



CHINA

DUMPLING INN ↑

The Inn's dumplings, stir-frys, and noodle dishes have a rabid following, so two years ago, they moved to bigger digs within the same plaza. Now there's more room to enjoy their namesake, with fillings ranging from pork and chive to beef curry, vegetarian, and seafood. The vibe is bustling, especially for happy hour—Tuesdays through Sundays from 4 to 6 p.m., when food is half-price—and on weekends, when crowds pack into the adjacent bar, Shanghai Saloon.

MUST-TRY DISH:

Xiao long bao

4625 Convoy Street, Kearny Mesa; dumplinginn.com

XIAO LONG BAO steamed pork dumplings

DRAGON EXPRESS

While the authentic Chinese restaurant has been dishing out traditional cuisine for nearly two decades, its spices and added meats give it the edge on signature dishes like fried rice and lo mein. Tucked right off the I-5, the fast-casual South Bay eatery is worth a visit for anyone yearning for homestyle stir-fry.

MUST-TRY DISH:

Garlic chicken

678 E Street, Chula Vista; dragonexpresschulavista.com

MINH KY This compact hole-in-the-wall is the best place for egg noodles in the city. It's also known for its low prices, huge portions, fast

service, and authentic dishes. The menu is dominated by egg noodle soups, but there are also lo mein plates, crispy noodles, fried rice, and meat plates. The ambience is simple, friendly, and usually packed.

MUST-TRY DISH:

Sate beef egg noodles soup

4644 El Cajon Boulevard, City Heights; minhkychinese.menuoteat.com

VILLAGE NORTH

At this bright, modern restaurant opened by a recent UC San Diego graduate, the kitchen is armed with three chefs: one who specializes in Northern Chinese fare, a second in Sichuan-style dishes, and the third in barbecue. It's worth sticking to the Northern cuisine, which includes stews with potatoes and pumpkin.

MUST-TRY DISH:

Pork with pickled cabbage hot pot

4428 Convoy Street, Kearny Mesa;

villagenorthsd.com

ROYAL MANDARIN

The strip mall eatery has a refreshed, expanded space. Expect the same casual setting and friendly servers, plus egg drop soup, Mongolian beef, seafood stir-frys, and more. They also serve a nine-dish family dinner for \$105 that serves up to 10 people, and they have a robust catering division—perfect for holidays, since they're open on Christmas and New Year's.

MUST-TRY DISH:

Salted pepper chicken wings

1132 East Plaza Boulevard, National City;

royalmandarinrestaurant.com

SPICY CITY This sit-down does fiery family-style dishes from Sichuan and Hunan, Chinese provinces with cuisines that love garlic, chilies, and more chilies. Offset the heat with menu items that aren't tagged with pepper symbols, like the fish with black bean sauce. Space is tight, so ideally stick to parties no bigger than four.

MUST-TRY DISH:

Sichuan-style spicy fish

4690 Convoy Street, Kearny Mesa; spicycity.menuoteat.com

COLOMBIA

↓ **ANTOJITOS COLOMBIANOS** It feels like you've stepped into Bogota at this petite, family-owned eatery that's half market, half restaurant. Cheese, plantains, and meat figure largely into the menu in dishes like fried, breaded pork loin, and Colombia's national dish, the **arepa**. The staff is gregarious and will happily explain menu items to newbies. Though the decor is no-frills, it's so friendly you'll want to sit and stay awhile.

MUST-TRY DISH: Sancocho, a meat soup
2851 Imperial Avenue, Grant Hill; antojitoscolombianos.com

AREPA a cornmeal patty stuffed with various fillings

