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First Bite

Chinois Asian Bistro

By Suzanne Daly

Editor's note: First Bite is a new concept in restaurant writing. This is not a go-three-times, try-everything-on-the-menu report; rather, this is a quick snapshot of a single experience. We invite you to come along with our writers as they're informed, intelligent eaters like yourselves to have a simple meal at an area restaurant, just like you do.

The aroma of spices and garlic that wafts from Chinois Asian Bistro in downtown Windsor entices visitors through the door and down the Silk Road. The ancient and renowned trading route influenced the cuisine of Japan, Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, Cambodia, the Philippines and Southeast Asia, and is reflected in Chinois' large and varied menu.

After being seated at the black lacquered table, our hungry party of four started with the menu's small plates, ordering the Thai-influenced fried calamari with lemongrass and mint-citrus dip (\$8), lemongrass crab cakes with seven-spice aioli (\$7) and our favorite, crunchy Japanese panko prawns with wasabi-honey mayo (\$12). Fresh shredded beets served as the garnish for each dish.

From China, we selected dim sum, a snack originally served in the roadside teahouses for travelers. The daybreak radish cakes (\$5) are made from daikon that has been boiled, mashed and formed into squares that are then fried. The nicely crisped outside hid the bland white interior that slightly tasted of horseradish. The sweet soy dipping sauce served with it was flavorful, and we liked it so much we ended up ordering it two more times, since it was repeatedly whisked away after the small plates were emptied.

The dim sum sampler (\$14) features two shrimp and leek dumplings, three pork *shu mai* and two barbecued pork buns. The dumplings were bursting with fresh leeks and shrimp, and the soft but slightly chewy steamed pork buns were generously stuffed with shredded meat. *Shu mai*, small dumplings with a flavorful ground pork filling, were another table pleaser, and it was difficult to share two among all of us.

From the large plates, we went back to China for the flank steak with organic snow peas (\$16), and to Taiwan for the short rib egg noodle soup in Chinese five-spice broth (\$17). The slow-braised meat and soft noodles complemented each other well, and the broth was highly spicy, even for those of us who like to break a gastronomic sweat. We moved on to Hong Kong with barbecued pork char su with egg noodles (\$17), wok-fried and served with baby shiitake mushrooms. Both the pork slices and noodles were chewy, which the men loved but the women considered dry.

We ended our travels in Malaysia, with a huge bowl of Kuala Lumpur sambal mussels (\$16) tossed in a spicy ginger sauce. The coconut rice accompanying it never arrived, so we ate it with the jasmine rice that came with the other dishes. The owner gave us a container of the missing rice to take home, and it was sweet and delicious even a day later.

Chinois, just six months old, also serves dessert (we were too full), and hosts \$5 happy hour tapas and cocktails from 5pm to 6:30pm on weekdays. It's worth hitting the road for.

Chinois Asian Bistro, 186 Windsor River Road, Windsor. Open daily for dinner; lunch, Monday-Friday 707.838.4667.

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