

## Hot Pot is authentic Chinese dining

BY DAVID RAMSAY, FOR THE LEADER-POST FEBRUARY 24, 2012



Co-owners Daway Yang, left, and Jason Zhao hold up a few dishes at the Simmer Hot Pot Restaurant on Wednesday.

**Photograph by:** Troy Fleece, Leader-Post, For The Leader-Post

One of the first things one notices when entering Simmer Hot Pot Restaurant is the decor.

From the large, elegant and comfortable chairs to a wall-length mural depicting life in ancient China, Simmer's inviting atmosphere enhances what is a unique dining experience.

Located in what used to be a Broad Street coffee shop, Simmer offers an ancient form of dining that originated in northern China almost 2,000 years ago. The concept is similar to a fondue - but much healthier as the food is cooked in broth instead of oil.

The menu is very simple, listing a variety of platters that contain a main ingredient - beef, chicken, seafood, meatballs, mushrooms or a vegetarian option - along with vegetables such as zucchini, potatoes and baby corn. There is also a signature dinner for two platter that includes all of the above.

We decided on the combination platter, which is a good choice for a first-time visitor. Our meal started with a first course of pickled garlic cloves and radish slices and a bun flavoured with cinnamon and honey. We quite enjoyed all three - the radish and garlic have a very unique taste somewhat similar to kimchee, while a cinnamon bun might seem an unusual appetizer but compliments the meal well.

After a short wait, our hot pots were filled with a lightly flavoured broth consisting of water, ginger and seasonings, and two large platters of impressively presented meat and vegetables and two bowls of dipping sauce were brought to our table. The sauce in the first bowl was a wonderful mix of soya sauce, vegetable broth and spices, which was slightly spicy but not overwhelming. The second, smaller bowl was much hotter and it was suggested we could either dip our food directly into it or add some of its contents to the first bowl to adjust it to taste. We did the later, in order to create a hotter sauce.

Our server also gave us a few other pointers, telling us to wait for the "soup" to boil, then cook only a few mouthfuls of food at a time. The cooking process takes a minute or two, depending on the food being simmered - the beef, for instance, was thinly sliced and needed little cooking time while the meatballs required more time in the broth.

We followed her advice and spent the next 90 minutes slowly enjoying not only our food and several pots of oolong tea, but also the conversation between bites. It was a relaxing, leisurely way to spend an evening out.

Prices at Simmer are very reasonable, with the signature platter for two priced at \$44, and individual platters ranging from \$15 to \$24.

Simmer Hot Pot, which opened a little over a week ago and has been full every night, was created by owners Jason Zhao and Daway Yang as a way to introduce Regina to authentic Chinese cuisine.

"Hot pot is a very popular cuisine in China and we wanted people to enjoy the experience," says Zhao, who along with Yang are successful Regina businessmen. "We wanted to make sure we did it right."

Zhao explains their objective was to make an evening at Simmer an opportunity to relax and enjoy an authentic Chinese experience.

"For both of us, our vision is to have a place with good food, it's really about a love of good food," he says. "We want you to enjoy the process, experiment a little bit, try some of the seafood. It's really the time to embrace the whole experience."

One of their main focuses is the presentation of the food, Zhao says, explaining that in Chinese culture the colour, the fragrance, the taste and ingredients are all important parts of eating.

Simmer also allows customers to dine at their own pace - while the time spent dining at Simmer is similar to other high end restaurants, how the meal is eaten is quite different.

"Unlike a lot of restaurants, you don't sit down, order and then wait 30 minutes for them to cook it and bring it out," Zhao says. "Here you sit down, you order, and the food comes out in 10 minutes or so, and then as you are talking, you are cooking a mouthful at a time - you cook at a leisurely pace."

Currently, the restaurant is only open evenings but there are plans to eventually offer a luncheon menu.

Simmer Hot Pot Restaurant is located at 2201 Broad St.

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This is my last piece for Taste Regina. After reviewing and writing about 60 Regina restaurants over the past 14 months, I am leaving Saskatchewan for new adventures. While writing about dining in Regina, I was more than pleasantly surprised by not only the quality of Regina restaurants, but also the growing diversity of cuisine now available in the city. It has been a satisfying experience in so many ways and I hope it has helped Leader-Post readers learn a little more about Regina's vibrant restaurant scene.

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