

Asian Restaurant News

SUCCESS STORY



Owner Jibang Xi and staff



MERLION SINGAPORE CUISINE IS AS UNIQUE AS ITS INFLUENCES

Interview by Jun Wang Written by Chris Holt

MERLION SINGAPORE CUISINE

Owner: Jibang Xi
Location: 3610 SW 13th Street, Gainesville, FL 32608-3506
Cuisine: Singapore, Nyonya, Asian fusion
Capacity: 150
Offers: Dine-in, Party Room
Signature Dish: Basil Eggplant Seafood, Java Beef, Green Tea Fried Rice
Year of establishment: 2005
Phone: (352) 376-8998
Website: www.merlionrestaurant.net

Combining an incredible décor with an inventive and creative menu is a sure way to win customers, and to offer everything at reasonable prices will ensure they remain loyal. This winning formula has made Merlion Singapore Cuisine a culinary gem found (of all places) in Northern Florida.



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THE SCENE

Merlion Singapore Cuisine is an upscale Singaporean restaurant located in Gainseville, Florida. The 3800 square feet dining area and spacious parking lot available attest to the restaurant's high volume of customers.

The restaurant's ambiance fuses the old with the new, offering both TV displays for the guests' viewing pleasure and classical piano music for the guests' auditory entertainment. There is a stylish party room to accommodate about thirty people.

The restaurant was designed by a Turkish-American interior designer. The owner wanted to create a combination of Asian and Western aesthetics and the designer made his vision a reality. One notable feature is the successful integration of western paintings with oriental touches. White linen bedecked tables are surrounded by elegant wooden chairs and similarly-toned woodworking.

The entrance of the restaurant is graced by a fountain. Bamboo floors and modern candle sconces create an understated and lovely feel to the establishment. Walking around the restaurant, the spectacular décor will put you in a relaxed mood. The Merlion, a Singaporean symbol, stands in the foyer to welcome the customers.

THE FOOD

Merlion Singapore Cuisine offers a rare selection of tastes and spices from diverse places. Nyonya cuisine and Asian Fusion cuisine are the house specialties.

The owner decided not to focus his restaurant on Chinese cuisine. He cites the fierce competition between Chinese restaurants and the lack of originality that usually permeates the menus of

most Chinese restaurant. Mr. Xi also cites his interest in Singapore's unique culture: "I used to work in Singapore for several years, and have great interest in its distinctive culture. Singapore is really a heavenly place to dine and enjoy life." One unique aspect of Singaporean culture is "baba-Nyonya," a style that originates over 400 years ago. The Nyonya is an intermarriage between Chinese Confusion culture and Malay culture and the food reflects this fusion. The owner would like to share this distinct cultural cuisine with the people of Gainesville, as there is no other Singaporean restaurant in the state of Florida.

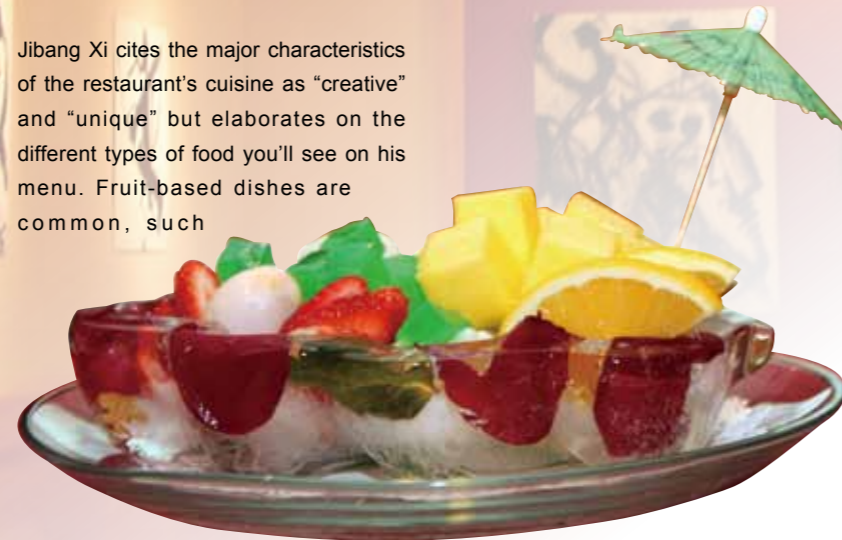
Jibang Xi cites the major characteristics of the restaurant's cuisine as "creative" and "unique" but elaborates on the different types of food you'll see on his menu. Fruit-based dishes are common, such

as those that are made up of mango, lychee, pineapple, and lemon. The fruits are used not just for garnishment but are instead the main ingredients. The Mango or Pineapple Veggies, for example, are made of assorted soy proteins, veggies, and fresh mango or pineapple with fruit sauce. Another type of item on the menu is the herb-centered items, including those flavored with basil, ginger, dried ginger, sushi ginger, garlic, and curry in different styles, such as Thai curry, Indian curry and Japanese curry. Finally, veggies are a large component of Singaporean cuisine. Apart from assorted vegetables, there are "false meat" items which contains high protein

but are vegetarian-friendly. The false chicken meat, beef, fish and mutton are molded to mimic the taste and texture of chicken, beef, fish and mutton; in actuality, each is made of bean curd layer. Initially, customers were resistant to try the bean curd items, but when they tasted them the customers really liked it. Merlion is very veggie and vegetarian friendly.

Merlion is also proud of some of its more unconventional dishes. The Java Fried Tofu (Indonesia Java style) is a lightly fried dish and served with a mild spicy Java sauce. It is a dish that is so

unique that it is trademarked. The Green Tea Fried Rice is also quite popular. It is stir fried with bacon, green tea and barley. The Java Fried Rice is another matter; this unique dish uses an adoption of Java pepper which grows in the tropical Southeast Asia and is famous for its spiciness. It is stir fried with chili, onions, green peas, carrots, diced fresh pineapple and scallions. The Chacha Fried Rice also receives rave accolades. It is stir fried with Cha-cha sauce, a kind of barbeque-like sauce and the owner named it "Chacha". Finally, the Java Pineapple Fried Rice (Choice of Veggie Ham or Vegetables) is a spicy and sweet item.



environment they are served in.

The owner believes that service fundamentally should make customers happy. He keeps a record of the customers' critics to control the service quality of the restaurant. Whenever there is poor response from the customers, the owner could quickly trace back to know who did wrong; In this way, each move is monitored to guarantee the customers of a happy dining experience.

OWNER

The restaurant opened in 2005. Over the last three years of operation, the menu has been updated from time to time and the current version is the eighth edition of the menu. The ninth version will hopefully feature even more tempting dishes.

In the future, owner Jibang Xi hopes to continue to push his restaurant's high standards on food and service. He would like to add some American style Chinese dishes but knows that timing is important. It depends on the market response. He hopes to launch a new dish, the Hainan Chicken Rice, which is considered a "national dish" of Singapore.

The owner has said that only when they launch this popular dish in Singapore can the restaurant be called a real Singaporean restaurant.

Photos by April Vigna



At the first glance of the menu, you will find there are so many interesting and unique delicacies which you won't enjoy in other establishments. The offerings are unique in their name, presentation and taste as well. Even the names of the items can be confusing or different. The "Communist Soup," for example sounds quite strange but is actually a delicious concoction of curry beef and potato soup.

Tea selections: while enjoying such a bounty of culinary delights, the afternoon tea time shouldn't be missed. All of the tea time specials come with a pot of tea of your choice. There is a special tea selection menu for the customers. Tea is a particular interest of the owner, and has invested considerable time and effort into its research and collection. The tea is classified into five categories: petal style tea- such as rose, jasmine, etc.; fruit style tea such as lemon, peach, lychee, etc; ethnic style tea such as Thai, Japanese, or Indian style tea; herb based tea such as pepper, honey, ginger, cinnamon; and finally milk tea, such as green latté.

Fruit platters, bottled water, and fine wine are also available.

THE SERVICE

The staff at Merlion not only performs the basic duties of a waiting staff at a typical restaurant, but like the restaurant itself, is unique as well. One job of the staff is to tell stories of each dish and the rooted culture background as well. Thus the staff must be equipped with the rich knowledge of the Nyonya culture and its cuisine. It is really an arduous job to train the staff because they are so much better equipped than typical waiting staffs. But the owner is happy to impart his knowledge about the culture to his staff. "The staff is always one way to promote our culture," explained owner Mr. Xi.

As most of the dishes are created by the owner himself, each chef is trained to adjust their cooking styles to the owner's requirements. The owner mandates that a chef should not only be able to cook, but possess creative ideas as well. One of their jobs is to brainstorm creative new dishes. In addition, the chef is required to make an art of presentation- the dish presentations should perfectly match with the luscious

