

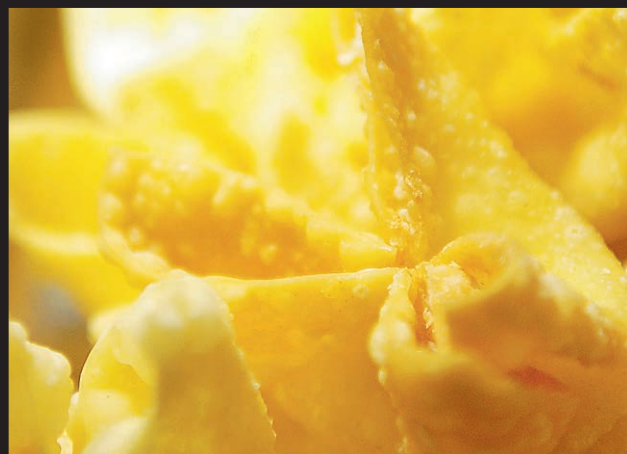


Feast

from the East

Asian buffets are everywhere these days. The food is cheap, but is it any good? Grab your chopsticks and find out.

By Lisa Hornung ■ Photos by Matt Stone





The aptly, if unoriginally, named Asian Buffet in Buechel features a big and beautiful spread of freshly-made sushi that is as delicious as it is attractive.

America loves a buffet. We love to be able to decide what we want to eat at a moment's notice, and when we do figure out what we want, by God, we want lots of it.

So the proliferation of ethnic buffets isn't really surprising. It just goes along with the lifestyle of the fast food generation.

Asian buffets are popping up all over, and it's creating quite a phenomenon. And why shouldn't it? Instead of blindly ordering off a menu, you can sample different foods you may not have known about. The downside is that the food may have been sitting there for quite a while, and you probably won't get five-star offerings.

Obviously, there is a difference between

the items on a typical Asian buffet and the specialties found at gourmet Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese or Korean restaurants.

But for a quick and inexpensive meal that's different from standard meat and potatoes, these buffets are a viable alternative.

Foodies eat it, too

Local food guru Robin Garr said he noticed the proliferation of Asian buffets in Louisville about 10 years ago.

"Then it seemed like they were everywhere," said Garr, publisher of the website LouisvilleHotBytes.com. "I tried to review them all for a while, but finally gave up

when we got to about 20 of them."

He said he suspects there are organizations that help set up storefronts for owners. "All those identical back-lighted pictures of the Great Wall of China and brass-and-glass room dividers just have to come from the same giant Chinese restaurant supply warehouse, don't they?" he said.

As for the food, Garr said he's seen a wide range, from lackluster to quite good.

"But by its nature, it's mass-produced food, made for the mass market on an assembly-line process, quickly made with just a few sauces used in most of the dishes, and kept in pans over burners until it congeals," he said.

But that doesn't mean he's snooty about it. "It's one of the best food buys around,"

Garr said. "You can eat as much as you like for a very fair price, and there's so much variety, there's surely going to be something you'll like. In general they seem to be well-run, and most of them get their A from (government) restaurant inspectors."

A bite of history

While the cuisine is traditionally Chinese, a lot of it has been adapted to the American palate, said Lillian Peiper, education coordinator at the Crane House, a non-profit Asian cultural resource center in Louisville.

The buffets are usually heavy with seafood, which is true to Chinese tradition. The



Dynasty Buffet in the East End is spacious and lavishly decorated.



Two examples of the luscious sushi at Asian Buffet in Buechel.



Chinese diet is two-thirds vegetarian, with seafood, chicken and pork thrown in, said Peiper, a native of China who moved to the United States as a child. So your favorite Hunan beef dish is not likely to be found in the Hunan province.

The appeal of buffets is elementary, she said.

"It's healthy, it's quick, it's variety and it tastes good. Sour and hot, sour and sweet, peppery — it runs the gamut, and there's a lot of variety in either hot or cold."

The buffet may not have been invented in America, but Americans have embraced it like they have pizza and hamburgers, popular fare with distinctly European roots.

China has its own version of the buffet, Peiper said. Called dim sum, it's similar to a buffet in that you look at the offerings and choose the food and amount you want. But instead of going after it at the steam table, a cart is brought to you.

The concept fits in with the bite-sized philosophy of Chinese cooking, Peiper explained. In the U.S., we are accustomed to cutting our food into smaller, more manageable pieces. In China, expecting the diner to cut his or her own meat is considered impolite, Peiper said. That's why Chinese food is usually cut into small bites.

"So the dim sum cart is in that same idea," she said. "It's all ready for you; it's all prepared, all set in the dishes, and the only thing you have to do is select what you want and they take it off the cart and put it in front of you."

Epicurean evolution

While you expect Asian buffets to feature items such as General Tso's chicken and beef with broccoli, you'll often find sushi, sashimi, a Mongolian grill and sometimes even pizza for the kids.

And in a clear nod to American eating habits, most buffets feature desserts such as cookies and cake.

"Chinese people really don't have dessert," Peiper. "Their traditional desserts would be fruits because they don't use the oven. It takes too much (cooking) fuel!" ♣



Chinese Food Glossary

Here is a sampling of Chinese cooking styles and their origins. The names in parentheses are the modern names of the provinces.

Cantonese: From the Canton (Guangdong) province in the Southeast. This type of cuisine is famous for roasting and grilling meat, fried rice, bird's nest soup and shark fin soup.

Fukien (Fujian): A province on the east coast famous for its selection of soups and seafood dishes.

Peking (Beijing)-Shantung (Shandong): A province in the northeast, it's famous for Peking duck and is acclaimed for its subtle use of seasonings.

Honan (Henan): A central province, it's known for sweet and sour cooking.

Szechuan (Sichuan)-Hunan: From western China, this food is hot and spicy.

Mandarin: Not a regional distinction. Mandarin means "Chinese official" and the style of cooking suggests aristocratic cuisine made from the best of all regions.

Shanghai: Also not a regional cooking style, it means a cosmopolitan combination of many styles.

Source: "The Food Lover's Companion," by Sharon Tyler Herbst.

Plates of Plenty

In an attempt to find the best Louisville has to offer, Lisa Hornung sampled five Asian buffets. They vary in offerings, price and service, but they all similar offer a lot of fried food and tons of seafood ranging from the ordinary to the exotic. Warning: All of them had items mislabeled. Lisa doesn't like to eat surprise, and neither do you.

Here's what she found at each location:

Jumbo Buffet

2731 Hurstbourne Parkway in Stony Brook
495-0028

Dinner: Monday through Friday, \$9.49; Friday, Saturday and Sunday, \$11.49

Lunch: Monday through Friday, \$5.99; Saturday, \$6.99; Sunday, \$11.49

My take: I ate here before a movie at Showcase Cinemas Stony Brook, and I wasn't very impressed. Most of the food was fried and had been sitting a while. Since I'm not a fan of sushi from a buffet, I didn't touch it. But my son chowed down and didn't complain later. The fountain in the lobby is a nice touch.

No. 1 Asian Buffet

1250 Bardstown Road in the Highlands
451-6033

Dinner: Monday through Thursday, \$8.59; Friday through Sunday, \$9.99

Lunch: Monday through Saturday, \$5.59; Sunday, \$7.59

My take: A friend raved about this one in Mid City Mall, but the food was cold and we weren't impressed. Lillian Peiper of the Crane House said that "No. 1" to the Chinese means "the best," not "the first," which is why it is often part of Chinese restaurant names. What did excite me was the hand-dipped ice cream on the dessert bar. It made up for a lot of flaws.

Golden Palace Buffet

161 Outer Loop in Fairdale
368-2868

Dinner: Monday through Thursday, \$8.25; Friday through Sunday, \$8.95

Lunch: Monday through Saturday, \$5.50; Sunday, \$6.99

My take: A friend's parents referred me to this hidden gem in the South End. The food tasted fresher and the service was exceptional. One negative was the strong smell of fish in the place.

Dynasty Buffet

2400 Lime Kiln Lane in the East End
339-8868

Dinner: Monday through Thursday, \$8.99; Friday through Sunday, \$13.99

Lunch: Monday through Saturday, \$5.99; Sunday, \$6.99

My take: My editor likes this place, and I have to agree. The décor is elaborate and the food tasted fresher. The peppered chicken was delightful and there were unique offerings, such as the chicken-and-cheese roll: a stuffed wonton wrapper that's rolled into a long, thin tube and deep-fried. However, the signs saying "Eat what you take" were a bit off-putting. I felt like my mother was watching.

Asian Buffet

3646 Mall Road in Buechel
479-9989

Dinner: Monday through Thursday, \$8.99; Friday through Sunday, \$9.99

Lunch: Monday through Saturday, \$5.99

My take: While the food was mediocre, there is a very skilled sushi and sashimi chef on hand. I don't do buffet sushi but its beautiful presentation caught my eye. And if you're shopping with the family, this is in the perfect spot.

