

Who Remembers... Tofu Restaurant?

Here is another installment in our *Who Remembers?* series. You can browse previous articles by using the search bar on the right or by clicking [here](#). These articles are strolls down memory lane. In some cases, the buildings, but new businesses have replaced them. In other instances, the buildings or even the properties have been razed. Instead of a building, it may be a TV show, personality, or commercial that no one longer exists. Either way, it can't stop us from taking the Memory Lane stroll!

As always we would rather this be a discussion. No one knows this area better than those who grew up here! Please, leave constructive criticism, feedback, and corrections. We'd love to hear your anecdotes. Please share!



Once upon a time, there used to be high-end Chinese

restaurants. In this golden age, the fancy decor resembled a palace in Beijing's Forbidden Zone, the dishes offered were of an uncommon variety, and the customer service was exemplary. You could even dress up for the occasion.

People wanted "cheap, cheap" even if it meant sacrificing ambiance, menu variety, or quality. First, the combination plates came. Then the buffet came. These restaurants slowly died or replaced and now the words Chinese Food conjure up the question "Buffet or order to-go?"

Those of us longer in the tooth will remember a time when buffets weren't so common and they weren't even a preferred dining choice. There are still a few placed in the region where you can find these remnants, but generally speaking the idea of dressing up to have Chinese Food has lost its luster.

One of my favorite restaurants of this type – actually, one of my favorite restaurants of all-time – was Tofu Restaurant that was "on the bridge." While technically it was on the "Fairhaven" side of the bridge it was a popular destination of people on both sides of the bridge.

Tofu replaced a Ground Round that was in the spot previously and today that spot is a news and magazine shop with a Dunkin's Donuts next door.



The building had that classic Chinese exterior with large, dark, carved wooden beams, ornate and elaborate columns at the entrance, and large extravagant gate-like doors to greet you. It was like a fancy restaurant from Tang Dynasty traveled through time and crash landed like a TARDIS.

Inside was just as fancy, elegant and highfaluting. There was a bar to your left once you walked in and a quintessential fish tank that was populated with all manner of different fish to your left. Gazing into the interior one could see that just like the exterior, it was like traveling through time and space to a building in ancient China with all its royal trappings, decorations, and pomp. A full setting at each of the dark, wood tables, bamboo, plants, tapestries and Chinese woodcuts were spread throughout and the aroma coming out of the kitchen gave you a glimpse of the deliciousness that was waiting.

One of the things that stood out immediately when you visited was that you were always warmly greeted and escorted to your

table and then your coat or jacket was drawn from your shoulders and when you sat in your chair you were assisted into place. I do not remember a place since Tofu that did something similar. The concept has died out in this region anyway.

The customer service was impeccable. I remember one time that my brother elbowed his fork off the table by accident and by the time he had bent over and picked it up the waiter was already at the table with a fresh, clean fork. While not a big deal in its own right, it highlights how attentive the service was. These days it seems like you need an airhorn and those small, orange flags the runway workers use at airports to get anyone's attention.



But who cares about all that? Remember the food? While there were some Chinese classics and standards there were plenty of dishes that you just don't anymore. Some were original to Tofu and others would now be considered obscure. One of my favorite dishes of my entire life was a dish called a Mongolian Hot Pot. While it's been something like 20 years since Tofu closed its doors and I've had it, just these words have me literally

salivating.

The classic Mongolian Hot Pot usually refers to a pot of rich ginger-based broth joined by a dozen or more ingredients spread out on a wooden block, but this version was a large clay pot with everything placed in it already. It would be tossed in an oven to simmer and marinate until all the mouth-watering flavors married. Inside the pot was an assortment of vegetables like Bok Choy, straw and Enoki mushrooms, wood ears, bamboo shoots, sliced chestnuts, green onion, and other ingredients I can vaguely recall.

The coup de grace that transports this dish into the foodie heaven stratosphere are two ingredients: the plump, juicy and succulent Shiitake mushrooms which add texture and lots of flavor and the tender, juicy perfectly cooked morsels of pork whose fat would dissolve into the stock leaving an unctuous velvety and Umami element. To eat it was life-changing!

There were a lot of uncommon dishes similar to this on the menu like some of the best Ma Po Tofu ("Pock-Faced Lady" dish) I've ever had, Peking Duck, Mantou (steamed Chinese buns), Baozi (stuffed Chinese buns – like dumpling buns), there may have even been Shark Fin Soup.



The owner was a man called Lonnie – I don't recall his last name – but he was very kind and affable fellow. Once I bumped into him in Chinatown in Boston and he treated me like a long lost friend, showed me around and even bought lunch. He was from the "old country" and wanted his restaurant to be just like the ones you would see back in China – from items on the menu, to decor and ambiance, to customer service.

He was very proud of the restaurant and it was quite popular with the locals... until the cursed bridge "got" to it. When the bridge was down for an entire year for repairs (shipped of to the south) many businesses on the bridge suffered greatly and Tofu became one of the casualties, along with a friend's business that also operated on the bridge. What was a simple, quick trip to a fantastic lunch or nice night out became a "We have to go 15 minutes around and through backed up traffic to get to Tofu."

Almost instantly the restaurant's clientele came around less frequently and to make up for it, Lonnie altered the menu to

have cheaper items and prices. When that didn't work, they added a buffet to it and that was the sort of last-ditch effort in a death spiral. Lonnie simply couldn't afford to keep the doors open and struggled while the bridge underwent repairs. That hideous bridge cost more than the dollars wasted on it. It ruined people's livelihood, careers and businesses.

While Tofu survived during that year, the blow to the business was one he couldn't recover from and in spite of the fact that the bridge was allowing through traffic, people had either dropped Tofu from their mind or when they tried out the "new" and not improved restaurant and menu they were disappointed and didn't come back.



Eventually one of the better restaurants in the area closed their doors and I heard Lonnie and much of his staff went back to Asia, likely bitter from the experience. They did something with passion, care, and excellence – they did everything right, but good ol Massachusetts does what it always does – kills businesses with red tape, excessive paperwork, permits, licenses, and permits or perpetual road/infrastructure construction.

The only other places I can recall that were upscale Chinese eateries – whether they are now or not – were Chong Hing towards Fairhaven/Mattapoisett way that I believe is a car lot or condos, Chuck's China Inn on Acushnet Avenue and Cathay Temple in Mattapoisett. There may be or have been others but my memory is poor. These places may be excellent in their own rights, but no restaurant in the area today offers the style of customer service that Lonnie and Tofu offered.

The only place that came close in my experience was the one in either Foxwoods or Mohegan Sun. It was even more upscale, and that restaurant was an authentic Chinese Restaurant with the menu in Chinese and English and offering dishes like Bird's Nest and Shark Fin Soups, 5-course Peking Duck, Wan Dou Huang (Split Yellow Pea Cake), offal dishes and more.

Mind you I enjoy the many Chinese Restaurants in greater New Bedford, but we are now left with luncheon specials, buffets, and casual dining experiences. You have to head to Providence or Boston for something different than that.