



RESTAURANT NEWS & REVIEWS

This Natomas restaurant ranks among the best in Sacramento for dim sum

BY KATE WASHINGTON
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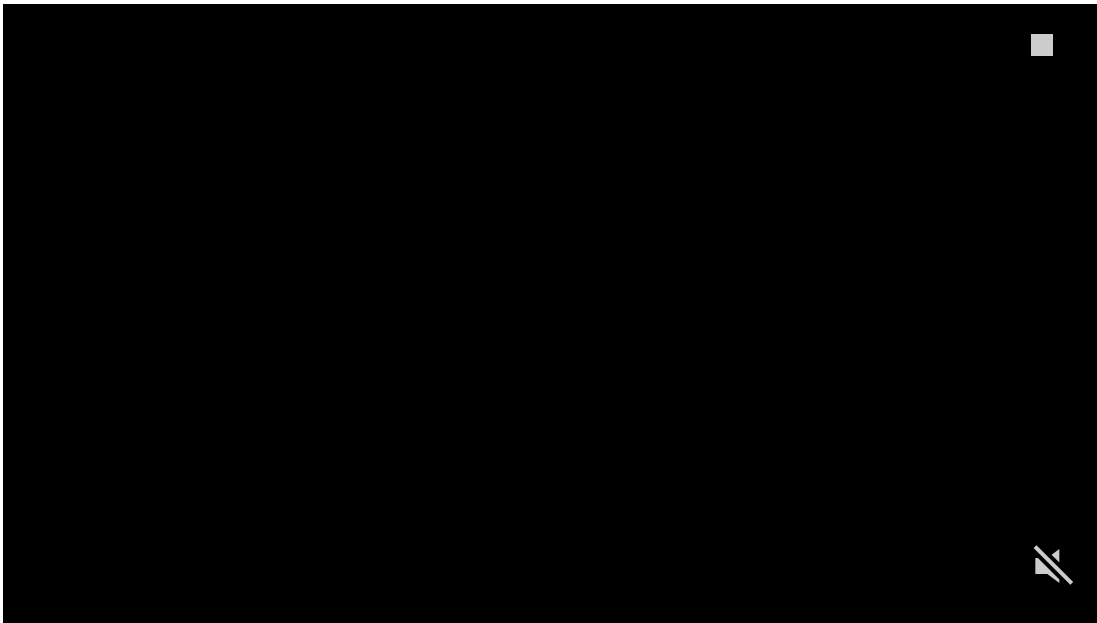
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Brunch is great and all, but sometimes a lazy weekend calls not for eggs but a parade of dumplings, washed down with large quantities of tea and (preferably) followed by a nap. Dim sum originated as simple tea snacks served in the southern Chinese province of Canton, and has evolved into an indulgent ritual, especially in Hong Kong, that's also popular in the U.S.

Sacramento's options, never plentiful, have narrowed in recent years, with the closure of some old standbys and others slipping in quality. The Tea Cup House and New Canton still serve central city diners, but West Sacramento's venerable King's Restaurant, with roots dating back to the 1960s, announced this week it was shuttering shop. South Sacramento offers some solid choices, including the cavernous Hong Kong Islander. But it is a newcomer in Natomas that is generating word-of-mouth these days.

Opened in June 2016, Yue Huang, housed inside the building of a former chain restaurant, is a decidedly pleasant discovery, offering daily, super-fresh and high-quality dim sum service, as well as a sleeper-hit dinner menu. (There's also an elaborate, appealing lineup of banquet options, which we didn't sample.)

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Yue Huang's exterior may look nondescript, but inside it is luxe: glass cases displaying high-end wines line the foyer; gorgeous and sparkling seafood tanks face the dining room; and velvety, cushy upholstered chairs add a fancy touch, as do crystal-drop light fixtures. I also was taken with a bright chrysanthemum mural and a bas-relief wall display of sinuous red and white ceramic koi.

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An assortment of dim sum at Yue Huang.

Paul Kitagaki Jr. - pkitagaki@sacbee.com

Even more eye-catching, however, are the contents of the carts that trundle through the dining room every midday. Weekend dim sum service is bustling at Yue Huang, all the better to ensure each dish comes out of the kitchen fresh and hot – and is snatched up by eager diners, pointing at the servers' wares, before it cools. As is often the case at busy dim sum joints, service was blunt but efficacious: They ask a yes or no question, you nod or shake your head, done.

There are two basic types of dim sum carts: the steamed and the fried. Carts stacked with bamboo steamer baskets are appealing because of their mystery; carts bearing fried food and miscellany flaunt their golden wares more obviously. A great dim sum meal depends not just the freshness and balance of the different dishes, but also on the diners' patience: It's important not to fill up before you get a look at everything that's coming around.



Let's start with the steamer baskets. The siu mai – open pork-and-shrimp dumplings with a wheat-based wrapper – are a standard dim sum item, and at Yue Huang they were outstanding, with juicy pork and plump shrimp. Har gow, shrimp dumplings in a thick, toothsome translucent wrapper, were another basic item done very well. (I never saw my favorite type of dumpling, shrimp and chive, make an appearance.)

I loved a dish I had not tried before, fried cylinders of silky tofu steamed with balls of shrimp paste on top. They looked like tiny chef's hats and tasted fantastic, the sweet shrimp contrasting with the yielding tofu. Less cute in their steamer basket, but worth closing your eyes to savor, were tender chicken feet, first fried and then stewed in a soy-rich sauce redolent of star anise. Slices of jalapeño on top added a welcome note of heat.



Steam BBQ pork rice rolls at Yue Huang.

Paul Kitagaki Jr. - pkitagaki@sacbee.com

Rice noodle rolls (cheong fan) also were excellent, particularly filled with sticky BBQ pork and drizzled with soy. Rolled tofu skins, filled with vegetables such as cabbage, added a lighter note to the table. Fluffy steamed bao (buns) with various fillings were ultra-light spongy and not overly cloying. I especially liked the chicken bao, which got a flavor and textural contrast from fine, crunchy threads of ginger.



On one cart, amid the usual welter of har gow, was something I'd never seen before: walnut buns, steamed tan balls of fluff imprinted with a pattern that looked something like the outside of a walnut shell. Inside, the filling was very similar to a pecan pie, including the presence of pecans (not walnuts), making for a sugary treat.

A more familiar treat are egg custard tarts, with their pools of smooth yellow filling. Yue Huang's version was textbook-perfect, with meltingly flaky pastry contrasting with satiny, eggy filling. Those, and other sweets we were too full to try, often occupied cart space alongside that second major category: the fried.



Fried shrimp balls at Yue Huang.

Paul Kitagaki Jr. - pkitagaki@sacbee.com

My favorite of these were the fried shrimp balls encased in shreds of paper-thin wheat wrapper, so that they look like a lion's mane, or a fanciful asteroid, when fried. Greaseless and crunchy, they were hard to stop eating. I also gravitated toward fried taro balls, with a lacy-crisp exterior contrasting with the soft mashed taro and rich pork filling inside. Also a hit were melting-textured slices of amethyst-colored Chinese eggplant topped with perfectly maple-hued breaded ovals of fried shrimp paste.

Yue Huang's focus on seafood shone in more than just shrimp; it also was evident in the delectable chunks of lobster inside a turnover-shaped fried dumpling. Less successful were rectangular daikon cakes, pasty and dominated by the fug of flaked dried fish. Enormous plates of emerald-green Chinese broccoli, steamed tender and drizzled with oyster sauce, would be a must-order if only for the fiber, but they also add a bracing, moderately bitter contrasting note to a rich spread.



Chicken and crab clay pot surrounded, clockwise, fried shrimp balls, broccoli with oyster sauce, eggplant stuffed with shrimp paste and baked BBQ buns at Yue Huang.

Paul Kitagaki Jr. - pkitagaki@sacbee.com

During dim sum service, we saw several tables with whole fish and lobsters, which we did not sample (in the absence of menus, it wasn't entirely clear how to order them). We did receive menus at dinner though, when Yue Huang sharpens its focus on seafood. The menu offers many familiar Chinese-American basics, but sit-down service was worth a visit for dishes such as crab with pea shoots, with a subtle and delicate winey sauce, or faintly chewy abalone braised with matsutake mushrooms and a fan-shaped, softly spongy yellow fungus I never had tasted before. The manager tried to track down the English name for me. He had no luck, but did tell me it was very good for health. It soaked up the savory brown sauce beautifully, whatever it was.

(By the way, don't go for dinner expecting a wine list informed by those prestige choices in the glass cases at the entrance: Those seem to be for banquet service, and the regular wine list offered a few lackluster choices by the glass, with a few basic beer offerings. We stuck with jasmine tea on all our visits, with teapots refilled with alacrity.)



We also enjoyed the sing ma street noodles, tagged on the menu as a chef recommendation: vermicelli-thin rice noodles, dry fried with mild curry, and studded with red-spiced shrimp. More familiar noodle dishes were also successful; my expectations for chicken chow mein are generally low, but Yue Huang's was a good version, with the distinctive smoky taste of the hot wok, a light hand with oil and big chunks of tender chicken. Potstickers stood out for their savory, gingery pork filling. Roast duck, available both at dinner and on the dim sum carts, was lacquer-skinned, luxuriantly fatty and delicious. Like a lot of dim sum, the duck is rich enough that all you need is a few bites.

Dim sum is almost always best with a crowd, so if you and your brunch squad have been pining for a break from bacon, hit the highway north. Just make sure you set aside the afternoon for lounging in a pleasant post-dumpling haze.

Email Kate Washington at beediningcritic@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter: [@washingtonkate](https://twitter.com/washingtonkate)

YUE HUANG RESTAURANT

3860 Truxel Road, Sacramento. 916-621-3737. www.yuehuangseafood.com

Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Friday; 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Saturday-Sunday.

Beverage options: Limited wine and beer list, soft drinks.

Vegetarian friendly: Not very, though there are more veggie dishes on the dinner menu than at dim sum service.

Gluten-free options: Yes

Noise levels: Buzzy, especially during busy weekend hours, but not overwhelming.

Ambiance: Elegant yet comfortable, with velvety chairs, banquet-size tables and a full wall of seafood tanks. Big TVs, however, detract from the fancy atmosphere.

Overall

☆☆☆

Dissatisfied with the central city's dim sum options? Cheer yourself up with fresh, plump siu mai, har gow and more from the overflowing carts at Natomas' upscale Yue Huang, where carts overflow with dumplings and buns prepared with finesse. There's also a wide-ranging and worthwhile regular menu, especially for seafood lovers, as well as lavish banquet service.

Food

☆☆☆

Dim sum is the big draw, with dumplings for days (anything with shrimp was a hit), plus bao, rice noodle rolls, egg custard tarts and more. While carts offer all the usual dumpling suspects, don't miss more unusual specialties such as the fluffy, sweet steamed "walnut" buns and spicy chicken feet. On the dinner menu serves hits like the light, curry-scented sing ma street noodles with shrimp.

Service

☆☆1/2

Overall, service was accommodating and helpful, despite occasionally challenges with a language barrier. Dim sum service can be a bit brusque, and if you have a table toward the back or out of the main traffic flow, the carts may come less frequently.

Value



Prices here might feel inflated for those familiar with dim sum, but quality and freshness warrant the bill. Higher-priced items on the dinner menu feature intriguing specialty seafood.

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