

Eat Cheap Asian Food 10-15-08

Growing up in the Midwest, I ate Chinese food almost every Sunday night. Those were the nights I would indulge in my favorite Chinese dishes. To this day, I still have the urge to eat Chinese food on Sunday nights, and I love it.

People assume that all Asian cuisine is healthy, but like everything else, it depends on what you order. Some dishes contain as much saturated fat and sodium as a hamburger and fries. Let's see how well the *Times-News* reporters did on their Asian food quest.

Shrimp Tempura

Many people think tempura originated in Japan, but actually it was Portugal. This cooking method dips fish, beef, chicken or veggies into batter and deep-fries it until golden and crisp. The batter seals and steams the food. Since the hot oil sears the outside, this cooking method uses less oil than a sauté. Many people are afraid to use oil in their cooking, but oil gives you energy to be mentally and physically active.

I make tempura regularly at home because it is so rich and satisfying and a great way to get healthy oil into my diet. Healthy oil-for instance, olive, sesame or safflower- helps you avoid craving and eating potato chips, chocolate, french fries and ice-cream. Knowing what type of oil the restaurant uses is important. Sakura Japanese Steak House uses vegetable oil to deep-fry its tempura; that's good.

Many restaurants serve tempura with a soy-sauce based dipping sauce or grated daikon radish. Both help the body digest the tempura oil. Virginia Hutchins, since the dipping sauce was too heavy and sweet, a few drops of soy sauce on each tempura piece would have done the trick. Soy sauce is very high in sodium, so ask whether a low-sodium version is available.

Virginia, I think ordering an appetizer is a great way to save money and your waistline. Portions have increased so much in size over the years that today's appetizer is enough for a meal. Too bad you were pushing your budget, because a side of rice would have completed this meal nicely.

Inarizushi and Vegetable Tempura Long Roll

Melissa Davlin, I think it is great that you can order your sushi in Japanese! Sushi is becoming so mainstream it is even made and sold at Fred Meyer and Costco Wholesale.

Many people think sushi is raw fish, but that is actually sashimi. Sushi is short-grain white rice topped with or wrapped around fish and veggies. Nori is the green seaweed used to hold it all together and a great source of vitamins and minerals. There are so many varieties of sushi that you never have to order raw fish - unless you want to.

For those people who have never tried sushi, the easiest way to ease into it is to order vegetable sushi. Melissa ordered Sushi Ya's vegetable tempura sushi which consists of tempura carrots, zucchini and sweet potato wrapped in rice. It is delicious and very satisfying.

The description of the inarizushi, fried tofu skin wrapped around rice, is not the most appealing. But don't be scared off. The tofu skin is created during the tofu-making process; like pudding, it forms a skin. It is a soybean-based product, so it does not contain cholesterol or saturated fat.

This lunch was a bit heavy on the rice. Ordering either a salad or soup would have balanced this meal a bit.

Sushi is always a healthy choice for lunch, dinner or a snack. If you haven't tried it yet, you should.

Cashew Diced Chicken

Virginia, I think it is always better to order off the menu rather than the buffet. People tend to eat more when they order the buffet because they want to get their money's worth. So perhaps your budget saved you.

There are many dishes to choose from in a Chinese restaurant, so it is always healthier to look for the ones with the most vegetables and the light sauces. Wok 'N Grill's cashew diced chicken dish was heavier on the veggies than the chicken. In traditional Asian cuisine, the meat, chicken or fish is more of an accent to the meal instead of the main attraction.

It would be great if restaurants offered a brown rice option, but white rice is still a grain and does contain fiber, which we need in our daily diet.

So many people love a salty crunch in their dishes, and cashews do the trick. They are a tropical nut and contain less oil than most nuts. This adds a nice richness to this dish.

Mushroom Noodles

Melissa, China First's noodles and broth is a classic dish. It can be made with vegetables, chicken, fish or meat. I order this dish when I dine out and often make it at home, but I have never seen it include hard-boiled eggs.

The broth is usually quite salty and strong and is used only to season the noodles. People often think it is soup and slurp it up, which can leave you craving liquids or sweets.

I would have liked to see this dish with more of a variety of vegetables, but then I think it would have been called Vegetable Noodles. Melissa, you definitely got what you ordered ... mushroom and noodles.

This is a great dish and perfect for the cool weather.

Garlic Chicken and Vegetables

Ariel Hansen, I liked the look of this dish because it had an abundance of green, crisp-looking vegetables in relation to the amount of chicken and a light sauce. Because sauces contain a lot of sodium and sugar, ordering a dish that has a light sauce is one way to make your meal healthier. Garlic sauce is light but adds a lot of flavor to a dish.

Just because Silver Dragon's menu listed certain vegetables does not mean you cannot ask to substitute, add or omit veggies. I find restaurants are very accommodating with requests.

Ariel you are right: Steamed rice would have been healthier than the fried rice. But it looked like it was only accented with egg and pork bits, so it wasn't as bad as you thought. Besides, the oil in the fried rice helps you feel more satisfied with your meal.

I liked all the green veggies in this meal. It had a good balance of grains, vegetables and chicken, which is why I am choosing this lunch as the healthiest of the bunch.