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NORTH STAR

► VILLAGE NORTH OFFERS TASTY, AUTHENTIC CHINESE CUISINE.

IF YOU THINK THAT CHINESE cuisine revolves around such concoctions as chop suey or orange chicken—dishes you would never actually find at truly authentic, traditional restaurants in China—I strongly encourage you to consider a visit to **Village North**, where your taste buds will be treated to the complexities of real Chinese flavors and textures. And by real, I mean authentic dishes from both northern and southern China. Each region and respective cuisine is so different from the other that the kitchen at Village North features two chefs—one specializing in northern Chinese

fare, one in southern, and soon, a third who will be the barbecue expert.

How do the cuisines differ, you ask? In a nutshell, dishes from chilly northern China tend to be heartier, with an emphasis on wheat, rather than rice; salt rather than very hot peppers; and meats such as mutton, beef, chicken or pork starring as the main ingredients. Southern China, whose hot and humid climate is ideal for rice paddies, gives us the spicy Szechuan style, different types of rice, and somewhat lighter dishes with more vegetables and seafood.

Village North, located in the Convoy Street dining dis-

← The Pot of Gold dish at Village North

trict—a hotbed for a diverse range of Asian cuisine—realizes young entrepreneur Steven Ji’s dream of bringing to San Diego the northern Chinese Dongbei-style food his grandmother cooks.

Says the UC San Diego grad and La Jolla resident, “There’s always been a shortage of authentic northern Chinese cuisine in San Diego. Village North is here to fill that void. You won’t find any of those Americanized creations on the menu. Each and every dish we serve has to pass the ‘would my Grandma approve?’ test. Everything from the broths to the noodles is made from scratch, and each dish requires a minimum of 10 ingredients to prepare.”

Also noteworthy—unlike many of the other Convoy Street establishments—Village North dishes do not include monosodium glutamate (MSG) in its ingredients. For those who are extremely sensitive or allergic to the common flavor-enhancing agent (like I am), this is truly great news.

My advice to first-time visitors to Village North: Be adventurous. Chicken feet, pigs ears or pork intestines,



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perhaps? Bring it on. Try a delicacy out of your usual comfort zone; if you don't know what something is, don't be afraid to ask.

Not feeling all that daring? Not a problem; there are plenty of other more familiar choices. Maybe start with rainbow rice noodles—a colorful, cold dish of wide, translucent homemade noodles, tossed with wood ear mushrooms, cucumbers, carrots and cilantro, and then tossed with a sesame dressing.

Another light option, perfect as a shared side dish, are the sour and spicy potato shreds. This northern-style selection features cooked julienne potatoes combined with hot peppers, carrots and a light, vinegary sauce for a very pleasing balance between peppery heat and cooling acidity.

On the heartier side, braised chicken with mushrooms, another northern dish, is rich with umami from the wild mushrooms in the thick, flavorful sauce; while the southern Szechwan-flavored fish stars a mild white fish, such as sea bass, smothered in fiery hot chopped peppers. The tofu dry pot is a filling vegetarian mixture of well-seasoned tofu triangles, spicy peppers and vegetables. Other popular dishes include the hot pot with pickled

cabbage and pork belly; the beef dry pot with potatoes; the Szechuan flank steak; the fried green beans; and the shrimp and lamb skewers.

Portions are large and served family-style, so go with several friends and try a variety of dishes. The bottom line: There's something on the menu for everyone—with vegetarian dishes, exotic carnivorous delights, healthy bites and hearty dishes.

Finding Village North can be a bit of a challenge. Tucked into the back of a Convoy Street plaza near Balboa Avenue, it's not visible from the street. But when you do locate the eatery, you'll find the interior cheery and contemporary. Ji spent six months renovating the former sushi bar, and the 109-seat eatery with private dining options and crescent shaped bar is open and inviting. The colorful, casual space is family-friendly and great for groups.

Late-night cravings? Village North is open Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 12:30 a.m.; and Friday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. (Closed Tuesdays.)

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