned spicy, crispy chicken entrée—smaller pieces polished in a ginger, basil, and onion sauce—is served with a colorful papaya salad, a plate that you could easily share, or eat alone, for \$9. The piping hot tofu clay pot is lightly crisped tofu, mixed with lemongrass, slices of onion, and fresh shitake mushrooms, in a feisty, caramelized thai chili sauce. Next time, if you don't find us at the bar devouring dim sum, we'll be sampling from the water menu—specifically, the tea-smoked Chilean sea bass.

What you'll see: Upon entering the antique, white building on North Main—which is formerly the space of the San Franciscan—you'll notice attention to detail: a table designed for larger parties is surrounded by windows to keep noise levels low, solid white-oak tables, art, marble, and white light fixtures brought in from China, and even linen-lined trash receptacles in the restrooms.

Who You'll See: Casual Walnut Creek locals in larger groups seated next to dressier couples on a Friday night date.

Daily Deals: From 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, try the prix fixe menu at \$8.50; Tuesday nights feature half-price sake, as well as unlimited dim sum at the bar for \$10; \$2-per-dish dim sum all-day on Sunday.

Modern China Café, 1525 N. Main St., Walnut Creek, (925) 988-8008, modernchinacafe.com