



## Santana Row's hip new spot shifts into most creative gear after 4 p.m.

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Exotic drinks, striking decor and small plates of Asian food with a fusion twist: Chris Yeo knows how to set the stage for a party.

His Singapore-themed Straits Cafes in San Francisco, Palo Alto and San Jose's Santana Row long have been hits with drinkers and diners alike. Now Sino (pronounced SIGH-no), built around a Chinese theme, is the hip new spot on Santana Row.

Even on a weeknight, the lounge is overflowing with revelers. They're drawn by the dramatic design, sleek and stylish in theatrical shades of red and black, and imaginative cocktails in unusual but appealing combinations -- think Van Gogh apple vodka muddled with Thai basil and lime.

The cuisine reinterprets many familiar Chinese dishes with flashes of brilliance. However, the cooking is uneven, and some items were ordinary at best on my visits. Other dishes were disappointing.

The environment, created by Engstrom Design Group of San Rafael, is stunning. Diners enter down a long hall of deep, lacquered red with tiny tea lights flickering below panels that wall off the inviting lounge, where low, red upholstered benches are arranged like puzzle pieces opposite the sweeping ebony bar. Strings of silver metal beads shimmer like rain behind the reception desk, and kung fu movies flicker silently on layers of gauzy fabric in the sunken dining room. Globe lights hang from the dark ceiling like marble moons.

Two other dining areas, separated by screens and silky curtains, divide the 280-seat restaurant into zones. The tables closest to the bar share the noisy energy of the lounge. Those toward the rear, where booths and banquettes break up the space, are more geared to serious eating and quiet conversation.

Attention to detail extends to the settings on the dark, bare wood tables -- small, rustic red plates and black napkins -- although the chopsticks are the same paper-wrapped model found at most Chinese restaurants. Tea arrives in attractive silver and glass pots.

The ambience is reflected in the prices. That pot of tea, properly brewed with outstanding loose-leaf Chinese teas, costs \$10. Cocktails with names like Addiction and Serenity run \$11. A plate of crunchy Sichuan dry-fried Chinese string beans is \$10.

At lunch and throughout the afternoon, Sino serves fairly traditional dim sum. After 4 p.m. and late into the evening, the chefs shift to a dinner menu and take more liberties with the classic recipes. Offerings range from small plates of wontons filled with crab, cream cheese and green onion (\$10) or Snake River Kobe beef tartare (\$18) to a platter of tender Mongolian grilled rib-eye steak (\$28) served with a haunting, deeply flavored but only mildly spicy hoisin sauce.

An extensive wine list organizes wines from California, Europe and the Southern Hemisphere by description, including "aromatic spicy whites" such as rieslings, and "rich powerful reds" like cabernet and Bordeaux. Service on a recent weeknight was casual, friendly and efficient, if not polished. We were warned that food arrives when it's ready, but we weren't prepared for appetizers to come before the drinks.

It was love at first bite for the kung pao chicken lollipops (\$10), an inspired new spin on an old Chinese favorite. No wonder it's the most popular dish on the menu. Drumsticks, frenched so the meat is clustered at the top and the bone serves as a stick, are fried in a coating of crushed peanuts and served with a spicy chile sauce.

Flaky scallion pancakes (\$6) were an irresistible combination of a soft and moist onion-laced interior with crisp, well-browned exterior on a bed of shredded lettuce. Their roasted shallot and peanut sauce was addictive. Crispy kumquat chicken medallions (\$12) were a delightful interpretation of the familiar lemon chicken in a light, ultra-tangy citrus sauce that offered new dimensions of intense flavor.

Other dishes, though, were competent at best. The crispy Chinese chicken salad could have used some fusion drama, but Sino plays it straight with slices of deep-fried chicken breast arrayed atop a bowl of iceberg lettuce with an ordinary dressing. Red salt and black pepper pork chops (\$12), once again deep fried, were dull and dry. Choices were few for dessert, among them the ubiquitous molten chocolate lava cake. We opted for green tea cheesecake (\$7), a lovely, subtle blend of Asian flavor and Western richness.

At lunch on another day, servers brought around trays of dumplings, steamed buns, stuffed vegetables, pot stickers and more (\$3.75-\$6 per plate) hot from the kitchen in steady rotation.

All are made fresh in-house with excellent ingredients, and most were satisfying. The pan-fried bean curd roll stood out, the paper-thin tofu skin wrapper a crackling contrast to the filling of big, juicy shrimp.

Yet Shanghai dumplings were short on the meaty broth that created their identity as "soup dumplings," pot stickers could have been seasoned more aggressively, and Singapore noodles (\$15) -- skinny pasta tossed with crab and chive flowers -- were distressingly bland.

Our disappointment was tempered by the charm of distinctly untraditional steamed buns stuffed with bittersweet chocolate for dessert.

Choose well and Sino delivers surprising, memorable flavors.

Sino 377 Santana Row, at Olin Avenue, San Jose (408) 247-8880

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**The Dish** Hip new restaurant gives Chinese food a fusion twist in a dramatic setting.

**Price range** Lunch \$3.75-\$24. Dinner appetizers \$6-\$18, entrees \$10-\$48. Corkage fee: \$15.

**Details** Outdoor tables for nice days.

**Pluses** Stunning decor and imaginative drinks

**Minuses** Uneven menu mixes the ordinary with the outstanding.

**Hours** Lunch 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Mondays-Sundays. Dinner 4-10 p.m. Sundays-Tuesdays, 4 p.m.-midnight Wednesdays-Saturdays.

Restaurant reviews are conducted anonymously. The Mercury News pays for all meals.