



Orange Chicken: Fresh and Delectable Orange Chicken

BY ALEX MACLENNAN

Live, Love,
Laugh and Eat
at Jenny's

Waterfront Welcome

Jenny Liu and her husband, Henry, own an Asian Fusion restaurant on the waterfront in Southwest, DC. Jenny runs the front, and her husband manages the kitchen and business side. Their daughters, Joanne and Julie, also contribute both in the restaurant and behind the scenes.

In the past twenty-five years, they've grown enough that, while the family still defines the quality and types of food their kitchen serves, they have both a French-trained seafood chef and traditionally-trained Chinese wok-chefs preparing their customers' meals.

But I'll get to the food in a minute. Two words: Orange Chicken. Two more? Mongolian Beef.

Jenny's has been part of the community for over twenty-five

years, and she considers the neighbors and customers to be family and friends. Joanne tells me that pregnant couples ask Jenny to divine whether they are having a boy or a girl. Single customers seek the Jenny Liu "stamp of approval" for last night's date.

Students are invited to exchange good grades for a free spring roll. There are long-married couples that met at Jenny's and new parents who sat in Jenny's highchairs themselves. The secret ingredient behind it all, her daughters say, is Jenny herself. So why didn't I even know she was there?

A few months ago, I took us on a walk down to the waterfront and the seafood barges there, commenting as I went about the few restaurants – the venerable Phillips, a nightclub, and the odd-fish-out, Jenny's Asian Fusion.

It seemed unusual that an Asian restaurant would sit there among the entirely waterfront-identified – crabs, oysters, hush puppies and slaw – joints that line that small stretch of the Washington Channel of the Potomac River in DC. But now that I've been to Jenny's, it makes perfect sense.

Jenny, you see, began working for a small boutique in Waterside Mall back in 1977. According to Joanne and Julie, her natural spirit and friendliness radiated well beyond her role at that first job, and

when the mall was undergoing one of its many reinventions, the landlord asked Jenny and Henry whether they would be willing to open a Chinese restaurant. Always game, and because "Mom loved her friends in Southwest and wanted a new challenge," she and her husband opened Jenny's that year, serving their first meal on January 20, 1983.

When I asked how they decided to call it Jenny's, Joanne explained: "My father's grandfather named Jenny 'Ji Li,' meaning 'lucky,' because he felt her addition to the family bought luck to the Liu family." (Her given name is Chien Liang Bi .) Apparently, "Ji Li"'s closet phonetic twin was "Jenny," and her mom has gone by that name ever since.

That brightness translated to the restaurant as well. Deciding that too many of the mall's stores were drab, she decided on a bright, cheerful color scheme. In particular, she loved the pink napkins she used in those early years. Joanne concludes: "From the first day, Jenny's has been a happy place to eat and laugh."

And then, with the demise of Waterside Mall, Jenny's moved – thanks in large part to their longstanding role in the community – to the bright sunshine and expansive views of their current space above the Capital Yacht Club. It's a welcome addition to the waterfront.

Like the juxtaposition of gleaming sailboats and the gritty shacks to the right, the blend of traditional waterfront seafood and classic wok-cooked Chinese seems like the perfect evolution of Jenny's style. Fit the neighborhood, work with good people, and create something for everyone – long time regulars, boaters, today's tourists – to share.

"We knew that our primary objective was to keep the same delicious affordable food that we've always had at Jenny's and that southwest patrons have always loved. However, we needed to expand the menu and our offerings to include more variety to account for the increase in tourists and demand for items such as crab cakes and lobster on the waterfront.

"In addition, due to the evolution of Asian cuisine, coupled with the French seafood background of our chef, we were able to create some truly 'fusion' dishes such as

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our Jade Shrimp and Scallops which combines the delicate shrimp and scallops with Asian tastes of cilantro and herbs but in a very French-inspired cream-based sauce and served over a bed of wide noodles.” Well, well.

The handiwork of French-trained Adil Erturk is also evident in the Double Stuffed Lobster Tails. While the price of this entrée nearly triples its neighbors on the menu, the lushness of the lump crab meat, a heady, savory sauce, and crisply broiled lobster meat – served on the cracked backs of red lobster tails – warrants the additional price. We probably wouldn’t have ordered it on just an average day, but my friend had just had his teeth professionally whitened; he was only eating “pale white food.”

Family favorites run the gamut of the new menu. Jenny loves the crabmeat stuffed Rockfish, her husband tends toward the more traditional, very spicy, Drunken Noodles with Shrimp. Julie makes meals out of appetizers like the

whitest, moistest, freshest breast meat chicken I’ve ever had with Chinese food.

“Deep fried” in the service industry often means a cheap cut of meat. Not here. As with the Mongolian Beef, Jenny’s use of quality ingredients and refined techniques are a delightful surprise.

The restaurant itself is comfortably familiar. A Buddha statue and running fountain (paired with an invite to watch the Redskins on the patio bar) welcome guests on the ground floor, and glass cabinets of Asian knick-knacks perch at both ends of the stairs.

The service is quick, direct, loud-voiced and very friendly. The view is divine. And Jenny herself is usually at the door, and if not, she’s probably walking the floor, with a surveyor’s sharp eye – and even quicker smile – making sure all is running well.

Her commitment to her neighbors runs strong as well. The other day, a large group of astonishingly dapper African



Stuffed Shrimp: Classic, French-Inspired Stuffed Shrimp

mushroom-rich Shitake Surprise, Dumplings, and “Jenny’s Original” Vegetable Spring Rolls, while Joanne “leans toward” pan-seared fish and (finally, talk of dessert!) the Chocolate Mousse.

For my part, I enjoyed the Crab Pearls – mini crab cakes ripe with flavor – and found the Mongolian Beef surprisingly moist and robustly flavored. So often Asian beef dishes depend upon meat that’s been cooked beyond all recognition, but this large plate of tender beef, plentiful onions and scallions, and savory brown garlic sauce, gets it remarkably right.

Another of Jenny’s favorites (and another “Jenny’s Original”) is the Orange Chicken, and after tasting it, I can see why. A lighter, brighter cousin to the classic drenched and fried General Tso’s, the Orange Chicken here showcases a thick, sweetly sharp sauce dotted with darkly smoky orange rinds, and the

American ladies (of a certain age...) joined the lunchtime crowd of tourists and L’Enfant Plaza business types for lunch. There were twelve of them, slowly filtering in over the space of an hour, and each nodding to or leaning forward as the newest arrival came up the stairs and toward the table. They were joyous to greet each other, and when I asked what brought them here they simply said, “Jenny, of course.” I felt lucky to be in the know.

Alex MacLennan is a local writer and editor specializing in food. His first novel, THE ZOOKEEPER, was published this spring.

CORRECTION: In last month’s profile of Nage, Hill Rag listed the website as www.nage.biz, which is incorrect. The correct address is www.nage.bz. ■