

# New Garden Asian Cuisine

Star Chinese restaurant offers value, tasty dishes in Seaside Carousel Mall

Picture a carousel — the bobbing plastic horses, the twinkling lightbulbs and the incessant, revolving carnival soundtrack. There, what foods come to mind? Hot dogs? Elephant ears? Corn on the cob?

Try Mongolian beef.

Indeed, there's a charming and wholly worthwhile Chinese restaurant tucked in the back of Seaside's Carousel Mall. It's called New Garden, and it's damn-near an oasis in a deluge of fading ephemera.

Now, Chinese in the Carousel Mall isn't new. New Garden is at least the third regionally-inspired restaurant to rent the space. The family-operated restaurant opened last March, though you might've missed it — I sure did. Being at the back of a kitschy tourist mall will do that.

But the recommendations kept trickling in: "I know it sounds funky but you've got to try it." "It might be the best Chinese food on the coast." "The eggplant with garlic sauce is amazing!"

So, finally, with a whistle and some whimsy, I spun around on my heel and wandered in, gawking at the asinine T-shirt shops, the caricature artist, the odd stillness of this relative ghost town. New Garden is at the back of the mall, ensconced by 6-foot-tall dividing walls. With a shared, open ceiling, the restaurant is at once separate and part of the mall. The carousel soundtrack bleeds into the comfy, spacious, bright and clean dining room. There are loads of tables, booths, and a big stone fireplace I never saw running. Colorful tapestries hang from the ceiling. The kitchen too is half open — you can hear the sizzling woks and spy flaming bursts as they're tossed.

The menu, in Chinese and clipped English, is vast and opaque. With nothing more than titles and occasional photos, it lists over 120 dishes and 40 more lunch specials. While certainly Americanized in its offerings, New Garden could loosely be considered the descendant of Szechuan and Cantonese cooking: simple preparation reliant on sautéed proteins and vegetables, brought together with sauce.

My server, thankfully, was not shy about proffering her favorites, as well as making sure my needs were met. By assessing my proclivities — did I like spice? did I have any dietary restrictions? — she guided me toward the Mongolian Beef (\$12.95), which I had spiced "medium," two on a four-alarm scale. The plate appeared in no time at all. Even without the side of rice, it was huge. Tossed in an oily, red pepper sauce, the beef rested on a bed of rice noodles with onions, scallions and the occasional hot pepper. The heat eventually got my nose running, but in no way overtook the flavor — if I wasn't paying proper attention I might not have noticed at all. The onions were ideal, caramelized and still crisp. The strips of beef were plentiful and gristle-free. The thin rice noodles

added a light, airy, contrasting crunch. Even while ignoring the rice almost completely, there would be leftovers worthy of another lunch.

I was less enamored with the of Cumin Chicken (\$10.95), which was also recommended. Certainly, though, it lived up to the name. Blunt and musky, it might as well be called the CUMIN Chicken. The ancient spice provided back-of-the-throat heat and coated the accompanying carrots, onions, jalapeños and bell peppers. The essence to me was almost pan-ethnic, as much Indian and Mexican as Chinese. Regardless of origin, unless you buy your cumin by the pound I'd suggest something else.

Well, not just anything else: the Eggplant w/ Hot Garlic Sauce (\$9.95) was indeed absolutely marvelous. As I ordered it, my server inquired about my heat tolerance, as the Hot Garlic Sauce is measured on its own scale: A "medium" Hot Garlic Sauce equates to "hot" in any of the others. I saddled up and had no regrets. This particular day was awfully cold, gnarly, wet and wind-swept, and the Hot Garlic Sauce had me taking off my cap. To be sure: It wasn't meaningless, carnival, feat-of-strength type stuff; just robustly hot. While just a tad sweet, the slick sauce was also terrifically garlicky. And in this case — un-



The Eggplant w/ Hot Garlic Sauce is hot, sweet and a delightful dish for vegetarians and carnivores alike.

like the cumin — I celebrated the intensity. Before the plate was even set down before me I smelled the pungent plumes of garlicky steam rising, and my mouth began to water.

The eggplant aroused further senses: It was one of the most attractively colorful dishes I've seen lately. The skin of the eggplant was a purple gradient, deeply darkened on the edges, brightening towards the center. The flesh was tan, burnt yellow, off-orange. It was dotted with green peas and chives, red peppers, black beans and the seeds from hot peppers. Splattered chaotically but evenly in the rectangular frame, it resembled something like a Pollack painting. The eggplant was divine, buttery and so so soft. A delight for vegetarians and carnivores alike, I melted along



The daily special of General Tso's Chicken with rice for \$5 is an excellent value.

with it.

I ordered it as part of the "Weeknights and Weekend Special," which includes two pot stickers, a spring egg roll and choice of soup along with the rice for no additional cost (total: \$9.95). The fried rice was rather bland, light on accoutrements, but added a little firmness and texture to the soft veggies. The pot stickers were perfectly fried, crispy, flaky and yet still soft. The innards were meaty, with a hint of ginger. The spring roll had a similarly exquisite shell, but prioritized rice noodles above veggies inside, and thus became all starch. I went the Hot and Sour soup route, which included the basics of the Egg Flower with some sweet spicy kick, tofu cubes, and pork stock. All in all, quite a deal for 10 bucks.

And yet, New Garden topped that one with the daily special: General Tso's Chicken with rice for only \$5. While a bit sweet and bread-heavy for my taste, it's a stellar value. Bento Boxes, basically four-item samplers, are another way to try multiple items.

As such, New Garden will pique my radar from when I'm lunching in Seaside. And while the restaurant has yet to turn me on to any new aspects of Chinese cooking, New Garden's uncluttered, durable preparation, generous portions and low prices have given me reason to spend time in a carousel mall. And that's no small feat.

## mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

Story and photos by THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA • [mouth@coastweekend.com](mailto:mouth@coastweekend.com)

### New Garden Asian Cuisine

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ☆

300 Broadway St., Suite 21, Seaside

(Inside the Carousel Mall)

503-738-9639

HOURS: Winter – 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily / Summer – 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily.

PRICE: \$ – Most entrées are around \$10; there are numerous deals to be had

SERVICE: Cheerful, really quick, dine-in or take-out.

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: One of the better alternatives in the area

DRINKS: Beer, wine, bottled soda and juice.

#### KEY TO RATINGS

- ★ poor
- ★★ below average
- ★★★ good & worth returning
- ★★★★ excellent
- ★★★★★ outstanding, the best in the Columbia-Pacific region