

STORY BY JENNIFER STREISAND
PHOTOS BY TOM BAUGUES

think authentic



Popular Great Wall
buffet showcases
regional Chinese dishes

Congee, a popular breakfast item in China



If you would like to try eating something that is authentically different, then Saturday is the day to visit the Great Wall buffet at the Chinese restaurant in Lafayette. Once a week on Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., authentic Chinese food is served at the buffet, most of which is quite different from the Chinese food many Americans are accustomed to eating.

Owner and head chef “James” Zhong Chen has added menu items and takes great pride in what he serves at the buffet, which is held during the week as well. The difference is that on Saturdays, the food at the buffet is cooked the way it is cooked in regions of China. Chen bought the Great Wall in 2008; he moved to Greater Lafayette from Maine.

“The problem is that for many Chinese people who live here, it is hard to cook in a small kitchen, and that is why I want to make home-cooked food for them to enjoy, just as they would if they were living in China,” he says.

On a Saturday at noon, the restaurant is packed and noisy. The Saturday buffet is a place to get authentic Chinese food, but it’s also a place to catch up with friends and perhaps make new friends. On a Saturday, a parking spot is hard to come by at the restaurant, students congregate in the lot, and bicycles can be seen parked neatly on the side.

“To our happy surprise, a lot of American customers are really interested in trying the authentic Chinese cuisine, also,” Chen notes. “And we have more and more ethnic people coming here from all different parts of the world, and they all enjoy this.”

Some of the consistent dishes on the menu on Saturdays include pig’s feet, known by the Chinese name of Zhujiao, particularly in the south part of China. In the north part of China, the pig’s feet are known by the name Zhuti. The difference is in how the dish is prepared, Chen says.

“If you had to find a difference, in the north they tend to cook it a little longer than in the south so that the texture is a little softer in the north, but the way we prepare pig’s feet is common in both regions,” he adds.

Other dishes at the Great Wall include the cold dish of spicy pig’s ear salad (Hongyouersi), and a specific kind of Congee (Pidanshourouzhou).

“Congee is a must-have item for breakfast for people who live in the south part of China,” explains Chen. The congee has a paste-like consistency, and many different ingredients give it the flavor such as minced lean pork, preserved eggs, minced Chinese celery, minced onions, a little Chinese cooking wine, sesame oil, ginger, green vegetables and Chen’s special hot chili oil.

Chinese cooking wine is different from the wine for drinking that many Americans are used to, he says.

Owner and head chef "James" Zhong Chen

"It's made of rice instead of fruit, and it has a special fragrance that would bring out the natural taste of meat."

Crawfish, clams with black bean paste, and ginger and scallion crabs are some of the other dishes that are available at the Saturday buffet.

"It reminds me of my mother's cooking," says Tina Li, who eats at the Saturday buffet regularly. Li served as translator for the *Lafayette Magazine* interviews at the Great Wall. She is a graduate student at Purdue University. Chelsea Weng and Tsungchi Chen, who are from Taiwan originally, come to the buffet with their daughter, Olivia. They like the authentic Chinese crawfish.

Jun Yu chatted with his group of friends with full plates from the buffet. He says the food is authentically Asian, but almost as important is the social aspect because the Saturday buffet serves as a gathering place.

"We like almost everything at the buffet," he says. Yu, who is from China, says he enjoys the restaurant too because it gives him a fast meal and it's a break from cooking.

"There are a lot of Chinese

students here," notes Chen, "but our cuisine is not only enjoyed by the Chinese community but by all of the Asian communities."

Specially prepared soy milk with a distinctively sweet taste is offered at the buffet and is loved by the customers, says Li.

Since taking over ownership of the restaurant three years ago, Chen has not taken a vacation; he also is the main chef, with four employees in the kitchen.

"I enjoy cooking, and I enjoy that people can taste the flavor of home," says Chen. He rarely cooks at home, spending his time at the restaurant.

If you prefer standard American Chinese food, the buffet of familiar Chinese dishes is always available at the Great Wall every day except for Saturdays between 11 a.m. and 3:30 p.m., and the authentic Chinese cuisine is always available on the menu for customers who want to sample authentic dishes.

"I want our customers to know that we are pursuing quality of food, not just quantity," says Chen. "What we try to do here is not cook an overabundance of dishes, but each type of food that we put on the buffet, we want it to taste the best." ❖



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A
Chinese
recipe
to try
at home



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Here is a Chinese recipe that anyone can make in their own kitchen, with ingredients that can be found easily in the Greater Lafayette area. This recipe comes from “James” Zhong Chen, owner of the Great Wall Restaurant in Lafayette.

Spicy Tofu with Pork

- 1 box of tofu
- Cubed carrots with green peas (you can use frozen)
- About 1/4 cup of minced pork, beef or chicken
- Vegetable oil
- Soy sauce
- Chicken broth (can use powder from bouillon cubes)
- Minced Chinese onion
- Minced garlic
- Spicy bean paste*
- Pinch of sugar

Heat vegetable oil in a wok and add the minced pork; cook until almost done. When you cook the pork, place 1/2 Tablespoon of the spicy bean paste into the wok to mix it with the pork as it cooks. Also place the minced garlic into the wok with the pork and spicy bean paste.

Cut the tofu into cubes of about an inch. Cook the tofu about 1 1/2 minutes in boiling water, and then remove it from the water. Set the tofu aside.

Put chicken broth into the wok, along with soy sauce and a little sugar. Add the tofu to the wok. Let everything come to a boil. When it is thick and paste-like, put the peas and carrots in the wok, and then quickly stir it – carefully, because tofu breaks easily.

Before taking the mixture out of the wok for serving, add a little minced Chinese onion on top of everything, or you can wait until the mixture is served on plates, and place the Chinese onion on top for a nice presentation.

*Spicy bean paste can be purchased at local Asian grocery stores, such as Asia Market, the Hana Market and the C&T Market.

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