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DINING



**COOKED TO PERFECTION** Whether it's ultra-fresh veggies or grilled delicacies, Canton Chinese knows how to cook. Photos by Karen Petersen.

## Variety, the Spice of Life

Hearty servings, stir-fries with still-crisp produce, and a friendly atmosphere make Canton Chinese a comforting destination | **BY KAREN PETERSEN**

It's been about five years since Canton Chinese Restaurant moved slightly up 41st Avenue to a shiny new mustard-colored stand-alone building. And just recently, the restaurant, run for years by various members of the Leung family, obtained a full liquor license.

We were welcomed graciously by staff members, and our various plates arrived quickly. We enjoyed tall glasses of cold iced tea, which were kept full throughout the meal, while we weighed the numerous culinary options.

In addition to Chinese food, the restaurant offers a handful of other Asian favorites, including satay skewers, Thai iced tea, and noodle bowls with Korean barbecue short ribs, and teriyaki salmon. Although the complete dinner menu is offered all day, the lunch menu had plenty of choices to pique our appetites.

Small plates (\$2.50 to \$9.50) include crispy cream cheese-filled wontons, Szechwan string beans sautéed with chilies, and Chinese-style battered fried shrimp. Almost 30 rice plates (\$8.50 to \$9) are served with a choice of two soups, a sesame ball or egg roll, and

plenty of white rice. On Tuesdays, all lunch entrées are just \$7.50.

The aroma of a turmeric-laden curry powder marinade emanated from the Satay Shrimp Skewers (\$6.75). Served on a bed of iceberg lettuce, decorated with strips of carrot, drizzled with peanut sauce, and topped with minced peanuts and black and white sesame seeds, the 10 plump crustaceans offered both savory and sweet components.

In the large bowl of steaming War Wonton Soup (\$8.75), bright vegetables including sweet sugar snap peas and fresh mushrooms were interspersed with shrimp, chicken breast, slices of lean barbecue pork with red tinged edges, crisp water chestnuts, and fat wonton pockets filled with nicely seasoned meat. The broth itself was not as strongly flavored as I've previously encountered.

Threads of beaten egg drifted in the mild hot and sour soup with green onions, bits of red pepper, tree fungus, fresh mushrooms and silken tofu. The miso soup appeared thin due to the light-colored miso paste, but was actually very flavorful and also held bits of bright green onion and tofu.

Canton's Garlic Chicken (\$6.75) was delightful. Chicken breast was sautéed with sugar snap peas, broccoli, water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, and for the spice, bits of ginger, flecks of red chili, and smoky, whole fried red chilies. The dark, lightly thickened sauce was sweet, and I spiced it up with some fresh chili paste. The sesame ball was exquisite. A perfect sphere of dough was deep fried to give the coating of sesame seeds a nutty toasted flavor. Biting through the crisp exterior revealed chewy dough and a core of sweet bean paste.

Thin slices of meltingly tender beef and still-crisp broccoli were the focal point of Beef and Broccoli (\$8.50), an ideal dish for the chili-adverse. A generous serving of at least two cups of rice shared the plate. The egg roll, a perfectly rolled cigar of flaky, fried pastry, contained crisp cabbage, carrot and bean sprouts. We appreciated the side of head-clearing hot mustard. ☞

*Canton Chinese Restaurant, 900 41st Ave., Santa Cruz, 475-8751. Full bar. Open daily from 11:30 a.m. until 9 p.m. Visit [cantonchinesefoodsantacruz.com](http://cantonchinesefoodsantacruz.com).*

## HOT PLATE



### THREE-PEAT

It was a filling afternoon meal with plenty of vegetables, protein, and even an adult beverage, with a tab that came to just \$12.96.

It was the "Three and three at 3:00" Happy Hour at the Dragon Lounge at Canton Restaurant, which is offered daily and all day on Wednesdays. There is amazing variety in the 13-item menu, all for \$3. Six draft beers including a Speakeasy microbrew, small sake, Japanese and Chinese beers, and seven wines are also \$3. And if you still have work to do, free wi-fi is available.

The lounge is separated from the restaurant by a sturdy, gnarled wood display case and screens made of horizontally strung bamboo. Sit at the counter where a television is suspended over the full bar, at three new tall tables with comfortable foot rests, perfect for a tête-à-tête, or chill with friends on the well-worn bench seats.

I lingered over a chilled glass of crisp Cupcake Chardonnay while evaluating the menu. There are staples such as edamame, egg rolls, pot stickers, crispy wontons, and calamari. But I can never pass up those healthy Vietnamese Spring Rolls. Thin noodles, colorful shreds of purple cabbage, chewy fried tofu and crisp, sweet jicama were rolled in an emerald leaf of lettuce, and then translucent rice paper. Dipping them into smooth peanut sauce, I tasted glimmers of fresh ginger.

A nicely sized bowl of chicken salad included iceberg lettuce mixed with matchstick carrots, purple cabbage, crisp fried wonton skins, minced peanuts, and grilled chicken breast. The creamy dressing added little to the entourage, so I spiced it up with soy and peanut sauces.

Wasabi Yam Sticks were coated with airy tempura batter and deep fried. I dipped the tender slices of root vegetable into the syrupy sauce mixed with spicy wasabi paste. | **KP**

*Dragon Lounge at Canton Restaurant, 900 41st Ave., Santa Cruz, 475-8751. Happy hour 3 to 6 p.m. daily, all day Wednesday.*