

RESTAURANT REVIEW:

THE ORCHID GARDEN

on Norwegian Cruise Line's
Norwegian Gem

by

Richard H. Wagner

The Orchid Garden may not be the first specialty restaurant that guests think of on Norwegian Gem. It tends to be overshadowed by Le Bistro, the ship's French fine dining venue; Cagney's Steakhouse and even Orchid Garden's neighbor Teppanaki, the Japanese-style steakhouse. However, guests looking for a flavorful meal in a casual setting should not overlook this understated venue.

If it weren't for the stand alone wooden arch with its small electric sign, one might well pass by the Orchid Garden without noticing it. Lying between Gem's two other Asian venues - - the Sushi Bar and the Teppanaki Room, the Orchid Garden is a softly it area overlooking a two-deck atrium.

The décor of the room is not spectacular. It could best be described as modern with traditional Asian highlights. There is lattice work separating the dining area from the atrium, a few silk scroll paintings and an

Asian-inspired geometric design in the smoked glass screens.

This is a casual venue. Even on the "dress up or not" evening, few jackets or dresses were in evidence. The atmosphere is relaxing and conducive to conversation. Since the starboard side of the room is generally open to the atrium, you can hear the live music that is being played in Magnum's champagne bar one deck below.

You enter the restaurant through the archway on the starboard side. A warm welcome is waiting. Since this entrance is shared by the two other Asian restaurants, you are asked which restaurant you would like. Although some guests do reserve in advance, reservations for the Orchid Garden are generally unnecessary.

Many guests assume that the Orchid Garden is a standard Chinese restaurant. However, it is actually an Asian fusion venue, combining elements of Chinese,



*The Orchid
Garden*

Thai, Indian, and other Asian cuisines.

The list of appetizers contains some familiar names - spare ribs, Spring rolls, dumplings and lettuce wraps. A standout was the Asian Crab Wantons, which is served with a spicy plum sauce. It presents contrasting textures ranging from the crisp exterior to the creamy interior. Similarly, the flavors explode with a blend of sweetness and spiciness. Indeed, the sauce, while mild by Asian standards, is spicier and has more personality than you usually encounter in cruise ship Asian dishes.

Another excellent choice is the Lightly Battered Salt and Pepper Calamari. The Orchid Garden successfully avoided the two most common pitfalls that can befall calamari. As the name promises, these are not over-breaded but rather allow you to taste the calamari as well as the butter. In addition, these were crisp and not at all rubbery.

The calamari is enhanced by the condiments that accompany it. A spicy duck sauce breathes fire into the dish. For a milder experience, quickly dip the calamari into the small mixture of salt and pepper, which brings out the hidden subtle flavors.

For the soup course, the Orchid Garden offers a choice of a traditional Chinese Egg Drop Soup and a Hot and Sour Soup. I selected the latter. It is a clear soup containing barbecue pork, bean curd, mushrooms and bamboo shoots. As with the appetizers, this was a spicy flavorful blend that packed punch.

Arriving at the table with considerable flare was the main course, Chengdu Spiced Lamb. Served on its

own cast iron skillet, the food was still sizzling. It consisted of thinly sliced lamb chops covered with a peanut sauce atop a bed of caramelized onions. Again, there was a contrast of flavors including hot and spicy, sweetness and the unique flavors of peanuts.

The menu presents four offerings under the heading "Noodles and Rice." These can be had as a separate dish or as an accompaniment to the main course. A bowl of Fried Rice served as a good accompaniment to the Chengdu Spiced Lamb by offsetting the main dish's spiciness. Steamed rice is also available.

For dessert, the Orchid Garden offers four choices that are essentially western dishes with an Asian accent. These include Flight of Oriental Crème Brulee, Coconut Tapioca Pudding, Five-spice Chocolate Cake and Warm Banana Pancakes with coconut ice cream.

The service at the Orchid Garden was friendly and prompt.

In sum, the Orchid Garden is the place to come if you are looking for a powerful flavor experience. While it is geared for western tastes, there is nothing bland about the food. The experience is enhanced by good service and a relaxing casual atmosphere.

There is a cover charge of \$15 per person. An additional \$10 is charged guests having the Szechwan Stir-fried Lobster Tail.