Shan Yuan: for when you're feeling wonton

Shan Yuan, 453 Massachusetts Ave (Central Square), open daily 11:30am till 10:00pm, till 11:00 Friday and Saturday; liquor: take out available, 474-6757.

Shan Yuan is a tidy new Chinese restaurant featuring Szechuan, Hunan, and Mandarin cuisine. It replaced Zorba's, a Greek restaurant. One would hardly recognize the place as the same: the old tablecloths, dark, bright atmosphere . . . and the inevitable high prices ($8 to $12 for a dinner).

Indeed, descriptions are sometimes necessary. For instance, what is "jade chicken"? Nice.Try to imagine "green flavor sliced chicken"? What is in "Buddha's delight"? And what makes a Polynesian drink s complex recipe, and should be avoided.

There is a bar, but nothing offered is very special. The "slippery chicken" slippery? Although many dishes actually describe names, the best way to answer your questions is to taste the food. The hot and spicy dishes are marked, so the proper precautions can be made.

In general, the appetizers are too expensive for what they are, and tend to be Americanized flavor than Chinese. Cheaper than the appetizers, the hot and sour soup is delicious as good as any in Boston. As with all hot and spicy dishes, you can request that they tailor the spiciness to your liking.

One main dish per person provides a good quantity of food, but check with the waiter on the higher priced items. The price of dinner at Shan Yuan can be blunted by ordering the large dishes and skipping the soup. For instance, "spicy, crispy whole cod" and a vegetable dish can comfortably feed three people, while a half duck and a moo shi dish will feed four.

There is a bar, but nothing offered is very special. The Polynesian drinks are complex rip-offs and should be avoided. And for me, the traditional tea is good enough for dinner. In fact, the tea at Shan Yuan is fuller than the green hot water most American diners serve.

Deserts are a hasty mystery. Sometimes a complimentary orange appears before the fortune cookies. In any case, the bill tends to appear before the hapless diner can utter the magic words "sesame humus," or the name of any other desert. It is probably just as well considering the price.

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