

Entertainment Magazine -
Fine Dining Review of
Nine Dragons Restaurant
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Upon arrival, the familiar scent of scallion and sesame oil wrestle for position within the noses of eager patrons. The mood is set by traditional Chinese decor featuring dark mahogany, creamy jade, elaborate tapestries and intricately patterned carpets. Families pack the bustling dining room, happily relating tales of the day's adventures. The location may not be where one would expect to find it. This is not Shanghai, Beijing, Xian, or even one of the many famed Chinatowns within the United States. We are in Central Florida. Orlando, to be exact, at The Nine Dragons Chinese Restaurant within Disney's Epcot theme park.

Stephen Fan, proprietor and Director of Operations emigrated from Shanghai in 1982. One year later, Mister Fan became a part of the Disney family, choosing to work alongside his uncle, the former owner of the Nine Dragons Restaurant. Much of this lineage to Shanghai, and China in general is evident within the restaurant's menu. Mister Fan felt it was important to create a menu including traditional Shanghai cuisine, while managing to still cater to modern American tastes. The job of any good restaurateur is to anticipate what the patron would like, and this establishment clearly does.

Now that the history and decor of the establishment have been set, we can move onto the food. Seeing as I'm from New York, have been to China, and have been fortunate enough to experience many Chinatowns scattered across the map, I certainly know what I'm looking for in a Chinese dinner. Nine Dragons offers the diner several different choices of menus and dining options, including a children's menu, a prix fixe menu option, a lunch menu, and a short dinner menu. I'm an advocate of a short menu seeing as it allows the chefs to perfect all of the items included. I was wholeheartedly pleased with my dining experience, and I would like to take you through it course by course.

Only a few moments after being seated and taking a few sips from my frosty Tsingtao beer, the tasty dishes began to arrive. A refreshing cucumber salad was brought out to be shared amongst the eager chopstick wielding group. It was sweet and crunchy with a hint of chili, and an essence of sesame to get the taste buds going. Before the last bit of salad could be scooped from its ornate dish, an elaborate array of items were whisked out of the busy kitchen and onto our table. Crisp spring rolls, hot from the fryer, containing a pleasant and unique surprise. Pieces of white fish paired with the usual veggies that we would expect. Then came steamed buns containing hulking chunks of chicken or pork. The buns, perfectly chewy and soft, were filled with satisfying pieces of meat so large that they hung off of the sides, accompanied by paper thin strips of red onion to add the much needed crunch and acidic element to the dish. I had requested a family style sized bowl of their hot and sour soup. In my opinion, the true test of any great Chinese kitchen. The soup was a thick, dark brown broth, both pungent and aromatic, containing a variety of mushrooms, bamboo shoots, tofu and sliced pork. Crunchy and soft items were placed alongside of each other in a deliberate act of culinary balance. It's a spicy dish, but not to a fault. The sweet ingredients are allowed to play out their roles instead of being drowned out by overpowering heat, as they too often are.

It was now time for the main courses. The entree segment of this meal was not to be overshadowed by an ambitious and delicious beginning, as we see all too often in the world of sit down cuisine. Our waiter assured that ordering was not necessary, as he would bring out his favorite items from the menu. I trusted this man that I had only just met, and this was a decision that I can stand by. Huge chunks of soft braised pork belly (the waiter's hometown favorite) were

served with crunchy broccoli, which was a success. A large dish of perfectly pan-seared shrimp and tender marinated steak served with a peppercorn sauce, which was superb. I was skeptical of this item, but my skepticism was soon thwarted by a peppercorn sauce with no equal. It was robust, smoky, and satisfying. The greatest of the entrees was an expertly prepared, lightly fried whitefish with an aromatic five-spice sauce. It was delightfully light, especially for a fried item, but surprisingly satisfying for a fish dish. Perhaps it was the numerous and diverse items that I had already indulged in to this point, but I was reaching the end. Before I move on to the dessert items and closing statements, I would like to touch on an often overlooked side dish. The ubiquitous noodle. These were no noodles out of a box or bag. These were hand stretched, deep green, spinach noodles made personally in small batches for the Nine Dragons restaurant. Shaped similarly to linguini or fettuccine, they're drizzled with some sesame oil and bits of garlic, and to put it bluntly, that's all that is needed. I was told that the noodle artist hails from Xian, China, and had set off to return home the day before I had visited the restaurant. I may have eaten the last batch of hand stretched noodles to pass through the Nine Dragons' kitchen, at least for a month!

At this juncture, I was full, but my waiter offered up an adage about how no meal could be complete without dessert. I may have hallucinated this, due to how much delicious food I had eaten, but regardless, a plate of sweet items soon hit the table. A dessert spring roll of sorts caught my eye. Allow me to state that I am by no means a sweets person. I'll take dark chocolate and coffee ice cream any day. The spring roll was sweet, but importantly not too sweet. A hot and crunchy shell housed bits of ripe banana and I happily indulged. The icing on the proverbial cake was, however, the ice cream that accompanied the dish. This was a unique ice cream made from white ginger with bits of actual ginger throughout. A new item for me, the man who claims to have tried it all. I sat down with feelings of happiness and left with the same. A meal expertly prepared on all accounts.

If you're planning on going to Epcot, or to Disney in general, do yourself a service and stop in to try this gem of a restaurant. Authenticity meets familiarity in a most excellent and exciting way. Owner Stephen Fan, manager Alfred Jia Bao Yu, and the entertaining wait staff including Mr. Jun all strive for success in making the Nine Dragons Restaurant an excellent choice for Chinese cuisine in the Orlando area. An overall symphony for the senses that includes delectable food items, authentic Chinese music, and last but not least, a spectacular nightly fireworks show visible from the restaurant that firmly puts an exclamation point on any evening. I thank you, the readers, and I look forward to describing my next culinary experience in the near future.

~SB

