



MONGOLIAN CHICKEN



TWICE COOKED PORK



PRINCESS PRAWNS

# YEN CHING

BY DANNY FAIRCHILD

Yen Ching, I believe, is the first restaurant I ate at after I moved to Dubuque. That night, dining family-style with some of my future ex-wife's relatives, I tried the twice-cooked pork. And while I loved every dish that was lazy-susaned within my reach, I have never, ever, EVER ordered anything else but twice-cooked pork when I go there. Wait... one time I ordered twice-cooked chicken by mistake once. It was very good. But it was no twice-cooked pork. My point is this: I was married a few months later. The marriage is over, but my relationship with Yen Ching's twice-cooked pork endures, stronger than ever.

That's the magic of Yen Ching. All the food is good, but everybody has a Yen Ching dish that they are fiercely loyal to. You can't NOT order it. It goes beyond a go-to, but I wouldn't quite call it a compulsion. For me, I'm down wit' TCP. For others it's all about the princess prawn. For still others, it's the Mongolian chicken. There's kind of an aging population of the three delight fans. Perhaps it will see a renaissance in the future. Who can tell? Anyway.

The loyalty to one's own Yen Ching dish presented a problem in writing this article, as you can well imagine.

I went with 365ink's own Bryce and Kristina for lunch. The way this works is we each order something different so we (but most importantly I) can try multiple dishes. As previously stated, I'm Team Twice-Cooked Pork. But Bryce and Kristina are \*gasp\* BOTH Team Princess Prawn. This meant that, for the sake of variety, somebody had to order something different.

Which is not possible.

Then I realized my dish was already represented. I could order a dish IN ADDITION TO my dish, and save lunch and possibly the world. So I chose the third dish. In honor of my friends, the Greens, I ordered Teresa Green's favorite: Mongolian chicken.

But let's back up.

Stepping into Yen Ching, you know immediately that this is a family-run business. It's obvious in everything from the Wisconsin Dells family photos on display behind the counter to the fact that it's a family running the business. They know their customers. I don't think they actually know my name because I'm a fashionably awkward man (dibs on the album title), but they know me. When Yen Ching peddles food

at the building where I work, we give each other a friendly greeting before I walk out the door and go to brick-and-mortar Yen Ching. Why don't I just get food right there and then? Simple. No twice-cooked pork.

When they seat you, they always ask if you need to see a menu. Always. Because so many of us don't. I have taken them up on a menu from time to time. Like many others, I've gotten it in my head to order something different. I never do because I literally can't, but I've thought about.

When you sit down, you're quickly served this egg drop soup that is more chicken soup than egg drop soup. OMIGOSH! IT'S A MOTHER AND CHILD REUNION! You Paul Simon fans out there feel me, yeah? Anyway, the soup is a wonderful hot greeting. And if that's not enough, a pot of tea is soon to follow. One way or another, you're going to get yourself comforted.

A word on the bathrooms. Yen Ching is housed in a string of very old buildings on Main Street. Yen Ching has been there since 1983, and it wasn't a young building then. All this to say that the bathrooms show some of that age. It's purely cosmetic, however, as they

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are clean and pleasant to the smell. I would not kick Yen Ching's bathrooms out of bed for eating crackers. I HAVE, however, done that to my son. Therefore, a case could be made that I love Yen Ching's twice-cooked pork more than I love my son.

Let's get in to it, shall we? That unfortunately-named twice-cooked pork. Worst name for a food since refried beans. That's the last time I will ever compare Yen Ching's twice-cooked pork to refried beans. I hate myself for doing it just this once. I'm typing this with my eyes closed right now, immersed in memories of this dish. There's a garlicky spiciness to it. Just enough to clear the sinuses during both cold and allergy seasons. You know...white people spicy. The vegetables are cooked but crisp in the way that only extremely high heat can deliver. So high that you have to STIR it as you FRY it so it doesn't immediately burn. Ever wonder why your home stir fries deliver the mush? Your heat isn't high enough, and you probably can't get it hot enough. Anyway. The taste is... would it make sense if I said that it has kind of a weary taste? I don't mean it tastes old. I mean it kind of drags itself slowly across your palate like it's happy to be home after giving it all it's got. Like it's been...twice-cooked. WUUUUUT?!

I am having so many personal epiphanies in this article.

The princess prawns. This is my second favorite Yen Ching dish. And it always has been. I know this, despite only ever ordering one thing, because I seem to have an affinity for princess prawn people. And princess prawn people will let you try their food. Anyway, if they stopped twice-cooking pork tomorrow, the princess prawns would be the natural successor. Because it's a miracle and only a miracle can replace my TCP. What's so miraculous about it? The fact that even though the prawns are sitting in Yen Ching's wonderful special garlic sauce, the breading on the shrimp always gets to your table crispy underneath it all. You know darn well that it hasn't been sitting out for any length of time because if you order

it take-out, the crispiness doesn't often make it home. Still good, though.

Then the dark horse. Mongolian chicken. It felt like cheating, I'm not going to lie. The betrayal, yes. But also the lust. It has a sweetness to it that I just don't get back home with twice-cooked pork. And gingery. I do love gingers. It has what I think is a little black pepper biting your lower lip and unbuttoning your shirt. I don't mean to say it's spicy. It's not spicy at all. But it is hot. And the bed of rice sticks it's served on offers is...I'm out of sex metaphors. I'll just say they offer a nice textural contrast like a real food writer.

Can you do something for me? If you have die-hard loyalty to a particular Yen Ching dish, please email us at the address below and tell us about it. I don't know what we'll do with this information. Probably nothing. At the very least it'll fuel my ego knowing that you've read this far. Thanks! ☒

**YEN CHING**

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