

ORDER UP

9/23/93

A Garden of Healthy Delights

IF YOU'VE BEEN LISTENING to the media hype about Chinese food lately (I was amazed to see a front-page story proclaiming that Chinese food "isn't health food") you might be thinking about avoiding your chow mein and mu shu pork altogether. However, I'd advise you to take a second look at restaurants that go out of their way to prepare the food in a healthy way — restaurants like the new Mei Garden Restaurant II in Santa Cruz.

Mei Garden uses absolutely no MSG (that chemical "flavor enhancer" that is used to mask low quality ingredients with a tangy, salty taste). Its dishes are prepared with vegetable oil, light sauces and an abundance of fresh vegetables. Besides all that, it is a spacious, relaxing restaurant that's very easy on the wallet.

Located in the 5,000-square-foot former Acapulco Beachcomber restaurant next to the County building, Mei Garden allows diners to stretch out and stay awhile. On a recent evening, Craig and I sat in a comfortable booth, drawing in a few deep breaths to recover from our busy day.

A lot of families were there that night, enjoying the prompt service and no-hassle atmosphere that makes

eating out with small children bearable and even enjoyable. Most of the families I watched seemed to be having a happy, peaceful meal. It's the type of place where you can have a conversation without being shouted down by the group at the next table.

Mei Garden offers both Szechwan (spicy) and Cantonese (mild). We

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started out by splitting a chicken salad appetizer (\$3.50). The salad was a tasty mixture of chicken, vegetables and roasted almonds, but I'd suggest ordering the dressing on the side (it was a bit sweet). Other traditional appetizers such as egg rolls, pot stickers and dumplings with hot sauce range from \$1.95 to \$3.50.

Soups are also a bargain. A small pot that serves up to three people can cost as little as \$2.95, while larger pots which serve up to six go for

\$3.95-\$6.25. We followed up with mu shu chicken (\$5.50) and the Sizzling Seafood Platter (\$8.50). Mu shu chicken is one of my favorites, but it's a dish that can be full of fat and salty sauce. Not so at Mei Garden, where chicken, shredded cabbage, bamboo shoots, mushrooms and eggs are sautéed in a very light sauce. You control how much plum sauce you slather on the pancakes.

Mei Garden's sizzling dishes are a feast for the eyes and nose, even before you taste them. Our sizzling seafood platter was brought next to our table on a tray. Our waiter first spread what seemed like an obscene amount of garlic on a hot iron skillet. I didn't protest because the smell was delicious. Then came the seafood — scallops, shrimp and calamari — and lots of sliced vegetables.

The whole thing was placed bubbling and steaming on our table. Once again, the sauce was mild and light (despite all that garlic). I imagine children would love the fun presentation of a sizzling dish.

If your taste buds are craving something racier, try one of Mei Garden's many spicy dishes. On an earlier visit, we ordered almond chicken (\$5.50) and asked the chef to make it spicy. It was a big, filling dish

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Diners enjoy healthy Chinese food at Mei Garden Restaurant II.

and had just the right zing. A lot of other dishes — curry shrimp (\$6.50), hot and spicy pork (\$5.50) and kung pao chicken (\$5.50) — also sound tempting.

Vegetarians can choose from about two dozen dishes, including eggplant with black mushrooms (\$4.50), vegetable fried rice (\$4.25), tofu with vegetables in garlic sauce (\$5.50) and vegetable sizzling rice soup (\$3.95-\$4.95).

If you work or play downtown

during the week, stop in for Mei Garden's lunch special. For \$3.95-4.50, you get soup of the day, fried won ton and your choice of 26 dishes over rice.

Mei Garden Restaurant II
533 Ocean Street
Santa Cruz 458-1687

Hours:
11 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday through
Thursday
11 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday and Saturday