

Restaurant Reviews: Old school Chinese food a happy find at House of Benny; Chinese-Islamic cooking at Omar Halal

By Merrill Shindler U-Entertainment

Posted:

PasadenaStarNews.com

It's hard not to smile when you say, "House of Benny." It's such a joyfully old school name, a name out of a culinary era long gone, and nearly forgotten. (And when you consider that Benny Ng, the "Benny" of House of Benny spent many years working at the nearby House of Louie, you have eras on top of eras.)

I grew up in a world of "House of" restaurants. The House of Wong was my neighborhood destination in The Bronx. When I moved to L.A., I often ate at the House of Lee in the Palisades. If a restaurant is called "House of" I feel secure that I'll eat well. And at House of Benny, I certainly did.

The San Gabriel Valley is home to the best Chinese food in America. The streets of Monterey Park, Alhambra, Rosemead, San Gabriel, Rowland Heights, Hacienda Heights and Arcadia are rich with the regional cuisines of China, styles of cooking rarely found beyond the borders of those particular regions. In a way, China has been replicated in the San Gabriel Valley - though the smog and traffic jams aren't quite as bad. And in the midst of all this regional authenticity, we still have room for a taste of the old ways - for restaurants that offer the sort of Chinese-American cooking so many of us grew up with. Which brings us to the House of Benny.

The House of Benny is a storefront on Shoppers Lane in Covina - a long, narrow room with booths along one wall and tables filling the rest, with minimum decor, which is fine, for all that matters is what's on the plates. Which is plenty.

If you have a hankering for a classic pupu platter, get the appetizer plate of fried shrimp, barbequed ribs, fried wontons, paper wrapped chicken and egg rolls - a plate of tastes that take me straight back to my youth, complete with plum sauce and hot mustard. There's a Chinese chicken salad made with iceberg lettuce, just as it has been for decades in neighborhood Chinese eateries. You want soup, they've got egg flower, just like in the old days. Chicken and corn soup, too, which always puzzles me, for corn is not often used in Chinese cooking. Wonton soup comes under a separate category with three options. I always go with the war wonton because, well, I always have. It's not so much a soup as it is a stew; a kitchen sink of dishes.

From there, the menu meanders from clams and oysters, to shrimp and scallops, from chicken and beef to pork and vegetables. But I had to go for the chop suey, of which there are six (including the redundantly named "vegetable chop suey.") Maximalist that I am, I went for the Chop Suey of the House - made with chicken, shrimp and barbecued pork. It was a happy, glorious mess of a dish, just as chop suey should be. There are six egg foo youngs as well, and nine chow meins (and thicker chow funs). There's a house special of orange chicken - too sweet as always. And bless 'em, there's moo goo gai pan: chicken, mushrooms, snow peas and carrots, just like back in the day. It brought tears to my eyes, and left me thirsty all night long.

Write to Merrill Shindler by email to mreats@aol.com.