

eat & drink

Dry chill prawns



Feelin' it

WonFun brings mouth-tingling Sichuan cuisine and punk-rock feels to the West Loop

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

Sometimes when I dine out, a song pops into my head that perfectly describes the experience. In the case of WonFun—the new West Loop Sichuan Chinese spot from Bar Marta vets Austin Baker and executive chef Ben Ruiz—that song is “Last Nite” by The Strokes. The song is about a breakup, but that’s not to say that WonFun is a great place to drop your sweetheart. I generally get hooked by melodies and rarely listen to lyrics. Julian Casablancas growls like a mumbling drunk, and a jangly guitar riff inspires me to head to the nearest darkest bar, put White Stripes on the jukebox, do shots of whiskey and dance until I fall over. Which is funny because I don’t dance. But “Last Nite” is the kind of song that makes you feel like you’re in the right place no matter where you are, the kind of song that makes you want to do stuff you don’t usually do. Stuff you might have to explain to a lawyer the next day. WonFun inspires the same wanton abandon.

Punk-rock Chinese

It all starts with the restaurant’s vibe. Located in the old J.P. Graziano grocery warehouse, a beckoning red neon sign above the door reads “Chinese Food.” The doors you enter through were found inside the warehouse drywall during demolition and were repurposed for the entryway. Once inside, you can pop up the stairs to 2Fun, a karaoke and dim sum bar featuring a 60-foot paper dragon sculpture imported from China, or you can turn right and find yourself in WonFun, a palace filled with blood-red and black lacquer tones. There’s a half pagoda built over the kitchen, and 280 Chinese globe lanterns hang from the ceiling.

The dark worn wooden floorboards are the original Graziano warehouse floors. WonFun feels like a clandestine back-alley opium den or the kind of place where you might procure a Mogwai (“Gremlins” reference). The massive booths feel like private dining areas, and once in, you’ll see nary another patron. The speakers hum with garage rock.

Unlike Imperial Lamian, an Architectural Digest deconstruction of Chinese decor, and Duck Duck Goat, which feels like an Indiana Jones movie set, WonFun has an underground punk-rock feel. It’s the kind of place I imagine hungry shaggy-haired rockers from New York (the kind who inhabited CBGB back in the day) would love to hit up after a show. There’s a history of certain

Chinese restaurants being centers of celebrity and cultural movements in major cities, such as Mr Chow in Los Angeles and New York and Davé in Paris during Fashion Week. I don’t know that Chicago has such a place, but I can see WonFun filling the void.

REVIEW

WonFun

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★★★★★

Take it or leave it

Daquiris and Dakine

Reportedly, models and rockers don’t eat much, so let’s start with the booze. The beer list is solidly craft, featuring Four Hands Brewing Co. Dakine tropical IPA (\$7) as a standout option when I was there. The hazy golden beer wafts pineapple and orange notes that salve the burning chili-filled cuisine to

RATINGS KEY ***** DEAD UPON ARRIVAL ***** PROCEED WITH CAUTION ***** GIVE IT SOME TIME ***** TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT ***** OFF TO A GOOD START ***** HEATING UP ***** ALREADY HOT

come. On behalf of poor artists everywhere, I appreciate that Miller High Life, aka the Champagne of Beers and my favorite lager, clocks in at \$3 a bottle. I'm sort of mystified that Lucky Buddha, another cheap lager, goes for \$9 a bottle, so I asked Baker what's up. "I don't really want to sell it," he laughed. "But I have it because I really love the bottle design." (The bottle is shaped like a fat glassy green Buddha.) There's also a strawberry daiquiri (\$12) brimming with rum, pisco, lime and real strawberries. My friends made fun of me when I ordered it, but once they took a sip of the tangy, floral and sweet elixir, and their minds and palates were filled with visions of the Caribbean, they were jealous.

Spice of life

Chef Ruiz has long been a student of Chinese cuisine, having backpacked through China and returned later for a 10-day guided tour with Baker, where they tried up to 12 restaurants a day and took cooking classes.

"I've been obsessed with Chinese cuisine and the regional variations," Ruiz said. "It reminds me so much of homestyle Mexican cooking, and I fell in love with it and have always wanted to do this."

Ruiz is a good study. Dry chili prawns (\$13.99) are fried with their heads and shells on and coated in chilis that don't blow your palate, but instead, numb your lips and exude a tingly buzzy chili high. The shells crackle like potato chips, and the flesh is briny and sweet. "People aren't really familiar with this kind of burn," Ruiz said. "People sitting at the kitchen table have been saying, 'Am I having an allergic reaction, or what's happening to my mouth?' When I tell them about how the Sichuan peppercorns produce this numbing sensation called 'ma la,' they dig it and want more."

And if you want more, Chongqing fried chicken (\$16.99) will fit the bill with a shatteringly crispy crust spiked with sugar, chili heat and dried mushroom crystals (these provide a satisfying mouth-coating MSG-like effect without actual MSG). The interior flesh is juicy, and there's a fermented chili-infused aioli for dipping.

If spice isn't your thing, foie gras fried rice (\$24.99) is pretty tame. The rice is toothsome, and the distinct grains are punctuated by scallion and silky slivers of roast duck. I figured the thing would be spiked with tiny foie bits, but you get a generous 4 ounces of seared cubes that pop with luxurious buttery fat in every bite. Biang biang mien (\$17.99) isn't the title of a new James Bond flick, but instead boasts chewy soul-satisfying pappardelle-like noodles tossed with luscious cumin-dusted, Illinois-raised lamb shoulder, slivered Fresno chilies and rich lamb jus. The chilies make your nose run, but they're not so hot you're demanding a carafe of water to put out the burn. The menu's crowning achievement is Sichuan pork wontons (\$9.99),



2Fun



Strawberry daiquiri



Foie gras fried rice

pillowy dumplings that spurt with rich pork broth and fragrant house-seasoned soy sauce. Juices dribbled down my chin with each bite.

There are a few misses. The Mouthwatering Rabbit (\$11.99) needed more salt and acid and didn't produce any of its promised anticipatory drool. Garlic-sesame cucumbers (\$7.99) needed more of a vinegar punch to cool and cut through the fiery spices of other dishes. Ginger bok choy (\$9.99) was a little over-steamed and could also use a touch more salt.

There's only one dessert on offer (\$12),

shaved green tea ice rimmed with gummies, tapiocas and fresh strawberries served in a glass clamshell. The shaved ice looked unappetizing, like fuzzy shaved turkey, and the interplay of gummies and creamy ice tasted like a child's poor choices at Forever Yogurt. Complimentary fortune cookies follow with the bill. Mine suggested I will soon make a serious sum of money. If you play that game where you append a fortune with the phrase "in bed," I might be changing careers to pursue life as a gigolo.

Bottom line

WonFun is the punk-rock Chinese food lair you didn't know you needed. A night here will be filled with revelry, great beer, killer noodles, garage rock and a treasure chest of killer dumplings. Just do yourself a favor: Skip the dessert and drink a strawberry daiquiri instead.

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