



diningout

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The crabshao long bao — small steamed bun “purses” filled with shredded, briny crab and funky ground pork make for a delicious soup dumpling at Red Violet. (RICHARDA, CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES)

PURPLE HAZE

Red Violet loses way along road to Chinese cuisine

Red Violet, a new modern Chinese restaurant in Chicago's Hubbard Street corridor, is named after the idea that the Chinese believe universal harmony is achieved when red and blue are combined to create the color violet. Boy, is this place misnamed. That is to say the service and food at Red Violet is about as harmonious as a duet between Bob Dylan and the infamous 2004 “American Idol” winner, William Hung.

The interiors at Red Violet aren't too bad. Featuring crimson leather couches outfitted with silk throw pillows, shiny chop chairs, ornamental screens and bar tops, it's a slight modern update of a typical mid-twentieth century optum denshic chop-uee palace. Replace the

contemporary black pendant lights with paper lanterns, round the corners of the red couches, and replace the hacklit purple panels on the bar top with a little chrome trim and Red Violet could be a time machine back to the day War Su Gai (aka silvered bodiless chicken) was invented. This is ironic given that Red Violet's menu, created by Franky Fong, an acolyte of Chinatown impresario Tony Hu of Lao Szechuan, often strives less for Americanized Chinese standards and more for earnest authenticity.

Consider Red Violet's mapo tofu, a Sichuan standard rarely seen outside of a few spots in Chinatown. Featuring silky squares of bean curd cooked in a warm gravy whose fiery heat sneaks up the back

of your throat and makes your cheeks glow, Red Violet's is quite satisfying. However, this version lacks a proper dose of huanjiao (Sichuan pepper). Thus, you do not get the citrus punch and mouth-numbing “chili high” available in the version from Lao Szechuan. It also doesn't help that my server forgot to bring a requested set of extra bowls so our group can share. (By the time he returns with the bowls after our second request, the wonderful gravy has started to congeal.)

Thankfully, spiciness is not required of great soup dumpling, and the crabshao long bao at Red Violet — delicate steamed-bun purses that explode in your mouth with the teeming juices of funky pork and briny crab — are quite proper.

Beyond the two dishes mentioned above, most everything else at Red Violet ranges from middling to disastrous.

In the middling category falls General Tsao's chicken featuring crispy flat bits of meat in a cloying gloppy “teriyaki” sauce. General Tsao's chicken isn't particularly authentic (it was invented in New York City in the '70s — it should be noted, as was disco, and we know how that turned out), but by employing teriyaki, which is Japanese, Red Violet's is an odd, pan-Asian fusion gimmick. Even if the sauce were the nectar of the gods, at \$18 — almost twice the price of a good takeout version — I expect juicy hunks of organic, local farm chicken, not some compressed, unrecognizable commodity poultry.

It is possible they don't really use teriyaki, as teriyaki seems to be the default description of most brown sauces at Red Violet. When I ask my server what the unfamiliar term “toban-yak” is (as noted on the menu), he says, “It's like teriyaki.” Except, it's not. A little Googling during my post-meal indigestion however suggests that a “toban” is a ceramic plate and that a toban-yaki is the method of cooking food on such a plate.

But that's OK, because in my haste to avoid consuming more teriyaki, I chose to go with the wild mushroom fried rice with black truffle oil instead. It's a fairly large bowl, where fluffy mounds of grain waft puffs of earthy truffle perfume. Again, at \$16, with nary a shaving of real black truffle in sight, there is very little value to be had unless you are served a wheelbarrow of the stuff.

This kind of empty gambit of luxury-larding continues throughout the meal. Foie gras wonton soup at 10 bucks a bowl tastes like every wonton soup I've ever had. Honey-black pepper filet mignon, which tastes neither of honey nor of black pepper, does come with a neat short stack of black truffle, but the truffle which usually is shaved for a reason, is thick and spongy and lacking the proper funk of a fresh Périgord tuber. Our server also does not ask us about our desired doneness for the steak, though it is, thankfully, delivered medium rare. The accompanying molish cake, promised as crispy on the menu, actually is glutinous and a bit like



The wild mushroom fried rice with black truffle oil is just too ordinary — and too pricey at \$16. (RICHARDA, CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS)



The satisfying mapo tofu is all about silky bean curd served up in a warm gravy, though a touch more Sichuan pepper would have made it even better.



The salted caramel-vanilla crunch cake is topped with a buttery crumble and a thick, sweet and salty pudding-like glaze.

biting into a square of recently cured Elmer's school glue.

Red Violet also charges \$40 for the pleasure of one post-it-prime King crab leg featuring a sauce of mandarin orange essence and onion ginger. The sauce is floral and bright, though there isn't much of a salsa, more like a parsimonious float of fine julienned bits of the aromatics. The sauce, however, is no match for the foul stench emanating from some of the crab, a smell that permeates my fingertips hours after I

leave the restaurant. Though half the plate is untouched, my server must assume I'm the kind of thug who throws money in freepales just to watch it burn. He shows no interest in my sudden lack of appetite as he whisks the ample remains away.

A caramel-vanilla crunch cake, featuring a buttery crumble and thick sweet and salty pudding-like glaze, raises my spirits a touch, but the sesame creme brulee is bitter, and the burnt sugar crust far too wimpy. You could forget the whole experience

and drown your sorrows in cocktails, which at five bucks on Tuesday nights are quite the steal (the “Stolen Pie” featuring vodka, vanilla-cinnamon syrup and apple juice is like liquid apple pie). Just don't order a beer for the bartender — who is not part cyborg. — likes to keep his bottle opener between his forearm and a sweaty wristband for some odd reason.

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