

Restaurant Review 10 Panda Express October 22, 2014

GETTING ON THE CHESTERFIELD VALLEY PANDA EXPRESS Our restaurant reviews tend to be of establishments that are locally owned and operated. Occasionally we make an exception and this week is one of those exceptions.

This week's "Lunch with Jean" (former Patch.com editor Jean Whitney) takes us out to the Panda Express in the Chesterfield Valley Commons Shopping Center at 98 THF Blvd. My wife and I and it turns out Jean go to the Panda Express in Manchester in front of the Highland Meadows Shopping Center. We decided to see if we would like the one in Chesterfield Valley as much.



We showed up at 1:10 at the end of a weekday lunch rush and had to wait before entering the line to be served. The reason for the delay is we were waiting for them to cook up some more chow mein noodles and more Shanghai Angus Steak.

Once the food was replenished we jumped in line and were immediately given a sample of Honey Chicken that just returned to the menu.

At Panda Express you build your order by selecting chow mein, fried rice, white rice, brown rice or steamed vegetables and then add entrees. A two entree plate is \$6.59 unless you get one of three or four premium entrees where there is an additional \$1.25 up-charge. That was where I was headed.

I went with the Shanghai Angus Steak and the Honey Walnut Shrimp on top of chow mein. (\$9.05)

I know that almost no place in America claiming to be a Chinese Restaurant that is owned and operated by Chinese-Americans actually prepares and sells food that is similar to what is eaten in China, let alone a chain like Panda Express.

I taught criminal investigation classes twice across China and in a month of meals in the late 1980s and early 1990s I had exactly four meals that I enjoyed.

Two were in Beijing. The first was in 1987 at the three story Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant located about two blocks from Tiananmen Square. (At the time it was the only American fast food restaurant in all of China.) The other was Peking Duck served at a Beijing hotel. The other good meals involved 23 courses of dumplings in Xian and some noodles in Kunming. Most of the other meals included too many soups with bird heads in them and dishes with eels, snakes or meat from questionable sources.

In 1993 I hosted seven Chinese fire and police chiefs on a national tour. When they were in Washington, DC, where I was a police official, I had to talk two different Chinese Restaurants to go off the menu and make food that would be served in China for the group. I stuck with my favorite from the regular menu, "beef lo mein."

So when I'm anywhere in the U.S. and there is some place selling "Chinese food" the last thing I want is anything close to what they eat in China. The Panda Express did not let me down.

My Shanghai Steak was both tender and spicy but not too spicy with a sauce that was just right. The steak is also served with mushrooms, asparagus and onions. On the other side of the plate were my fried shrimp with a honey/sweet sauce on it. Both were delicious.



Jean and I also split egg rolls and spring rolls. The Chicken Egg Roll (\$1.90) was left in the fryer a bit too long, but the ingredients were fine. However it was the spring rolls that were the hit. They were fried to a perfect crispness and the vegetables were tasty.

Jean ordered a Green Benn/Chicken Breast Strip bowl with fired rice (\$5.59). She also tried a side of Honey Walnut Shrimp. The chicken with the green beans does not have a tempura batter or breading, like the popular honey chicken or orange chicken, so it is lighter. Jean gave aces to this entree...actually we found no difference in the taste of quality in the food from the Chesterfield Valley Panda Express and the one in Manchester,



The other thing we found that during rush periods there can be screw ups. During a dinner rush in Manchester my wife and I watched as our food got cold while a go-order was filled. The young manager saw what happened and gave up vouchers for free meals.

On this day just as Jean was going to order her Chicken and green beans, they served up the last portion for a go order. We waited for more to be prepared, but the busy staff did not see that Jean had sat down. They dished up her order and when not seeing her they threw it away. 10 minutes later Jean went back up and they realized their mistake. Luckily we were in no hurry.

Besides liking everything we ordered...we were full...but unlike a trip to the Olive Garden for unlimited pasta and breadsticks we were not stuffed and uncomfortable when we got up from the table.