

FUJI ASIAN BUFFET

BY BRYCE PARKS

If fickle Dubuquers are supposed to swarm a new restaurant when it opens and then lose interest after a month, then fickle Dubuquers did not get the memo on Fuji Asian Buffet in Wacker Plaza across from Kennedy Mall. Two months in we made our most recent visit to the restaurant at 1:30 p.m. on a Saturday afternoon—and there was a 10 minute wait to get a table. Apparently, people like what they're finding here.

Following the demolition of the Asian King Buffet in Wacker Plaza in 2017, new construction brought other new dining options to that location. But just across the parking lot, a large portion of the exiting strip mall complex was renovated into an all new Asian buffet featuring a variety of new features that combine many popular modern Asian cuisine options together under one roof.

The decor is quite nice. So many Asian buffets have kind of a weird hodgepodge decor, but Fuji has a very modern, clean decor with great lighting, glass accents, and well-spaced seating including tables and booths. With two large dining areas to either side of the restaurant which is divided by the entrance and bar area, the restaurant also has a side room with additional seating which could also be used for groups or other private functions.

The central feature of the buffet is, of course, the buffet itself. Spread across three long double-sided buffet display tables, each one features a dozen different dishes covering a wide range of entrées. Many of these are the staples you have come to expect from a Chinese buffet, like General Tso's chicken, chicken and broccoli, chicken with mushrooms, green beans, pork with green peppers and onions and more. We particularly like black pepper chicken. You can find a number of non-deep-fried, sautéed entrées featuring chicken, beef, pork and seafood. The buffet offers white and fried rice as well as lo mein noodles and rice noodles as a base to build your meal around, if that's how you roll. There are also multiple Asian style soups to choose from.

While there are many of the items you expect to find on an Asian buffet and a very good selection of those, there really aren't especially unique options. It's a very

traditionally Americanized style buffet. And we don't say that as a negative. We just want you to know what to expect. If you like Chinese buffets, we think you will like this one very much.

The non-sauce fried options on the buffet are all collected together on the third buffet line and include crab rangoons, chicken wings, egg rolls, fried spring rolls, sweet and sour chicken, and more. The pan fried dumplings were very good. They take the time to actually pan fry them to crisp the bottoms as you would expect from a nice Chinese restaurant. There are also some very good chicken skewers that were worth going back for on a second trip.

There are a few odd things on the buffet which reminded us of the old Asian King location. We're not sure why macaroni and cheese, chicken nuggets, fried donuts, onion rings and garlic bread are on an Asian buffet, but perhaps this is something that kids and completely non-adventurous types who got dragged along to the Chinese restaurants against their will would enjoy. We didn't try these options.

There is also a larger dessert buffet across the back wall featuring fruit, pudding, cream puffs and ice cream, but let's be honest. Have you ever been in an Asian restaurant anywhere where the dessert was something to celebrate? It's not their fault. There just seems to be no such thing as great Asian desserts, unless you have a serious fried banana fetish. But what was there was fresh, attractive and plentiful. Though they do have traditional style scoop ice cream with eight flavor options which was nice. Plus, if you are like us, crab rangoons qualify as dessert.

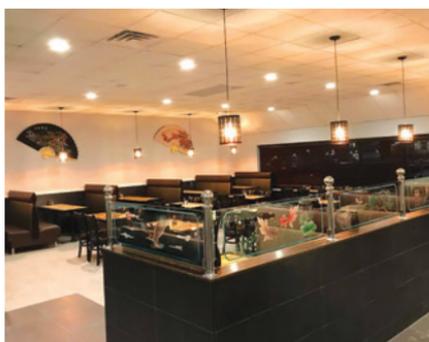


One of the two big features at Fuji Asian Buffet that you don't find at other local buffets is the selection of fresh made sushi. To the side of the main buffet area is a selection of a dozen or more sushi rolls being continually made fresh by the Fuji staff. They're not complex rolls, but there are many options from vegetarian to rolls with raw fish and sauces. We tried four or five different kinds. It's not Ichiban-level sushi, but it's pretty good overall and a nice departure if you want to avoid fried buffet options.

Next to the sushi area is something we do not normally see in a buffet: a Hibachi grill. With a salad bar style selection of ingredients featuring lots of fresh vegetables, meats and sauces, you can build your own stir fry bowl, and a member of the Fuji staff whips it up right in front of you, Mongolian Grill style. This may be a great option for people with dietary restrictions wanting to know exactly what they're eating.

We found shrimp options on the buffet with all of our visits. The dinner buffet had multiple shrimp options and they were not the tiny salad shrimp. These were all decently sized and the dishes heavily featured the shrimp, not just included them as a garnish. If you want





shrimp, you'll get shrimp. Imitation crab was also featured on the buffet.

With the continued popularity of the buffet, you might want to consider the timing of your visit. Peak dining hours, and especially Friday night and weekends, tend to be quite busy. But we did get seated pretty quickly when we were told there would be a 10 minute wait. And note that once you are seated, you can almost immediately head to the buffet and be eating minutes later. It was a full house when we were there, but there was no problem getting anything we wanted on the buffet. We can't speak for all experiences at all times, but in three visits, we found the selection to always be fully stocked and fresh. One thing that comes with a full house is a fast turnover of food. This is great news for the customer as the crunchy stuff stays crunchy and things that tend to dry out never get a chance to do that. One thing that is often a disappointment on an Asian buffet is when fried items in sauces get soggy or fried items simply get cold. We were very pleasantly surprised to find the simple deep fried chicken for the sweet and sour to be very hot and fresh with a good crunch and moist chicken inside. The General Tso's chicken had texture, not just mush as you might expect. That was a big plus.

The atmosphere is fairly frenetic. There's a lot of activity and people moving as they go to and from the buffet, but at no time did it interfere

with our dining experience. It was a bit noisy but more like an overall hum of activity than a distinct noise, and it was fine with us. You have to have realistic expectations going in. This is a Chinese style buffet with fast service and high turnover. It's not fast food, but it's not fine dining either. There were all types of people dining with us, from big families utilizing the booster seats available, to young couples on dates and elderly couples doing the same. We chose to pop-in for a buffet before a movie at Phoenix Theatres.

That leads to the last thing that Fuji Asian Buffet really has going for it, which is the price. With a lunch buffet for \$8.99 and dinner for \$12.99, it is priced right along the lines of other Asian buffets but offers a lot more entrée options and extras like sushi and hibachi. The value is certainly there; it's up to you when you say when. Kids eat at a two-tiered discount. For lunch, kids 3-5 are just \$3.99 and kids 6-9 are \$5.99. Lunch hours are 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Dinner prices for kids are \$4.99 and \$6.99 respectively. All beverages are \$1.69. Bottled beer and wine are also available at additional cost.

In the greater landscape of westernized Asian/Chinese buffets, we think Fuji Asian Buffet stands out nicely. It's a good value with lots of diverse options to serve different tastes and levels of healthy eating, in a clean, new atmosphere. With a soda, it was \$11 well spent for lunch. ■



FUJI ASIAN BUFFET

806 WACKER DR, DUBUQUE, IA
563-587-8999

FIND THEM ON FACEBOOK

Hours: Mon-Sat: 11 AM-3 PM;
3:30-9 PM; Sun: 11 AM-9 PM

Prices: Adults: \$8.99-\$12.99;
Kids: \$3.99-\$6.99; Beverages: \$1.69

SUBMIT YOUR DINING SUGGESTIONS!

DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE RESTAURANT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE US VISIT?

PLEASE SEND US YOUR REQUESTS, SUGGESTIONS AND COMMENTS!

EMAIL: DINING@DUBUQUE365.COM