

Panda Kitchen's owners fulfilling lifelong dream



Photo by Nick Higman

Volcano Shrimp and Orange Chicken,
Panda Kitchen

The Panda Kitchen
1986 US Highway 50 East,
Carson City
882-8128

Hours: Lunch from 11 a.m. to
3 p.m. and dinner from 3-
9:30 p.m. Monday through
Saturday

Price range: \$5.95 to \$10.95

by Susan M. Botich

Best Bets

The Panda Kitchen, specializing in Mandarin and Szechuan cuisine, welcomes everyone with simple, elegant décor and a warm, family-friendly feeling.

The look and feel of the restaurant's interior is stylishly presented with many traditional-looking Chinese vases, sculptures and wall hangings. The dining areas are spacious and well laid out with seating that allows for an intimate, but not crowded, atmosphere.

Stephen Lee, Panda Kitchen's owner, bought the business in 1986. Lee always had a love for cooking, so when he had the chance to pursue his dream of opening his own restaurant in Carson City, he and his wife decided to go for it.

The Panda Kitchen has been voted Best Asian restaurant in Carson City every year from 1996 through 2002. Many people have tried to persuade Lee to open another restaurant and expand his business, but he is happy focusing on just one and making it the best.

"A restaurant is like your kid, you know?" Lee said. "You want to put your all into what you have. More is not necessarily better.

"For example, we have a son in high school. He is a good boy. He gets straight A's. He's always done very well. We believe it's because we have taken care and we give respect. With care and respect, you can go a long way. Not just for your customers, but for your workers and your family. That's my philosophy," he said.

It's evident that Lee puts his philosophy of care and respect to work in his business. It shows in the quality of Panda Kitchen's food, service and thoughtful décor, and also in how long his employees have been with him.

"The cook we started with 20 years ago is still with us," Lee said. "Each cook we've hired since then is still with us. We believe that you have to treat your people right. Treat your customer right and treat your employees

right. Then, your workers are happy and this is like family here.

“You know, when you work in a restaurant, you spend most of your time here. I say to my employees, ‘What makes you feel good? If you want to enjoy being here, do your work as if you were serving your own family.’ Then, the hard job becomes not so hard,” he said.

One obvious advantage of keeping his cooks with him for such a long period of time is the impressive extent of the menu selections.

“I have to train my cooks very carefully,” Lee said. “I have taught them each dish, how to prepare it properly and how to cook it properly. Over the years, we keep adding to our menu. Now it’s like a book!

“But, each dish is made with only fresh ingredients and cooked fresh, the right way. We can offer so many different kinds of dishes because my cooks know how to cook each one the way I have taught them. Once we have perfected a dish, we can add it to our menu,” he said.

A new and popular addition to Panda Kitchen’s menu is its “low-carb” dishes.

The Panda Kitchen does have a liquor license and may serve drinks with dinner, but Lee prefers to keep the main focus of the restaurant on the dining aspect.

“Our emphasis is on dining — family dining,” Lee said.

The Panda Kitchen is well-designed for large parties. The dining areas are separated with partial walls for privacy between sections.

“We can accommodate parties of up to 40 people,” Lee said. “We have our side room that is very good for large groups.”

What is Lee’s wish for the Panda Kitchen in the future?

“I would like to continue serving Carson City,” Lee said. “This is my home. I really like Carson City. I want to continue to serve fresh, healthy food.

“We have customers who drive all the way from Reno just to eat at our restaurant,” he said. “We like to please our customers. They keep coming back. I am very proud of my restaurant, my cooks and my team.”

Susan M. Botich is a freelance writer.