

Shanghai comes to Oxford



I have never wanted to stay inside a restaurant loo for so long as I did this one. It was catering to my obsession with learning languages by playing constant 'learn Mandarin' tapes in the background. What a great idea! And if only all public loos implemented this scholarly act we may soon be a nation of linguists with an unstoppable desire to learn more languages. Anyway enough of my ramblings, you may be interested to know exactly which loo I was occupying for quite some period of time. Well it belongs to Shanghai 30's, an upmarket Chinese restaurant which opened six months ago and has taken the place of the famous Elizabeth restaurant. It is rather an understated restaurant and easily missed if you aren't aware it is right next door to the Alice in Wonderland shop and just down the road a bit from Christchurch College. Located in a 15th Century building it can't really be anything other than atmospheric. I felt rather like I was walking back in time as I timidly stepped

through the wooden doorway and crept up the stairs not knowing quite what to expect. I was immediately greeted by two of the staff and George Lee, who runs the restaurant. I was made to feel at home straightaway as I was led through to a room overlooking Christchurch meadows and college – a stunning view and one you would rarely see. There are two dining areas in this restaurant, one being decorated in blue with many Chinese paintings and décor, whilst the other is covered in oak panelling. The blue room which I was in has an amazing stucco ceiling and a huge mirror, with gorgeous mullioned windows. The old-fashioned jazzy music playing in the background gave the feel that we had indeed stepped back in time and this I think was the idea. The restaurant is called Shanghai 30's because it was in the 1930's that Shanghai became the place to be; it was even named the 'Paris of the Orient.' It became a place of experimentation for

new cuisines with many foreigners arriving there before the onset of Communism, and it became a hub of Western imperialism. Therefore the restaurant offers both classic and contemporary Shanghai dishes but with very much a 1930's feel to the restaurant. After studying an extremely large menu, with a great range of dishes arranged conveniently into categories of different meats, we started the meal with a delicious Hors D'oeuvre Platter. This contained Almond Chicken, Vegetarian Spring Rolls, Spare Ribs and King Prawns. I have never tasted spare ribs which were so tender and literally fell off the bone, and it was great to have such a variety of tastes on one plate. For the main I chose Shanghai Duck Stir Fry, which came with preserved cabbage, bean sprouts, garlic and peas cooked to a traditional Shanghai recipe, and of course steamed rice. The food was amazingly presented. On my dish there was an orange flower, which was actually cut out of a carrot, and there were more of these amazing mini food sculptures on other dishes. My partner's dish, Pineapple "Gu Lao" Chicken, was presented actually within half a pineapple! They obviously take pride in the way food is presented and have fun with the creative side of things.

The restaurant was busy with some large groups of people as well as twosomes. It was lovely to eat in a restaurant oozing its culture and which prompted you to perhaps think about life in 1930s Shanghai, or even simply Chinese sociology. The foyer, decked out with Chinese looking chairs and sofas, even had a very old record player with a huge trumpet. The evening was finished off very nicely with a fortune cookie. Mine told me: "You are never petty, bitter or deceptive." Hmm. Well at least you know I am telling you my true feelings about the restaurant!

Shanghai 30's have got it dead right – their desire to offer their guests a cultural experience whilst enjoying delicious food has no doubt worked. But it is all the extra little touches they have made which makes this restaurant such a success – the décor, the Mandarin lessons in the loo, and the amazing array of food, which also all provoke a gentle interest in all things Chinese. Furthermore it also makes you yearn to go back to Shanghai 30's to experience it once again.

**Shanghai 30's, 82 St Aldates, Oxford,
OX1 1RA Tel: 01865 242230**

