

WEST SIDE THE SPIRIT

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DINING

Go for the Celeb Sightings, Stay for the Peking Duck

Believe the buzz surrounding Philippe Chow's newest culinary foray



Dark, chocolate-colored leather banquettes line Philippe's railroad-space dining area.

By Tom Steele

Philippe opened just a year and a half ago, but in that time it has managed, with good reason, to attract a devoted audience, including more than a few celebrities. Part-time New Yorkers Jake Gyllenhaal and Matt Damon are listed among the restaurant's admirers.

Philippe is set in a swanky, fairly complicated townhouse space, with clean lines and medium-low lighting. There are private dining rooms, a wine cellar lounge and two main dining rooms that can seat a total of 360 people. We were seated in the smaller railroad space. Both walls are lined with dark, chocolate-colored leather banquettes and rows of clothed tables. A beautiful orchid graces each table, while the larger skylit dining room is centered by a spectacular spray of exotic flowers.

Chef-owner Philippe Chow was born and trained in Hong Kong. He spent 25 years working in the kitchen of the much-admired Mr. Chow in Manhattan, working under the legendary Dim Sum chef, Steven Yim. It took Chow over a year to get all the details at Philippe just the way he wanted them and everything about the restaurant directly reflects his attentive efforts, especially the marvelous, creative food and the deeply attentive service.

Our congenial and loquacious server,

Gino, is a former bartender. He designed the cocktail we enjoyed most, Philippe Passion, a sweet and pungent exploration of infused vodkas, commingling Absolut Peach vodka, Grey Goose Pear vodka, fresh passion fruit puree, lemon juice, sugar syrup and a colorful splash of cranberry juice.

Nearly all the portions are intended to slake the appetites of two to three people, but half-portion are available for many of the entrees at half price.

Shark fin soup, the menu explains, "does not contain endangered shark," and it features a generous amount of mako shark fin in piping hot chicken stock. The smooth, thick soup is quite evenly seasoned and a little ramekin of chile vinegar is offered as an accent.

A trio of Chinese-herbed chicken satays flaunt chef Chow's "famous cream sauce" that manages to be the very essence of butter flavor. Chicken never had it so good.

For salt and pepper calamari, large chunks of squid meat are cross-hatch scored, gracefully fried, showered with salt, pepper and minced scallions and offered with a searing chile-garlic sauce.

Chow rightly gives his noodle and dumpling chef Wai Ming Cheng billing on the menu. At around 9 o'clock every night, chef Cheng gives a highly theatrical demonstration of the nearly extinct art of hand-pulling noodles. We sampled a slew

of those noodles dappled with a toothsome chopped pork and red bean sauce redolent of toasted sesame oil. Those noodles alone make Philippe unforgettable.

Vegetable spring rolls are tight, crispy and surprisingly flavorful, served on a bed of flash-fried shredded nori.

Luscious "pan crispy salmon" is served hot in a thick sweet-and-sour sauce enlivened considerably by minced jalapeño.

Philippe is justly famous for Peking Duck. It's an unusual presentation: An entire plump 7-pound duck is expertly carved tableside (by chef Cheng, in our case) into slightly larger than bite-sized hunks cut so that each piece has that spectacular dark and crispy skin clinging to it. The customary narrow spikes of cucumbers and scallions and a steam basket of mu shu pancakes are on hand for rolling up and devouring the duck. Many a Chinese restaurant claims to have the best Peking Duck in town, but Philippe's really is the best I've had, gorgeously juicy and as rich as Bloomberg.

Asian cuisine is not renowned for its desserts and Chow wisely offers sorbets made entirely from freshly squeezed juices (no sugar): pear, apple and green grape. Fresh fruits are tendered as well: kiwi, pineapple and watermelon.

Philippe tries hard, and it richly deserves to be the destination that it has become.

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Philippe

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Entrées are priced for
two, \$42 to \$110
(Select entrées may be
halved)