

WEST LAKE CHINESE

Food is an afterthought at this Seaside restaurant

Growing up in the 1980s, my mom would take my sister and I to Chinese every so often. These long buried memories were dusted-off as I ate at West Lake Chinese Restaurant & Lounge, not because the Seaside restaurant awoke some warm nostalgia — rather it was more like a time warp, where nothing had changed in 30 years.

West Lake's booths are covered in red vinyl, the carpets dark and matted, the tables worn with a seemingly permanent stickiness. The walls and ceilings are dotted with a modicum of dusty, lifeless Chinese art. The only thing missing was the fish tank. I had hoped that behind West Lake's aging exterior was a hole-in-the-wall offering a few hidden gems. What I found, unfortunately, matched the dilapidated wrapper.

I struggled on what to order. A server told me she didn't like the fried foods as much, and I should've heeded her call. I didn't open the drink menu, as it was visibly filthy, covered in sticky smudges.

I began with the Appetizer Plate (\$8.95), a sampler that included fried shrimp, barbecue pork, an egg roll and fried wontons. Just a glance at all that deep-fried breading spiked my blood pressure. The wontons were the worst offenders. With almost no discernible filling, they were just big, crispy nothings. Do not order the fried wontons. The fried shrimp weren't much better, with thick breading overwhelming the small, dry, tasteless meat inside. The egg roll was large and too peppery. The pink-ringed, sweet-and-sour slices of barbecue pork were the only food on the plate worth eating, though their distinction was mostly a slight of hand, elevated by the meager company they kept. The pork slices were lukewarm, barely re-heated. I wondered, rather than being cooked from scratch in the West Lake kitchen, if they'd come pre-made from a purveyor. They were just so darn uniform — and dull.

I stumbled again into the entrée, Combination No. 6 (\$9.95), which included more of the barbecue pork. The Almond Fried Chicken had an even more lopsided breading-to-meat ratio, maybe five-to-one. With all that oily, deep-fried batter, the "special gravy" upped the fat content and added salt. After being fried, the bread balls were sprinkled with a dust of crushed almonds.

The Pork Fried Rice offered scant seasoning and was stingy with the vegetables, much less any chunks of pork. The Beef with Vegetables came with water chestnuts, carrot, celery, mushrooms, broccoli, onions and snap peas in a thin, salty sauce. None were fresh. The beef, which there wasn't a whole lot of, was thin and spongy, almost soupy.

Midway through my meal, a group of near a dozen appeared, most of them grade-school-aged children. They were brought to an adjacent banquet room, complete with ping pong table. They played as I picked at my plates, dunking things in the sinus-clearing spicy mustard and camouflaging bites with sweet and sour sauce. I found myself lamenting many things: all the food I'd ordered that wasn't going to be eaten, that I'd be coming back for more, and the pithy review I'd likely have to deliver.

On another trip I tried the Curry Beef (\$9.95) and was relieved to have a plate free of deep-frying and barbecue pork. The sauce was thin, cumin heavy, and lacking the coconut milk of its Indian counterpart. The beef was again spongy, accompanied by a few green bell peppers, carrots and too many onions.

The Szechwan Chicken (\$9.50) was similar, in that the sauce was minimalist, lacking any complexity or pep, and stacked high with onions. The non-fried entrée dishes at West Lake were melding together in my mind. Indeed, they were



The Appetizer Plate included fried shrimp, barbecue pork, an egg roll and fried wontons.

Combination No. 6 includes deep-fried Almond Chicken and Vegetable Beef.

so similar — just swap a forgettable sauce and exchange a vegetable or two and there you have it. Nowhere was balance sought or technique employed, be it Chinese or otherwise.

I spent one visit in the back lounge, which has a pastoral view of the creek. A nutria swimming and chasing off the ducks drew spectators to the large windows. Otherwise, though, their gazes were fixed on the video slots. I appreciated the long-time bartender's brassy charm. Around her and the slots a community gathered on a Friday evening. At one point as many as 15 were carousing, giving hugs, catching up, gossiping and hoping to hit the jackpot. None of them, however, were eating.

I had the House Chow Don (\$11), one of the



simplest-yet-convoluted concoctions I've had as the Mouth, maybe ever. It was like a leftover scramble cobbled together by a hungover frat boy, dumping together the dregs from last night's take-out boxes. Nothing about the Chow Don was the least bit Chinese, except maybe that dull, ever-present, sweet-and-sour barbecue pork. Lumped together in the pile was more spongy beef, shrimp, the barbecue pork, and the existential figure eight of chicken and eggs, all scrambled, lukewarm and teeming with onions. There were a few peas and two different sizes of carrots — shreds and cubes — suggesting multiple bags of frozen vegetables.

As much as any dish I had at West Lake, the Chow Don was utterly discombobulated. It had no reason for being. Really, none of this food did — it wasn't cheap, healthy, delicious or even culturally representational.

Over the last 20 years, West Lake has passed through a few different owners, though very little has changed. That the restaurant remains in business at all, I imagine, is because of the bar and the slots. The kitchen is little more than an afterthought. The food there was not only frozen in time, but freezer-burnt. Even the fortune cookie was stale.

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

Story and photos by THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA • mouth@coastweekend.com

West Lake Chinese Restaurant & Lounge

Rating: ★

1480 S. Roosevelt Drive, Seaside

503-738-3406

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday to Thursday, and 11 a.m. to midnight Friday and Saturday.

PRICE: \$ — Entrees hover around \$10 but should be less

SERVICE: Local friendly, particularly in the lounge

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: Just like the carnivores, vegetarians should look elsewhere

DRINKS: Full bar, coffee, tea, soda

KEY TO RATINGS

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