

Garden Cantonese Restaurant, Bangor

by Aaron Osborne-Taylor
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IT is a good few years since I last indulged in the Garden Cantonese Restaurant in Bangor. It's famous for fantastic Chinese New Year celebrations, and now boasts a Chinese supermarket in the basement.

Knowing how popular the Garden can be I had telephoned the previous evening, and was helpfully asked if I could make it a little earlier as they had a large party due at the same time – they didn't want me to risk any delays. Excellent customer service before even setting foot across the threshold, and something other establishments should take note of instead of trying to eke every last drop out of their capacity.

After spending the day pretending to be a tourist around Llanberis and Bangor, I was looking forward to a decent feed – and the Garden has never disappointed.

To ensure more than one dish was tested, and as an excuse for a bottle of wine, my friend Julie was commandeered for the evening. This was her first foray into Taste Testing but she is a veteran of restaurants both near and far, so suitably qualified for the job of assistant.

Service was attentive from the moment we arrived, with the option of a well-upholstered waiting area for busier times.

Having taken heed of the advice to arrive early, we went straight to our roomy table. We were immediately offered a choice of chopsticks or cutlery – I chose the latter to avoid the embarrassment of either catapulting rice over Olympic distances or attempting to harpoon larger chunks of food.

The Garden's menu is wide and varied with dishes to suit most tastes, which can create decision-making problems of epic proportions – we just about managed to decide before Cinderella's home time.

Being a slight greedy-guts, I wasn't minded to go for a smaller, sharing starter. Instead we ordered individual starters that could be combined and shared, in the interests of science of course.

We ordered one bottle of Pinot Grigio. This arrived quickly after ordering, and despite giving the name and menu number, the waiter arrived with the wrong one. No problem though, and the right one appeared in a flash along with suitable apologies, a temporary blip on otherwise top-class service.

The starters soon followed, king prawns in garlic sauce for Julie and spicy salt squid for me. The skewered prawns were succulent with a beautiful sauce, and soon met with a timely end. The squid was exceptionally tender, unlike the typical chewing-rubber-band experience, with a very subtle seasoning and salad. Probably on the mild side for my taste, but not everyone wants a spice inferno experience for a starter.

The thinking behind the large tables soon became apparent when the mains were served. Empty plates and bowls arrived first, with fresh chopsticks and cutlery, followed by a bowl of fried rice and then the star attractions – sweet and sour chicken for Julie, and pineapple and ginger chicken for me.

The sweet and sour was nicely presented, but paled into comparison to my selection – a half pineapple scooped out and filled with the cooked chicken dish.

Top marks for presentation, though works of art can be a shame to eat. As usual, I played the game of attempting to eat delicately for a few brief moments, but quickly degenerated and dumped the contents of the pineapple on my plate to effect quick disposal. Julie lasted a bit longer before doing the same, but the presentation was appreciated.

The food was delicious – the sweet and sour was of a high standard and befitting of a top- quality restaurant. My pineapple and ginger was also fantastic – very light, but nicely filling. My taste buds struggled to detect the ginger, but Julie assured me it was there.

Onto sweets and more difficult choices followed. Julie narrowed down three choices, and eventually plumped for chocolate trufito which was very tasty, but we should have kept a chopstick to spear it as it did a grand job of trying to escape from the bowl. I chose a very traditional banana split, and for once it was actually split down the middle. Supported by quality ice cream and fresh cream, it was a nice light feast to round off the excellent meal.

To complete the meal, we ordered a rum coffee and coffee floater. I caught a glance of a good inch of rum in the cup before the coffee was added, and Julie reported it was certainly well loaded. My plainer cream and coffee was also very nice, even better when boosted by half a cup of the rum rocket.

For any readers who may be concerned, I can report we both made it out of the restaurant upright and without attracting an ASBO.

The Garden Restaurant has a warm atmosphere and truly individual high-quality fresh food never fails to impress. It is well worth a visit to experience food that is just a little bit special.