

▶ Restaurant review

Well, this Chinese certainly floats my boat

Joseph Connolly climbs aboard the Feng Shang Restaurant, moored on the Regent's Canal, and finds outstanding dishes that certainly know how to create a splash

▶ About a decade ago, Feng Shui had its moment in the West: an inevitable and laughable dilution of an ancient Chinese philosophy was cannily reheated for the benefit of the usual self-obsessed gluten and wheat intolerant Yoga-practising New Age vegans who would not dare to so much as brush their teeth unless the stars were in alignment with Jupiter and Mars, and only then if their expensive medium adjudged it wise. Now they were paying other clever people to ensure that their prospective house – or even sofa – was not facing the wrong way, for otherwise life would forever be blighted, and from within a miasmic cloud of much bad juju, a plague of boils would surely descend.

The moment has passed, as is the way with moments, though the name of this restaurant, Feng Shang Princess, did rather bring it all back to me: I've no idea what it means, though it does have the ring of a bonkers ideology named in honour of the sainted Diana. The echo of interior decoration clung to me, though: I was aching to see inside the place, because from the outside this quite unique restaurant is positively stunning. We have here a boat, you see – a three storey and beautifully built Chinese boat in red, black and gold with authentic corbels and a prettily flirtly pagoda roof... and it is moored on Regent's Canal. It looks rather ancient, but actually was built in the 1980s – which begs all sorts of questions: who had the nuts idea of creating the thing, and turning

it into a restaurant? How was permission granted? And how many people, when deciding where to eat, will think – Oh I know! Let's all go to the floating Chinese restaurant!

Well quite a few, if the evening I was there is anything to go by. An ordinary Wednesday, and the upper floor was full. The lower two were empty, it's true, but I think these are largely used for parties, and so on. By night, the exterior is a bit of a letdown. I mean – it's nice to see it outlined in ropes of little red lights, but this is all pretty basic Homebase Christmas decoration stuff, and all the colour and architecture of the structure are completely lost: warmly discreet floodlighting is what is required here. But now back to interior decoration: within, we have beige glossy walls and trussed pitched ceiling, a few murky plaques, a claret coloured 1970s fitted carpet alive with with, of all thing the fleur-de-lys; cream swagged pelmets of the sort that might have graced a Victorian bay window, where once presided the aspidistra. It's pretty much like a hastily kitted-out shed – there is no red lacquer, no Chinese yellow silk, no shimmering black and turquoise fretwork, and nor are you dazzled by the glitter of gold. Cosy tasselled lanterns...? No – just recessed downlighters as you might see over a kitchen work surface: no candles, no flowers. Mmm. So how about the food, then...?

Those used to Chinese restaurants are in for a few sur-



■ The stunning Feng Shang Princess, with its prettily flirtly pagoda roof

prises: the fact that the well thumbed menus are littered with little colour pictures, rather like in the old Wimpy Bars. Also the proliferation of Japanese dishes. And things like ostrich. But mainly – the prices. Crumbs. We are not in Royal China Club nor Nobu, yet here is grilled black cod at £35. And a quartet of lobster options, each coming in at £48. Like I say: crumbs. Fortunately, however, there are many other lesser priced things, but however you cut it, this is by no means a cheap restaurant. My wife and I kicked off fairly prosaically with a quarter crispy aromatic duck, which I tend to eat in all its shredded nakedness: I don't see the point of spreading brown goo on to a circle of cold damp wrapping paper and rolling it up. The duck was good – but pretty much like every other one you've ever had. We decided upon the rest of the meal to a

background of music very much in accord with the carpet: Phil Collins, Whitney Houston, Chris de Burgh (his lady being the only bit of red in the whole of the room). But it was oddly lulling... there is no sensation of floating on this boat, though there is a feeling of safety and insularity: I liked it.

'Mock chicken'

There was 'mock chicken' on the menu, which my wife opined could well be dog, but it turned out to be bean curd. We ordered instead stir-fried king prawns in a (Japanese) yakiniku sauce – largely apple, onion, garlic and honey – stir-fried sirloin in oyster sauce, chicken fried noodles, asparagus with sugar snaps and lotus roots and a rice with an elaborate name which actually was the usual 'special fried'. And I know that purists avoid wine with all this, but I've never been

pure: Beaujolais goes very well... but they didn't have any. So I ordered the house red – an Italian Sanleo which, the list said, was possessed of "delicious viscosity": it was light and pluggable. And all the food, I am very pleased to say, was outstandingly good: the large prawns had great texture, and detonated an explosion of flavour. The thinly sliced sirloin was lean, succulent and perfect, as was its sauce. The noodles in the chow mein were the finest vermicelli variety, which encourage you to eat too much – a thing for which I seldom require encouragement. Vegetables were of the freshest – and the lotus roots, which look like a cross between a cog and a Catherine wheel – were crunchy and silky all at once. We could have done with those little warmers with night lights inside them – outside of Chinatown, they've rather vanished

these days, and I can't imagine why: the race to eat everything while still it's hot can be rather an exhausting one.

We didn't have pudding, obviously – nobody likes lychees, and ice cream you can get anywhere – and so I asked for the bill. Which was interesting. Because you remember that £48 lobster...? Well there it was: bold as brass, large as life, and on my bill. When I pointed out the error, there was much consternation from the uniformly charming, efficient (and authentically oriental) staff. A girl then explained to me that because the prawn dish we had was next to the lobster, there had been confusion. I did not bother to say that in fact all the lobster dishes were corralled into their own little section, well down the page.

So: a nicely old fashioned, tranquil and extremely good Pan-Asian feast – pricey, but worth it – and all served up on a slow boat to China. Very slow, actually – so much so that when you disembark, you're quite surprised to find that you're still in Regent's Park.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

▶ FACTFILE

- **FENG SHANG PRINCESS**
Cumberland Basin, Prince Albert Road, NW1
Tel: 020-7485 8137
- Open Monday to Thursday noon-2.30pm, 6pm-11pm, Friday noon-2.30pm, 6pm-midnight, Saturday noon-midnight and Sunday noon-11pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Cost: You could get out for £90 for two with drink, though there is the potential for infinitely more.

▶ Health & Beauty Susanna Wilkey

Deep tissue massage and princess facial soothe and replenish a tired runner's body

Having tackled the 2010 London Marathon, this autumn I decided to head up to the north east to take part in the Great North Run – the world's biggest half marathon.

It was a fantastic race charged with spirit and emotion and, after I pounded the 13.1 miles from Newcastle to South Shields, I was feeling in need of some rest and relaxation.

After returning to London and soaking my tired feet, I headed to Pacifica Day Spa in Hampstead for a deep tissue massage to ease my aching legs.

Masseuse and owner Kathleen welcomed me into the spa in Heath Street, sister branch of Pacifica Notting Hill, which has an intimate atmosphere with relaxing, cosy treatment rooms.

The massage was exactly what I was after and perfect for anyone

wanting a deep, thorough full body massage not a superficial rub.

My muscles were worked out hard. The knots in my back and shoulders disappeared and I left with a spring in my step, feeling fully relaxed and stretched.

Massage is a huge benefit for anyone doing a lot of exercise, getting rid of toxins in the muscles and easing tension.

Kate Middleton

For a double treat, after the massage, I made my way to West One Beauty in Camden Town for a Karin Herzog facial favoured by the new Princess Kate Middleton.

The facial is extremely thorough – a deep, detoxifying extraction facial to spring clean the skin. I had the pore draw which eradicates blackheads, whiteheads and spots.

The therapist cleansed and mas-

saged my face and then extracted – or rather squeezed! – my blackheads before applying the oxygen face mask which felt tingly on my skin.

She massaged my head while I waited for the oxygen to work its magic. Afterwards, my face felt fresh and clean and the effects lasted for a whole week. Staff at West One Beauty, which also has a branch in Marylebone, specialise in facials and hot waxing.

Pacifica offers a huge range of treatments, including facials, various types of massage, reflexology, body scrubs, wraps, waxing and tanning.

■ Prices for massage range from £35 to £105. For more information, visit www.pacificadayspa.co.uk. West One Beauty can be found at www.westonebeauty.co.uk.



■ Susanna Wilkey after completing the Great North Run