

ATLANTA ORDERS IN; ; Urban Wu offers exciting Sichuan

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Byline: Wendell Brock

For the AJC, Staff

Highlight: Buckhead restaurant's takeout showcases noodles and dumplings.

Body

Jing Lin was a young immigrant from China when she opened her first business, a cosmetics boutique in New York City. The shop failed, but, after moving to Atlanta three years ago, she found her footing -- first with another cosmetics shop, then with a pair of Sichuan restaurants.

Lin decided to try the dining industry after meeting business partner Gary Lin (a distant cousin) and a pair of talented chefs, John Wu and Haibin Wang. Last year, the partners opened Urban Wu in the so-called Disco Kroger shopping center on Piedmont Road in Buckhead, followed by Hai Authentic Chinese at Suburban Plaza in Decatur.

Wu, who previously worked at high-end hotels in Russia -- and, according to Lin, has a fan in Russian President Vladimir Putin-- excels at more traditional Sichuan at Urban Wu. Wang, a former partner of the famously peripatetic chef Peter Chang, cooks with a more modern touch at Hai, which also showcases noodles and dumplings made in-house by his wife, chef Qin Yinghua.

For Lin, 33, the pivot from mascara to mapo tofu was well timed.

"Right now, it's a very hard time for retail," Lin said by phone, talking about her Jimmy Carter Boulevard cosmetics store while scrambling to package lunchtime takeout at Urban Wu. Fortunately, in a year's time both her restaurants have managed to cultivate a younger clientele that craves spicy food and is facile at ordering online.

For now, both restaurants offer only takeout. "As restaurant owners, we want to reopen," Lin said, "but we worry about it."

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In particular, she's concerned her servers might be challenged by medical expenses if they got sick. At the same time, she wants to give back to the community by donating food to front-line workers. She said she's reached out to Emory Healthcare, but hasn't gotten a response.

I gave Hai a favorable review last August, but I had not ventured to Urban Wu, though I'd heard good things about it from diners I trust.

On Tuesday, I placed an order online and drove to Buckhead. Elegantly dressed and wearing a mask, Lin handed me my order through a takeout window, ran my credit card, and sent me on my way with a weighty bag of dan dan noodles, kung pao chicken, braised fish in chili oil, and double-cooked pork.

Part of the joy of contributing to this column is that you discover places you want tell your friends about, places where the brilliance of the cooking subsumes the existential dread of gloves, masks, hand sanitizer. Based on the dishes I tried, I'd put Urban Wu in the top tier of intown Chinese restaurants.

Chinese-American restaurant owners mastered the art of takeout decades ago. Now, thanks to restaurateurs like Lin, the options are more exciting than ever. Let's hope the pandemic doesn't change that.

Is there a restaurant you want to see featured? Send your suggestions to ligaya.figuera@ajc.com

(Box)

URBAN WU

Menu: full menu of traditional Sichuan dishes, some Chinese-American classics (sister restaurant Hai Authentic Chinese offers a similar menu, but with more modern touches)

Alcohol: has a beer and wine license, but not set up for takeout

What I ordered: dan dan noodles with beef (\$7.95); braised fish in chili oil (\$17.95); kung pao chicken (\$13.95); Sichuan double-cooked pork (\$15.95). The food was neatly packaged, traveled well and looked beautiful. The heat level hit the sweet spot--unlike a lot of Sichuan food around town, this wasn't loaded with scads of inedible dried chiles. I liked the lightness of the dan dan noodles, and the nicely balanced, deeply burnished, mahogany-colored sauce of the kung pao. The twice-cooked pork belly was a tad dry, but the complexity of flavors--and the so-called dragon's breath of the wok--were revelatory. The fish was swimming in chili oil, as is traditional, and was quite lovely spooned over white rice. Co-owner Jing Lin wanted me to try one of her favorite appetizers--lettuce cups with minced chicken, in a sweet sauce, garnished with pine nuts--so she included one on the house. I can see why she likes it so much; it's a wonderful appetizer. Service options: takeout only; order by phone or online; food is handed to you through a window at the front of the restaurant; delivery via GrubHub and Uber Eats; pay in cash or via credit card at the restaurant (the online app is not set up to take credit cards)

Safety protocols: follows standard CDC procedures and recommendations

Address, phone: 3330 Piedmont Road NE, Atlanta; 404-816-8008.

Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Mondays-Sundays. Website: urbanwuga.com

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