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**Food
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By Jim Duncan CVFDude@aol.com

Iron Wok



More new restaurants opened in Greater Des Moines during the last five years than during most previous decades. These newcomers have also been type cast by geography. In Jordan Creek and West Glen, most new cafés are corporate-owned or franchised operations. Downtown they are almost all independents. One local restaurateur half-jokes that there should be a zoning moratorium — no permits for new restaurants in western suburbs unless they are independents, nor for new places downtown unless they are chains. In the meantime, anniversaries like the one Iron Wok celebrated last Saturday are extremely rare.

Hidden in a forest of billion dollar brand names, this little Mom and Pop café survived its first year of operation by keeping faith with its motto: "Your mama's proud you eat with us." Iron Wok is a frank, frugal and healthy dining option that ought to please any mom. It's a third millennium café with a worldly fan base — I watched pre-school white kids expertly using chopsticks while Asian kids ate with forks. Frankness has been built into the design with a large kitchen completely in view of the dining area so you can watch your food being made. Every dish I ordered was made with fresh foods in a high-heat wok, a steamer or a fryer.

Most Chinese restaurants tend to overcook chicken. At Iron Wok, even buffet dishes had tender breast meat that had been quickly and expertly seared or steamed. Typical favorites of Chinese American cuisine (moo goo gai pan, almond chicken, kung pao, lo mein) were exemplary with a dozen different fresh vegetables, garlic and ginger dominating the flavors instead of being disguised in bad brown sauces. Pad thais, curries and "angry" dishes also tasted more of pure ingredients than of seasonings. For instance, the heat in "angry" and Szechwan dishes came from fresh and frozen chillies, not from dried flakes and seeds. Even sweet and sour dishes can be ordered "steamed" instead of fried, and they are always served with sauce on the side.

Iron Wok's menu should please vegetarian mamas, too. Locally produced, deep-fried tofu starred in a vegetarian version of ma poh tofu (this Szechwan classic can also be ordered in the traditional manner with pork shoulder and chicken stock.) Steamed tofu had an utterly different flavor in "home style bean curd" which was purportedly Chairman Mao's favorite dish. Dishes with black bean sauces relied on bottled sauce.

Iron Wok's fish offerings are somewhat mysterious, however. Tilapia, catfish, grouper and flounder might be interchanged on curry fish, hot braised fish, etc. But since everything besides the noon buffet is cooked individually, one can specify fish choice and method of cooking. By the way, steamed fish has become a café staple by customer demand.

Jalapeno Rangoon offered a new take on an old favorite. The soup menu included tom yum gai at a bargain price (\$2.50). In fact, everything was bargain priced with a \$10 threshold on all dishes. Iron Wok's midday buffet offered a dozen dishes plus soups and egg rolls for people in a hurry for \$7. Interesting desserts are flown in once a week from a San Francisco patisserie, and they sell out by the end of the week. Mango coconut cake, raspberry key lime cake and crème brulee shared the menu with some layered extravagances — pyramid noisette (a chocolate hazelnut mousseline in a chocolate shell), raspberry mont blanc (mousse in a shell) and paradiso (glazed genoise with tropical fruit mousse).

Side dishes

The season for Dungeness crab (the holy grail) struck a perfect storm from hell. First, an oil tanker hit the San Francisco Bay Bridge banning shoreline operations in California. Then a Pacific storm sank a famous crab vessel off British Columbia and curtailed the entire Oregon crab fleet. Prices have more than doubled from a year ago when available at all. ... Cafe Shi has moved from Iowa State's campustown to Ames' Northern Lights district. ... The final Downtown Winter Farmers' Market of the year will be held Saturday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. indoors at Capital Square, outdoors at Nollen Plaza. CV

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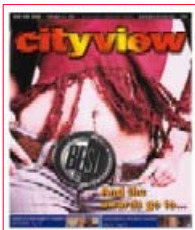
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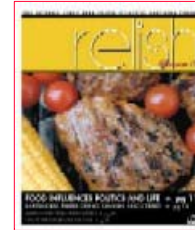
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