

Asian Restaurant News

SUCCESS STORY



ROYAL CHINA RESTAURANT

Location: 6025 Royal Lane, #201 Preston Royal Shopping Ctr. Dallas, TX 75230-3889
Cuisine: Traditional Mandarin, Hunan and Szechuan as well as Modern Chinese cuisine
Restaurant Concept: Upscale
Capacity: 120 plus
Offers: Banquet room
Signature Dish: Duck Three Ways, Lion's Head Lotus Blossom, Hai-Nan Shia (or Asian Tostadas), Specialty handmade dumplings and Xiao-Long-Bao
Year of establishment: 1974
Phone: 214-361-1771
Owner: Kai-Chi and April Kao

ROYAL CHINA, THE EMPEROR'S NEW DINING ESTABLISHMENT

Interviewed by Wenzhong Chen Written by Elise Krentzel

The ancient Chinese dynasties from the Han to Ming knew exactly what splendor and royalty meant when it came to costume, decoration, the applied arts and lastly, food and its gorgeous presentation. Creative and groundbreaking are words that come to mind when looking at the plethora of rich original cuisine emanating from the land of China. China indeed was the first land to invent sauce and all types of refined cooking methods. Today when one visits Mainland China, traveling from north to south and east to west, it is mind boggling to encounter the array of foods and the abundant availability in all categories.

Likewise in Dallas, Texas, one of the finest rooms to serve Mandarin, Szechwan and Hunan cuisine belie the sensuous traditions of yore with a gorgeous room fit for an emperor and empress. Buck Kao, a retired colonel of the Chinese government, established Royal China in 1974.

It was an instant popular gathering place for families, friends, and neighbors. Most patrons referred to it as Buck's place instead of its trade name - Royal China. Buck was well loved and missed by many of the regulars.

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Seafood Hot Pot Photo by Dave Carlin

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Royal China Restaurant has re-opened in August of 2008; it was closed about 4 months for a total renovation after staying in business for 34 years.

When entering Royal China Restaurant, it wows you with its open space; a bar in a contemporary setting, a walled-in fish tank near the entrance, and quite possibly the focal point of the restaurant, a giant black and white photograph that divides the waiting area from the dining room.

The photograph, which can be viewed from both sides; depicts a hand holding the moon-gate of a traditional Chinese building. Within the moon-gate, is an elderly lady in the background and a little boy stepping out of the door near the edge of the frame. This represents different generations and the movement toward the future while still holding onto the values of the past. On the adjacent wall, are two black and white photos of the old streets of Beijing, which serves as a contrast from the contemporary feel of the restaurant, with its bamboo floor, stainless steel, slick white marble countertops and glass tile. The music wafting throughout the restaurant alternates between Jazz and Chinese traditional music. The soft yellow lighting is warm and welcoming; black square porcelain vases hold various plants and orchids on square table tops while a wraparound sofa of Gold leather and red silk prints accented with pillows allows the guests to have a drink before being seated.

A giant fan constructed of aluminum mesh hangs above the dumpling bar and the sky lights above it make it glow within the restaurant. The simple colors of Royal China are echoed throughout the décor, from the marble countertops to the sogi sliding doors, with vibrant red walls and a golden iridescent tiled wall as the accent. It feels as if you've walked onto a stage, proving no expense was spared to create this intriguing interior.

How Grand is Grandiose?

"The attraction here is not merely the enticing food, but also the aesthetics. The interior was done by a professional restaurant designer who specializes in upscale restaurants."

"We've decorated Royal China in an eclectic way—combining modern sensibilities with old Chinese elements."

The bamboo floors give a clean and modern look corresponding with vintage tables and butterfly shaped leather armed



■ Entrance Photo by Dave Carlin

chairs. They've kept the original furniture, which has been here since the inception of the restaurant, but they've brought them back to life by updating their look. The table surfaces are made of copper and are adorned with art deco designs. They serve as compliments to the red and yellow walls.

The bold red color extends to the second room, which is a banquet room that holds around 30-40 people. It is an excellent venue for birthday parties or smaller intimate meetings and serves as a gallery as well. Currently on the walls are beautiful color landscape photographs. Standing majestically along the walls are beautiful wooden panels that compliment the interior and, like the restaurant itself, display great craftsmanship and attention to detail.

The result is a harmoniously warm environment that is retro cool as well as comfortable. You feel at home as you dine and watch the dumplings being made right in front of you.

The owner Mrs. Kao, in her own words, "We wanted to create a total dining experience for our guests and take Royal China up another level with a total renovation of both the interior and the menu".

"We wanted to serve simple, great tasting food, both authentic and modern cooking while always maintaining a health conscious and earth friendly approach."

Dumpling Bar

One of the main attractions at Royal China has to be the open Dumpling Bar. Located just outside the kitchen, it is actually an extension of the kitchen; customers can watch fresh dumplings and other dim sum delights being made fresh on-site. Their specialty is Xiao-Long-Bao along with the traditional style dumplings with a twist. They are made with different type of wrappers with fresh vegetables, flour and fillings. Dumplings are not only nutritious, but a delicious art form as well.

Offering Several Regional Cuisines

The Hunan, Mandarin and Sichuan cuisine offered here are popular traditional style dishes with a modern flare, nicely presented on square white plates. Some top signature dishes include Lion's Head, Duck Three Ways, Lotus Blossom and Hai-Nan Shia etc. The latter is popular for its sweet and spicy flavor. It is an Asian Tostadas prepared without oil or salt, loaded with fresh vegetables. People like the Lion's Head best because of its' texture, crispy exterior but juicy tender inside. Lotus Blossom is like the popular lettuce wrap with a twist.

The menu also offers Buddhist Delight,

Mango Shrimp, Rolling Napa, and vegetable rolls. Some of these dishes are steamed and others boiled, yet they satisfy the health-conscious diner in all respects. Our talented chefs can customize and make any dish to suit health requirement and taste; steamed, less oil, less salt, extra meat etc.

Delicious food and consistency, as well as good service and a friendly environment all help draw customers back to Royal China. Some of the regular customers have been coming weekly and monthly since the Seventies and Eighties. Many youngsters grew up in our restaurant and move back to the neighborhood. Now, they are introducing Royal China to their own children. Sometime that's what makes all the hard work worthwhile.

Mrs. Kao said, "for a long time, Chinese restaurants and Chinese food have been getting a lot of negative publicity. Some have the impression that Chinese food is cheap, quick and unhealthy."

Many of the proprietors paid little or no attention to interior design while serving commonplace Americanized Chinese food. "I wanted to do something to change this kind of mind set from my own efforts. I have embossed 35 ways of Chinese cooking on the menu cover and on our wall, to remind us that Chinese cooking is a great culinary art with thousands of years of history.

On the dining room walls are black and white photographs of compelling, dream-like images as if each with many stories to tell. They are the work of Mrs. Kao; a keen photographer which is probably why her aesthetic sense is so cultivated.

She has taken gorgeous portraits of her family and friends and distant relatives. They speak to her every day, accompany her through thick and thin, as they hang on the back wall of the restaurant.

First Rate Service Fit for Royalty

Another key factor of success is service; all the staff are well trained in the art of customer service. They are friendly and sincerely care about their customers. Mrs. Kao and her husband Kai-Chi go the extra mile in making sure that their guests have a wonderful dining experience. Kai-Chi; like his father Buck, remembers his guests' names and their special requests and favors. Many regulars feel like part of the Royal China family; they enjoy chatting about sports, music, movies and art with each other. "We cherish the precious friendships we have made over the years."



■ Asian Tostadas Photo by Dave Carlin

Another key factor is sanitation

Their sense of cleanliness is impeccable. Excellent hygiene is essential within the food industry. The entire staff is aware of the importance of maintaining this standard all throughout the entire restaurant; clean floors, spotless tables, chairs and most importantly, a clean and pleasant bathroom. The owner told ARN that some children think the restrooms are COOL. Other guests were informed beforehand to check out the restrooms and later overhearing a customer say, "wow it's so clean and beautiful."

All About the Couple Owner

Kai-Chi Kao and wife B'Lan emigrated from Taipei, Taiwan in 1977. They planned to study art and photography after a few semesters, Kai-Chi had to learn to cook after the original chef left suddenly to open his own restaurant.

He became a wonderful chef and continues to cook for more than 25 years. Guests enjoy his cooking as well as his personality.

The couple took full charge of the restaurant after senior Mr. Kao retired because of a stroke in 1995.

B'Lan had worked in the restaurant since arriving in Dallas in '77, washing dishes, kitchen prep... balancing between family and work at the same time. She later studied photography in 1992. By 1995 B'Lan was an emerging photographer and won many prizes, but had to put everything on the side for the business. Since then she has turned her passion to cooking. From the logo and menu design to testing new dishes with Chef Lin, to working with the renovation crew and architect. She stays hands on behind the scenes while Kai-Chi greets the patrons with his big warm smiles.

Royal China was voted by Park City *NeighborsGo* of the *Dallas Morning News* in March for The Best Asian Restaurant of 2008. And the Best Iconic Makeover- from the *Dallas Observer's* best of 2008. The owners confided in ARN, that above all awards, the most precious reward comes from the loyalty and friendships of our long time clients.

In today's economic downturn, Mrs. Kao believes the key to ensure continued growth and success is consistent and enticing food, great customer service, and a friendly ambience, all of which are essential in attracting repeat and new customers.

Both of the Kaos have been in the restaurant business for more than three decades. They always maintain an optimistic, confident, persistent, and easy going personality. But the most important is their passion for the food service, which has turned a laborious business into a love of interests. "You won't get tired of what you do if you love what you do," says Mrs. Kao.