



Many restaurants boast about the lengths they go to in pursuit of regional authenticity in their cuisine. But few would actually import two chefs from their native country in an effort to add an extra touch of accuracy to the usual fare on a traditional and well-trusted menu.

Chef Zhang is a specialist in the art of Shanghai wok cooking – which I am reliably informed is different to wok cooking in other areas of China – while chef Yu Zhi Li is hailed as a master of Shanghai and Cantonese dim sum (with no fewer than 22 years of experience in the subject). The idea of having a deep and meaningful conversation about the state of Chinese cooking wasn't without its complications, since all communication is carried out through interpreters – including instructions in the kitchen itself, where all conversation has to be translated between Chinese, English, Hindi and Arabic! Obviously explaining the menu might prove more complicated than usual to an unsuspecting customer ...

Customers at the Royal Orchid can be assured of a warm welcome, with graceful, helpful and efficient service. But it is clear that even the staff view the two Shanghai visitors with a slight sense of awe (often despite the language barrier).

As expected, the specially prepared menu is destined to be a surprise. But on arrival, the various starters of chicken wings in black pepper sauce, golden sesame prawn and a basket of assorted dim sum give a first impression of being ... well, an unexceptional selection for a Chinese eatery.

The difference comes in the taste. The prawns are not only huge (and almost worthy of a meal on their own) but are coated in a light, crispy batter that simply melts in the mouth. The dim sum, which includes a broccoli, chicken and steamed fish selection, is light yet surprisingly filling.

The main course selection consists of pan-fried pla (haddock in peanut sauce), stir-fried beef tenderloin in black pepper sauce, and chicken in Thai sweet chilli sauce. That was served with a totally delicious mix of steamed mushroom and broccoli in a light oyster sauce, vegetable fried rice, and a healthy helping of vegetable Hakka noodles.

The tenderloin is to die for. It's meltingly tender, a perfect cut of meat in a truly mouth-watering sauce. There is not a hint of chewiness here – thanks to adding the meat immediately to the wok instead of part-cooking it beforehand.

For this individual's taste, the haddock with peanut sauce is a little overpowering, with the fish coming second to the taste of the sauce. But hey, even a Shanghai gourmet guru can be allowed one questionable selection ...

To round off the meal I am treated to something of an old friend, a regular on the Royal Orchid menu – deep-fried ice cream. Yes, ice cream that has been deep-fried. It consists of a huge scoop of vanilla ice cream encased in a soft cake mix, deep-fried as advertised, and showered

with chocolate shavings. A real treat.

Our two chefs make a stately visit to the table to ensure my happiness and enthusiasm for their cooking – I think that's what they said, anyway! In return, I am assured that they are aware of my enjoyment and congratulations on cooking a splendid meal (even though their facial expressions remain quizzical).

The chefs have landed at the Royal Orchid for a two-week visit, during which time the regular menu of the restaurant is being placed on hold. During this period each day will have its own menu of new Chinese culinary delights. The good news for regular customers is that many of the dishes being specially created during this period could find their way on to the standard menu.

The Royal Orchid's 'back to basics' experiment seems to have worked here. If this is a 'cultural exchange' then I'm all for it!

What? The Royal Orchid

Where? The Hilton Abu Dhabi

How much? Average AED 150 plus drinks

Why? An excellent selection of well cooked Chinese cuisine complimented by attentive, graceful service

Why not? Not the place to go if you don't like long menus

Rated: 8/10

Contact: 02 681 1900

[Writer] Patrick Hill

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