

RESTAURANTS

Star Tribune

TASTE SECTION

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23 • 2004

Leeann Chin's new restaurant is made to order for those who need a decent meal in Mallworld

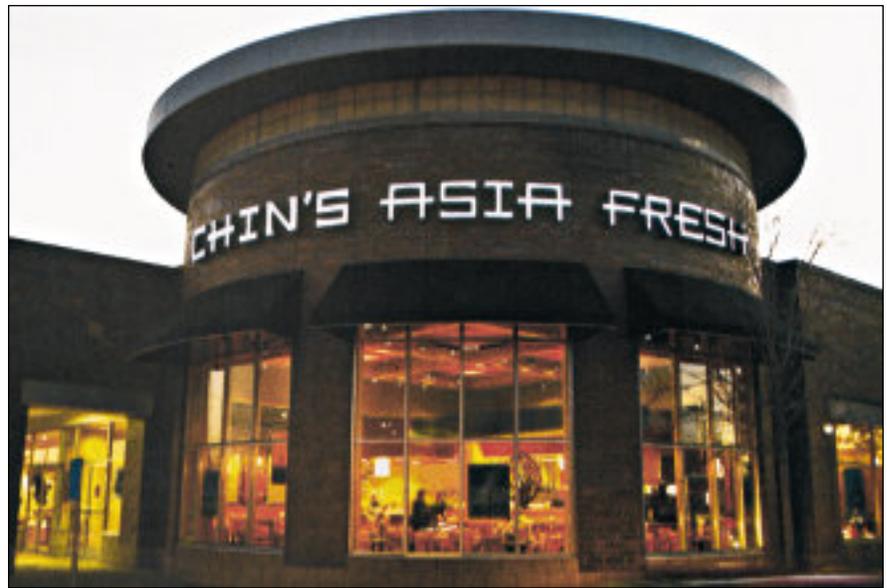
Asia Fresh twist

Jeremy Iggers
Star Tribune Staff Writer

“Capitalism is great,” my friend Tom exclaimed, his voice a rich blend of reflexive sarcasm and begrudging admiration. We were standing at the counter at **Chin's Asia Fresh**, Leeann Chin's new Asian-theme restaurant in the former Zaroff's Deli location at Interstate Hwy. 394 and Hopkins Crossroad in Minnetonka. Tom, a lifelong socialist, had just discovered he could get a decent glass of shiraz for a mere \$3.75 and eat made-from-scratch Asian cuisine in rather stylish surroundings at prices — most entrees are less than \$7 — that even an underpaid, untenured philosophy professor could afford.

Tom's meaning was clear: Free markets, and the lash of competition, really are making the world a better place by bringing quality to the masses. “What's wrong with the old **Leeann Chin's**,” he opined, “is the fact that the stuff sits out there.”

At Chin's Asia Fresh, everything is made to order, so the flavors are livelier, the textures crisper. But the Leeann Chin legacy is evident at Chin's in such signature dishes as cream cheese puffs, Chinese chicken salad, lemon chicken, sesame chicken and 10-ingredient fried rice. (There's also a Chin's Asia Fresh in Rochester, another opening soon



Photographs by Tom Wallace/Star Tribune

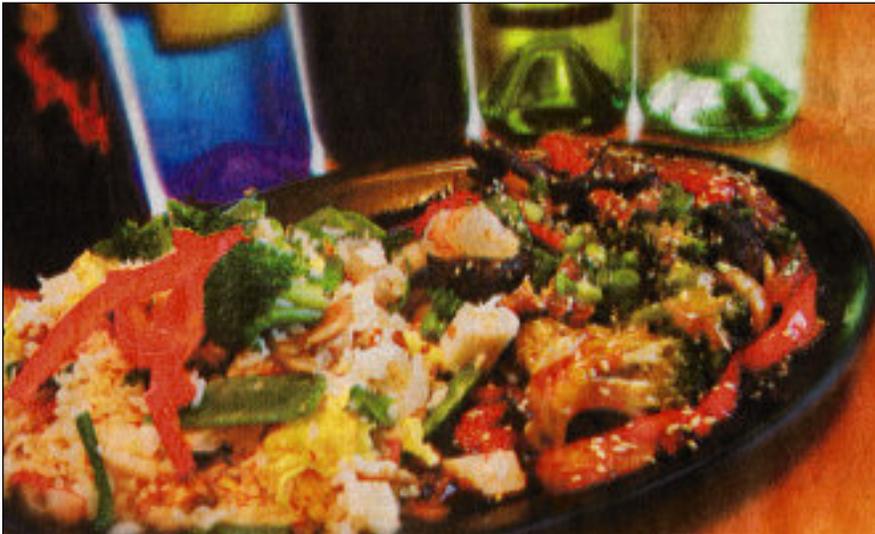
Chin's Asia Fresh, at the former Zaroff's Deli site in Minnetonka, offers a twist on the Leeann Chin model.

in Woodbury and four locations in Wisconsin.)

Tom's enthusiasm waned a bit after he actually tasted the pad Thai (\$5.50) with shrimp (\$2), which was a bit too oily and salty, but he was forgiving. “If we were at a Thai restaurant, I would go, ‘What's [wrong] with the pad Thai?’ But we're not at a real Thai restaurant,” he explained. The fairer comparison is with chain noodle restaurants such as **Noodles & Company**, which offer a few Asian dishes at comparable prices. But I'd rate the quality of the Asian food and ambience higher at Chin's.

The menu offers an “Asian stir-fry tour” that allows you to combine vegetables with beef, shrimp, tofu or chicken, and your choice of nine different sauces, ranging from teriyaki or sweet-and-sour to Sichuan, Thai peanut or Shanghai sesame. Six noodle bowls also are offered, including teriyaki udon, chow fun and spicy firecracker noodles, all of which can be topped with the same choice of meats or tofu. Vegetarians have a wealth of options: All of the stir-fries can be ordered with just vegetables, or vegetables and tofu, and all of the noodle bowls are available without meat.

RESTAURANTS



Everything is made to order at Chin's Asia Fresh. The stir-fries can combine vegetables with beef, shrimp, tofu or chicken and a choice among nine sauces.

I was pleasantly surprised by my Sichuan Kung Pao beef (a combination unknown in China, but no matter), an assertively hot and spicy stir-fry of beef, onions and red and green peppers, peanuts and scallions. I also thoroughly enjoyed another friend's dish of fried tofu and vegetables in an Indo curry

sauce, which was mildly spicy but had a rich curry flavor. The lettuce wrap, with minced chicken, fried rice noodles, water chestnuts and hoisin sauce, was a decent approximation of the versions served in real Chinese restaurants, but the sweet and wet chow fun noodles completely missed the mark.

It would be pointless to suggest that you can get much better renditions of many of these dishes at a good Thai, Chinese or Vietnamese restaurant, because Chin's Asia Fresh exists in an alternative reality called Mallworld, where authentic Chinese, Thai and Japanese restaurants don't exist. Mallworld (which includes developments like the West Ridge Market) has a gravitational pull that transforms everything that gets sucked into its vortex; it rounds the jagged edges of otherness off of the exotic and foreign, and renders it safe and familiar. Nothing terrible on the menu, and nothing too difficult to pronounce.

Chin's Asia Fresh, 11300 Wayzata Blvd., Minnetonka (in the West Ridge Market, Interstate Hwy. 394 and Hopkins Crossroad), 952-345-5010. Hours: Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

—Jeremy Iggers is at jiggers@startribune.com.