



# OOLONG ASIAN CUISINE SOFT OPENING

BY BRYCE PARKS

On Thursday, March 29, 2018, Oolong Asian Cuisine very quietly opened its doors in downtown Dubuque. As *365ink*'s own Kristina Nesteby has been involved in helping proprietor Ken Lin design his logo and other materials, as well as give her thoughts on the food options, we were kindly invited to come down and give it a taste test and put in our two cents. Naturally, we had to post a couple of our photos to social media and within a day, Oolong was no longer a secret. Ken and his crew has worked frantically to keep up with the crowd coming in the door. Apparently the Dubuque market was ready for a pho and ramen restaurant.

With a simple starting menu based around the two classic soup options and a Thai basil stir-fry entrée, Oolong is sticking to traditional East Asian flavors and cooking techniques. You won't find General Tso's chicken here. Ken will be the first to tell you that his style of casual cuisine may not be what most Americans think of when they think of Asian food. But if you are one of those who knows what pho is and what that means, we think you're going to be very happy with the latest addition to Dubuque's culinary landscape.



Ken Lin came to America in 1997 from China. Like many Chinese immigrants, he worked in Chinese restaurants, in his case, in Chicago. Later he advanced to Sai Cafe, a high-end sushi and Asian

restaurant in Chicago, he eventually joined Hy-Vee in Dubuque. But what Hy-Vee in Dubuque you might ask?

"As a Chinese immigrant you can't learn English working at Chinese restaurants. Your friends, your work, all speak Chinese or Cantonese, especially in the kitchen. You have no contact with English." Knowing he wanted and needed to learn English to be successful in America, Ken took a job at Hy-Vee, coming to Dubuque to cook Chinese food but for the express purpose of being forced to learn English—and it got him exactly the experience he was looking for.

Ken purchased the building that houses Oolong Asian Cuisine as well as Jubeck New World Brewing and The Food Store in 2005. As he began the remodel of the storefront, he was not sure what kind of restaurant he would open.

"Most Chinese restaurants have been doing things the same way for 50 years. And the only thing they're doing now is competing with each other by cutting prices, which is also cutting quality. I don't want to do that. I love Vietnamese and Thai cuisine and saw it as the most unique Asian offerings that were not being served in the Dubuque area."

Pho and ramen restaurants are one of the most popular growing food genres in America today, but so far it has not come to Dubuque as a consistent feature.

"I remodeled a Japanese ramen noodle shop with a friend in Chicago in 2015 and learned how they do the whole thing. The process is very different than any other Chinese restaurants running today. I didn't know how anyone could spend 6 to 8 hours just to make the bone broth for the bases of the ramen and pho. It's all about quality and patience, not about speed or economics."

But first, he needed a working restaurant to cook and serve in. What he had was far from a ready-to-go restaurant.



RAMEN

"The remodel is my favorite part." And remodeling is something Ken knows as well as food by now. "I have all of my heart into it. I want everything perfect. I do everything on my own if I can."

Ken had to tear the interior of the restaurant out down to the brick walls and the joists. In fact, he had to remove old joists that had rotted and put in a new floor support in the kitchen. But he saved everything usable, and most of the remodel features materials reclaimed from his own remodel. Some old joists he replaced were repurposed to build the beautiful high-top communal seating table that runs downtown the center of the restaurant. He cleared the brick walls twice before he was happy with the result. The low tables are made from maple floors and pine trim reclaimed from his building, and the walls are covered in 100-year-old Douglas Fir floor boards reclaimed from a home on North Grandview Ave. The addition of beautiful matching decorative and colorful glassware lighting finishes the cozy dining space.





HOMEMADE CHICKEN DUMPLINGS

The basement will be remolded as well for additional seating and private parties.

So, you probably think you know what ramen is, but what about pho?



For starters, its pronounced “fuh.” It is a beef bone broth based soup featuring things like daikon radish and ginger and is gluten friendly. It has rice noodles, sliced slow cooked beef, Asian beef meatballs, fresh vegetables and

herbs. Many people also like to add sriracha and/or hoisin sauce to their pho, and those are available at your table.

Similarly, ramen is based on a chicken bone broth with miso paste (fermented soybeans and koji fungus) and features flour-based ramen noodles with braised pork belly, fresh vegetables and herbs. Add in extra meat or a marinated soft boiled egg if you like. This isn’t your typical instant ramen!

In either case, it’s all about the broth. Cooked down over 6 to 12 hours, allowing time for every healing compound, nutrient, and mineral to be released, the pieces, bones and animal fat from the meat gives the soups it rich healthy base flavor that is only enhanced by the unique ingredients added to it.

Ramen and pho are not pre-made and just served up like most soups. Your meal is constructed when you order. For example, the miso paste is very delicate and needs to be kept frozen as it would keep fermenting at room temperature or even in the fridge. The noodles cannot be mixed in until you’re ready or they will soak up the broth and be too soft to enjoy properly.

“A lot of fresh herbs and the ramen bone broth are my favorite. It’s very healthy and brings a lot of flavor. It takes a long time to make it right and it’s complex, but a good bone broth makes any dish tasty. I use lots of fresh herbs. Fresher is better.”

If you are a fan of this style of cooking, you will be pleased at the dedication to authenticity.

The menu is currently limited during their soft opening, and Ken does not expect it to grow much. “The menu will add a couple of items, but there won’t be 100 dishes.” He plans to focus on a few specialized dishes and do them the best he can, and he will add unique monthly specials for variety.

“I want to try out all of the dishes of East Asian countries. I am Chinese and I don’t know how to make them all, but I will find the ingredients to make them and make it happen. I want to offer people interesting, new things each month so people can see what they like.”

While he wants to be authentic, he realizes there is still a cultural difference he must adapt to. “For the stir-fry, the original recipe called for five Thai chilies. I only use one, but it is still very hot. The cultures are just very different. Most people would never survive chilies in their dish. It’s hard to even cook it and breathe. I will adjust the spice level to local [palates], but we can add more spice on the side.” The stir fry can also be ordered without spice, and you have the option of adding either fried tofu or ground pork.



“A lot of ingredients used in this cooking are not Chinese, so it’s even new to me. Things like fish sauce, lemongrass, lime leaves, galanga, and tamarind for example are staples of Thai and Vietnamese cooking but not Chinese.”

You will also encounter items like ajitama (marinated soft-boiled egg), kikurage (wood ear mushrooms), menma (bamboo shoots), moyashi (bean sprouts) and wakame (seaweed).

“The market I use is owned by a Vietnamese man who owned a restaurant for many years, and I used his expertise in selecting ingredients to use. And I always prefer fresh options like fresh Thai chilies versus dried, and I only use fresh garlic. Lime leaves are my favorite especially with seafood.”

Ken has a few personal preferences that carry through his cooking. For example, none of his entrées use corn starch. Most Chinese style dishes will add corn starch to thicken it and make it look creamier, but “I just like the clearer, flavorful sauces.”

“And I will not put soy sauce in my fried rice. Everything is natural. Some natural fat is actually good for your body and gives a really rich flavor...I won’t make fried rice with vegetable oil, I only use animal fat [from the bone broth], and it makes all the difference.”

There is certainly more on the menu than soup. Appetizers include tasty fried spring rolls, fried dumplings with a spicy dipping sauce, and Thai chicken wings. The chicken wings are unique, based off a recipe that was for something more like a chicken strip. He adapted



it to work with wings. An herb-spiced wing is finished with a rice flour coating after it is cooked. So it looks like a beige powdered donut, and it just as messy to handle. But the flavor is very savory and since it’s powdered, the mess is easy enough to brush off your shirt. The unique presentation makes them a fun option to try. All of the appetizers come with unique and tasty dipping sauces.

“We’re going to try to offer organic meat options when we can and use organic bones in our bone broth as often as possible. Even as a percentage of the meat in the broth, I think it adds great flavor. It does taste different.”

More is on the way as Ken and his crew get their legs under them. Look for an amazing fried rice which we’ve sampled but is not yet a permanent menu item. Banh Mi sandwiches are on their way in the near future. They will feature the amazing braised pork belly from the ramen, served on a fresh Vietnamese-style baguette with pork pâté, fresh vegetables and herbs. You may see fresh spring rolls with peanut sauce too, and, as we mentioned earlier, monthly specials will give you something new to try from various East Asian countries.

Ken is particularly excited about his Thai Iced Lime Tea which is joined on the drink menu by Milk Tea (add popping boba to make a bubble tea) and a very strong, sweet and nutty Vietnamese Iced Coffee. Think of a caramel iced latte with some attitude.

The numbers in the first week were way beyond Lin’s expectations, but what makes him the happiest is that people have positive things to say about the food. He has even seen return visitors two or three times!

If it all works out to Ken’s plan, he hopes to develop a brand that he can expand to other properties in the Midwest. But first, as is his mantra, he wants to make everything perfect here first.

Oolong Asian Cuisine is currently in a soft opening phase. Ken is doing his best to meet the demand as he perfects his recipes and brings new flavor experiences to Dubuques. He is currently hiring for kitchen and wait staff. Email your résumé to [Ken@LoveOolong.com](mailto:Ken@LoveOolong.com). ■

## OOLONG ASIAN CUISINE

145 W. 11<sup>TH</sup> ST, DUBUQUE, IOWA  
563-239-1019 • [LOVEOOLONG.COM](http://LOVEOOLONG.COM)

**Hours:** Tue–Sat: 11 AM–2:30 PM and 4:30–9 PM; Closed Sun and Mon

**Dining Style:** Come as you are

**Noise Level:** Conversational

**Liquor Service:** None...yet!

**Prices:** Apps: \$3–\$7; Entrées \$10–\$14

**Pay Options:** Cash, Checks, Debit, All Credit Cards

**Accessibility:** Full

**Kids Policy:** Welcome but no menu or high chairs

**Reservations:** No • **Catering:** No

**Take Out:** Yes • **Delivery:** No

**Parking:** On street, metered before 5 PM