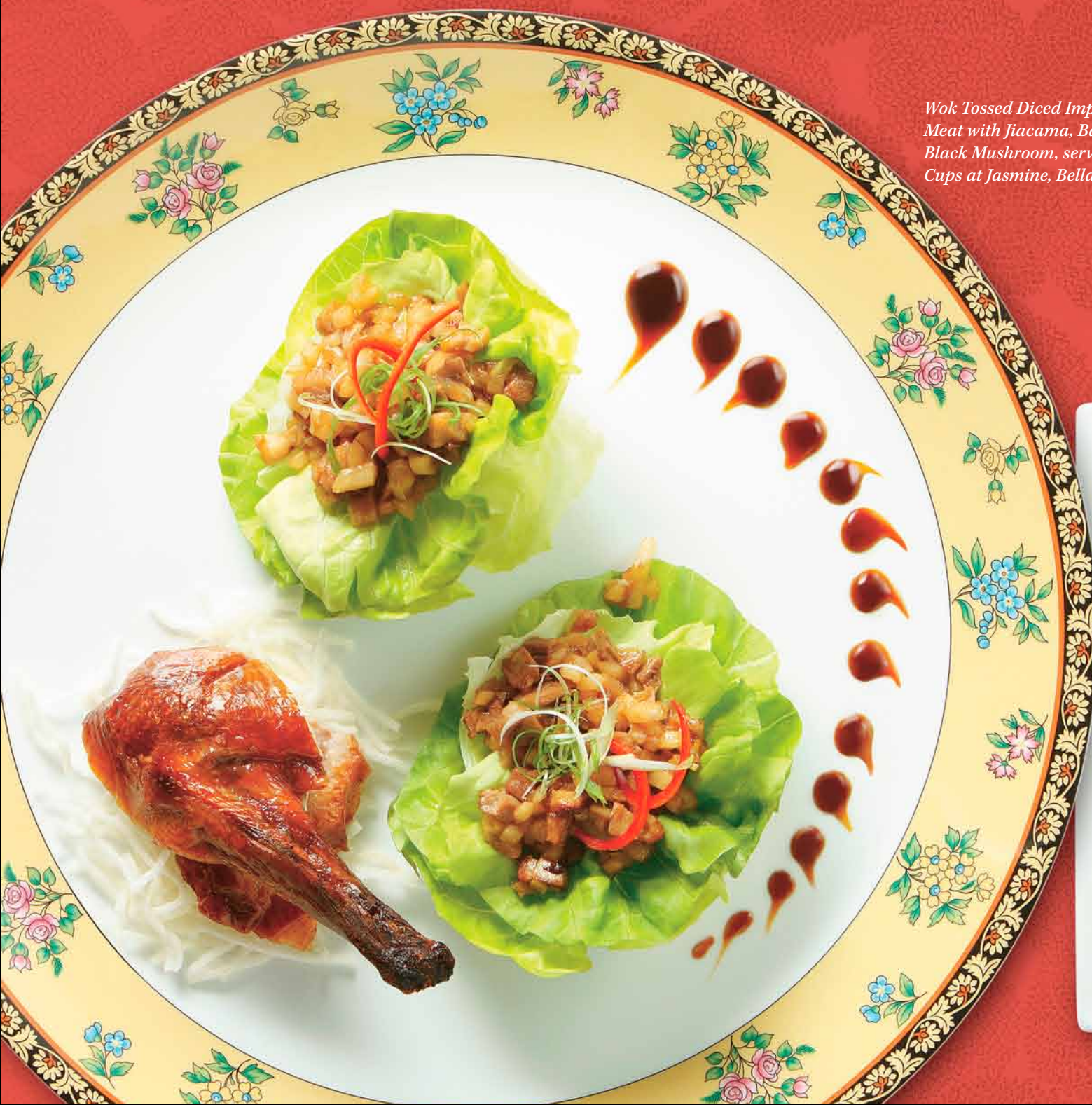


good fortune

Innovative chefs offer an array of mouth-watering menus for those seeking classic yet creative Asian-inspired fare.

By ANNELESE DOYLE KLAINBAUM | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAIME BIONDO



Wok Tossed Diced Imperial Peking Duck Meat with Jicama, Bamboo Shoots and Black Mushroom, served in Butter Lettuce Cups at Jasmine, Bellagio



Almond Crusted Lemon Chicken at Pearl, MGM Grand

Pot Stickers at Blossom, ARIA



There was a time when Asian dining meant lo mein or fried rice and a soda, and most certainly, ending the evening with a fortune cookie. ¶ These days, just hearing the words dim sum, edamame, bok choy or shiitake is enough to make us hungry. It seems our culinary tastes have evolved at an incredible pace, and we are seeking dishes that satisfy all cravings from the familiar to the exotic. ¶ A group of talented chefs are taking on that challenge, bringing a modern culinary perspective to this well-loved cuisine. From traditional Hong Kong fare to classic Chinese-American favorites and creative interpretations of Pan-Asian cuisine, you'll find a variety of Asian-inspired menus.

Brilliantly Balanced

Explore the flavors of Asia at a sleek, beautifully designed restaurant such as Blossom at ARIA where Executive Chef Chi Kwun Choi's self-described "inventive yet traditional" cuisine introduces you to savory dishes that balance familiar and new flavors.

Chef Choi began his career in Hong Kong at the age of 13 and has worked nearly 35 years in the culinary industry. In the winter months, his menu focuses on hearty foods such as hot pots and the restaurant's best-selling pot stickers. These dishes "create energy and warmth," Chef Choi said.

Blossom's Pot Stickers are the most popular appetizer and for a good reason: It's the perfect comfort food, even for those trying these classic dumplings for the first time. The dough is made fresh daily and a unique wrapping style allows for a generous stuffing of pork and vegetables.

The restaurant is known for its fresh seafood, so don't miss the shrimp and scallop Wor Won Ton soup or the Dungeness Crab, which is made in traditional Hong Kong style, selected live from the tank and prepared steamed or wok fried with lemongrass, chilies, garlic and scallions.

East meets West is a recurrent theme on Chinese menus along The Strip and beyond, and it's fabulously executed at Jasmine, which has received the AAA Four Diamond Award multiple years in a row as well as additional accolades from *Wine Spectator*. Bellagio's Executive Chef Edmund Wong serves up elegant nouvelle Hong Kong cuisine in the formal dining room overlooking Bellagio's magnificent fountains.

Born in Hong Kong and raised in Vancouver, B.C., Chef Wong draws on his Asian background and his classical European culinary training. When it comes to flavor, his approach is purely Zen.

"I prefer to keep food simple and natural, focusing on the intensity of individual flavors and the harmony of regional ingredients," Chef Wong said.

His culinary philosophy is evident in the Imperial Peking Duck, which is served in two courses that showcase distinctly different styles. The first is presented tableside with crepes, scallions, shredded cucumber and hoisin sauce. The second is wok tossed, diced duck meat served in butter lettuce cups with jicama, bamboo shoots and black mushrooms.

Some like to enjoy a cold beer with Chinese food, and while that's typically a good choice, at Jasmine a red wine like Côte du Rhône would be the best match for this regal dish.

At MGM Grand, Pearl's Chef de Cuisine Kai-Wa Yau has a similar approach to his craft. He uses three words to sum up his culinary philosophy: "Simple, tasty and beautiful."

Chef Yau's menu is constantly changing to make the most of seasonal produce and ingredients. His masterful cooking is served in a contemporary Chinese atmosphere in Pearl's serene dining room, and the restaurant has received the AAA Four Diamond Award the past five years along with additional awards from *Wine Spectator*.

After working in Hong Kong restaurants for 30 years, Chef Yau was recruited to bring his culinary talents to the United States. The Almond Crusted Lemon Chicken – wok-fried chicken coated in sliced almonds and served with a bright lemon sauce – is his interpretation of the classic Chinese dish.

"The dish smells extraordinary," Chef Yau said of the flavor pairing.

For a more traditional take on Chinese dishes, try the Crispy Garlic Chicken or Fire-Roasted Mongolian Beef at Pearl, which are tasty mainstays on the menu.

Flavorful Fusion

At Rice & Company at Luxor, the menu reads like a greatest hits of Pan-Asian cuisine: spring rolls, lettuce wraps, miso soup, lo mein and pad thai. The restaurant's sushi bar offers traditional sushi and sashimi, but also some aptly named specialty rolls such as the Crazy Mad Dragon and the Hot Dang. Desserts including Fried Banana Nutella served with coconut ice cream do not disappoint.

Don't let the casual vibe and plentiful menu here fool you. Executive Chef Kun John Kan, known around town for the flavor-packed dishes he formerly turned out in Vegas' Chinatown, presents traditional Hong Kong cuisine alongside the Asian-American favorites with ease. And with his 30-plus years of experience in China and the United States, it was only natural Rice & Company recruited Kan to launch the new concept.

Chef Kan is master of the wok, exemplified by Crispy Fish. The dish is a stunningly presented whole, filleted rex sole that is deep fried to create a nest for egg noodles and the fish fillets, which are cooked with a spicy black bean hunan sauce.

"The black beans and the spicy chili sauce draw out the flavor of the fish," Chef Kan explained. He likes this dish best with a medium dry sake such as Yuki No Boshu, an aromatic sake with hints of pineapple and mango.

While dishes like this one are purely authentic – straight from the Hong Kong kitchen – some Asian-American dishes such as orange chicken or egg rolls have become modern comfort food in their own right.

And then there is Executive Chef Timmy Che at Fin at The Mirage. After 30 years of cooking, he has learned a thing or two about what pleases guests' palettes and he's paving the way for new classics. With butterflied tiger prawns set atop American-style white toast and served with an addictive sweet and sour sauce, his Crisp Shrimp on Fried Toast is an instant win.

"It's an Americanized Chinese dish, such as fortune cookies," he said.

The Wok Fried Lamb Chop with pepper and garlic is also a must try. And so are the

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Wok Fried Royal Red Shrimp with a Sweet and Sour Ginger Sauce at Jia, Beau Rivage

Crispy Whole Fish at Rice & Company, Luxor

signature cocktails including The Fin Lychee Martini or The Zen Mojito, made with carefully chosen fresh fruits and intriguing spirits. The hand-painted wallpaper, glass spheres and private rooms at Fin combine to create an intimate atmosphere.

Creative Pan-Asian cuisine such as Chef Che's has graced tables for the past few decades, and the influence of experienced Asian chefs on young Asian-American talent is now being felt in restaurants across the United States from Vegas to the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

At Beau Rivage in Biloxi, MS, a Texan of partial Japanese heritage, Chef T.J. Antell has elevated the menu at Jia to new heights. With back-to-back AAA Four Diamond Awards and nods from *Wine Spectator*, Jia's upscale fusion cuisine has acquired a devoted clientele. Chef Antell combines the

culinary traditions of Japan, Thailand, China, Korea and Vietnam into a sophisticated menu set in an unpretentious dining room adorned with paper lanterns.

"Asian flavors run in my blood. My grandparents are Japanese and my mother was born in Tokyo, so I have the greatest respect for how the Asian cultures treat ingredients by not trying to alter their flavors. They try to keep the food in its pure form and taste,"

he said. To get the full experience, start your evening at Jia with the Crab and Avocado Spring Rolls and then try the Wok Fried Royal Red Shrimp, which showcases the local seafood. Round out the meal with a chilled sake and Green Tea Crème Brûlée.

In Asian cuisine it's "all about the ingredients," Chef Antell said. High-quality, seasonal ingredients must combine harmoniously, playing

off of sweet, spicy, salty, bitter and sour flavors.

Perhaps this focus on freshness and balanced flavors is what is so universally appealing about Asian cuisine. Or maybe it's the endless array of restaurants and dishes that's so exciting.

In any case, it doesn't take a paper fortune to state the obvious when it comes to Asian restaurants: A pleasant surprise is waiting for you.

So there is no excuse for sticking with beef and broccoli when there is the good fortune of having these expertly crafted dishes at your disposal. Go for the seared foie gras with black pepper with a glass of champagne and a lychee trifle. Order lobster tail with a Cantonese black bean sauce and tempura green beans. Or try Singapore rice noodles with mushroom spring rolls and a cold beer.

And go ahead, ask for your fortune cookie too. ■

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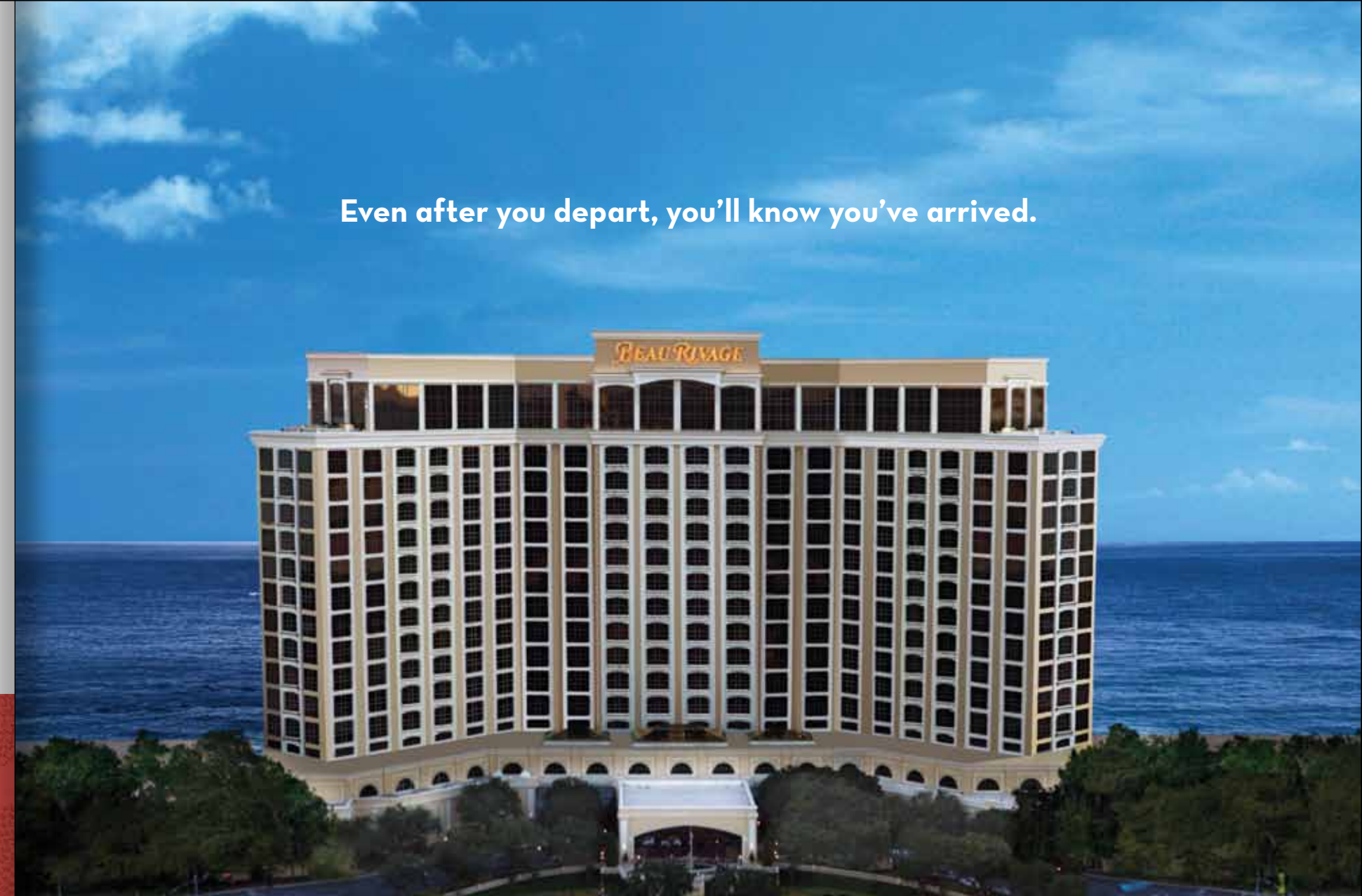
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Crisp Shrimp on Fried Toast at Fin, The Mirage



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