

Authentic dim sum at Malden's Sun Kong restaurant

By **Kathy Shiels Tully** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 10, 2013

Sometimes a meal is so authentic it transports you to its country of origin, eliminating the need to step onto a plane. That's dim sum, especially on weekends, at Sun Kong in Malden.

The restaurant is on busy Eastern Avenue, a half-mile walk from the T's Malden Center Station on the Orange Line. If the bright yellow sign with red lettering doesn't catch your eye, the lines outside the door will. Sun Kong offers its dim sum menu every day until 3 p.m. On weekends, the wait can be as long as two hours, according to manager Jim Chen.



KATHY SHIELS TULLY FOR THE GLOBE

A pushcart is laden with dim sum offerings at Sun Kong in Malden.

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On a recent Saturday, we visited Sun Kong with a Chinese friend and her family, who seemed worried about getting a table for eight. How busy could it be at 11 a.m.?

Turns out, very.

Every table was filled, mostly with multigenerational Chinese families speaking Cantonese, and waves and waves of families, and groups of young friends, continued pouring into the two-room, 120-seat restaurant.

My family of four felt like we were crashing a Chinese family's celebration for the Lunar New Year, which happens to be Sunday. That should come as no surprise. Malden is one of the state's most diverse cities, and about 20 percent of its population is of Asian heritage.

So we knew dim sum would be good.

It started with the tea. "Yum cha" (drink tea) is the Cantonese phrase to describe brunch-like dim sum. "Every family orders their own pot," my friend Pauline said as she poured fragrant, sweetened chrysanthemum tea into small white cups for everyone. "Each table has their own blend."

We placed our faith, and appetites, into Pauline's hands. As pushcarts layered with plates and bamboo steamer baskets showcasing a multitude of choices circled the crowded room, Pauline and the waitresses spoke quickly to each other — pointing to the cart, to our table, back to the cart — while an enchanting atmosphere of clamor and commotion enveloped us.

Within minutes, our table was filled with small plates for us to sample, and "to delight the heart" (a loose translation of dim sum), including ham sui gok (stuffed meat dumplings, covered in a pastry made with sweet rice, then deep-fried); har gau (shiny, translucent shrimp dumplings); lo bak goh (cakes made from mashed daikon radish, mixed with bits of dried shrimp and pork sausage, steamed, then cut into slices and pan-fried); char siu bao (steamed buns stuffed with barbecued pork) char siu sou (pastry stuffed with barbecued pork); and cheung fan (wide rice noodles, steamed, then rolled, plain or filled with different types of meat or vegetables).

We also ordered a crisp shrimp that Pauline directed us to eat whole. “It’s young shrimp,” she said, “and I like to eat it to get all the spice.”

Every dish Pauline selected was a big hit, eaten quickly with chopsticks, forks, and fingers.

With each order, our waitress stamped a bill, like a Bingo card.

“Where’s the menu?” I asked.

“There is no menu,” Pauline said. (I did find one, however, when I went back later, with all of the dim sum options listed in English.)

“Well then, how would someone like me order?”

Ask your server for suggestions, she told us, “or explore! Say, ‘I want to eat with adventure!’ ”

And so, like any good travelers in a foreign country would, we did.

“Order us chicken feet and steamed beef tripe,” I told Pauline.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“You’re kidding, right?” my kids said. Her two teens just smiled.

Most of my family thought the tripe was like unfried calamari; my teen announced, “I don’t like the texture,” but added, “it’s not bad.”

As for the chicken feet (fung jeow), a true test of a dim sum restaurant’s authenticity, we chalked that up as part of our adventure. They’re mostly marinated skin and bones, with a little meat. They were OK, but seemed to be too much work.

Despite the quantity of plates, we were filled but not stuffed. With room for dessert, Pauline ordered light, sweet desserts: dou fu fa (silky tofu served with a sweet jasmine flavored syrup) and daan taat (flaky puff pastry-type dough with an egg custard). And throughout, pots and pots of tea.

The thing we learned about dim sum is that you can eat “with adventure,” and it won't cost much if you regret a choice. Each plate is coded by a number and noted by portion size, with prices ranging from \$2.85 for a small dish to \$6.25 for extra large. At the end of the meal, the server adds them all up to calculate the total.

The bill arrived. I braced myself. Then was stunned. Our dim sum brunch, for eight people with tip, cost \$80.

“All this for \$10 a person? Let's order more!” I said.

“Next time, more people,” Pauline said. “More people means more plates.”

Sun Kong

275 Eastern Ave., Malden

781-388-9900

Hours: Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 1 a.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 9 a.m. to 2 a.m.

Handicapped accessible

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