



All too often Asian food is cheap, filling and a bit disappointing. But it doesn't have to be that way ... It's Asian food, Jim, but not as we know it. A thousand takeaways and noodle bars have led to some definite preconceptions: tasty but not especially distinct flavours, portion sizes between ample and enormous, food as fuel for the body rather than stimulation for the palate.

It doesn't have to be that way, of course, and at The Wok it isn't. The flavours really are distinct: you can taste the five-spice, the ginger, the Szechuan pepper. The sauces don't swamp the meat, and they don't come across as the same basic mix with an extra ingredient or two to justify their presence as a separate item on the menu. Even the noodles manage to be quite light and fresh, thanks in part to the flash-fried vegetables in there as a crunchy counterpoint.

Mind you, it didn't start so well. The Wok is on the ninth floor of the Crowne Plaza, which makes for reasonable views over Hamdan Street if you're sitting by the window. And that's the preferable option, for looking into the room is not a stimulating experience. It's a barn-like establishment, the kind of place that looks bigger and emptier than it is, and the bamboo-rattan wall coverings are only a token attempt by the interior designer to give the place some character. The utilitarian atmosphere isn't helped by the lighting, which manages to be both vicious and gloomy at the same time. How easy it would be to break up the floor space with booths or screens, to put in some low-level lighting, to give the place some atmosphere ...

The dishes hail from all along the left side of the Pacific – mostly Chinese in origin but with some Thai, Japanese and Indonesian in there. The shrimp crackers for instance came from Thailand and were the best we've ever tasted.

We kicked off with a sharing starter, the Far East Appetizer Plate: three examples of four dim-sum type finger foods. It was slightly overcooked (very crunchy) and the presentation could have been more exciting (no fancy trimmings at all) but the shrimp dumplings were pretty good

and the duck spring rolls very good.

But we waited for the mains with no great expectations. Big mistake: they were excellent.

Spicy and Sour Hammour lived up to the name – not too fiercely spicy, just enough to indicate that identifiable spices had been used with the battered chunks of fish in a tangy sauce that almost recalled sweet 'n' sour but was several degrees superior.

Even better was the Chinese Black Pepper Beef, tender strips of meat in another of those could-be-anything sauces that on the tongue turned out to be a real catalogue of identifiable flavours.

And the Wok Chilli Chicken did exactly what it claimed, but without blowing your head off: it had a nice warmth, but not so much that it masked all the spice tastes in there.

Our engaging waiter Roland had recommended egg fried rice (delicate and ungreasy) and a plate of mixed noodles (also commendably light: see above).

Don't come for the sweets, though. They sound interesting – pineapple chilli sorbet, deep fried mango ice cream, wasabi sorbet – but the first of those was just a sorbet with some chilli powder sprinkled on it, and the deep fried batter for the mango ice cream was both unnecessary and slightly disagreeable. But who goes to China for dessert?

For the main part, though, this is Asian cuisine as it should be, making the most of fast cooking, good fresh ingredients, and intelligent use of spices. Come hungry.

What? The Wok

Where? Crowne Plaza, Hamdan Street

How much? AED175 per person, sharing one starter and three mains, excluding drinks

Why? Excellent fast-food cooking, good flavours

Why not? Lack of atmosphere, disappointing desserts

Rated:

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[Originally published in Abu Dhabi Week vol 2 issue 14]