

# Authentic Sichuan worth the trip

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Why venture all the way to Framingham for Chinese food? I'll tell you why: ma la, which translates more or less into "tingling and hot."

Sichuan cuisine combines the ma of tongue-numbing Sichuan peppercorns and the la of fiery chilies with fresh ingredients, spices, preserves, and creative cooking techniques. The resulting dishes are complex and addictive—definitely not the Chinese food you grew up with, unless you grew up in Chengdu.

Sichuan Gourmet is unapologetically situated on the second floor of a small shopping center on Route 9 in Framingham, and at first looks much like any other suburban Chinese restaurant:

pleasantly lit and decorated, Chinese zodiac tablemats and chopsticks at the ready. The difference is that the tables are filled mostly by Chinese families and covered with a wide range of authentic dishes from Sichuan province in southwestern China.

Dan dan noodles (\$4.95) are a famous Sichuan snack, and they make a great appetizer. Beneath the innocuous-looking noodles flecked with crisp bits of beef lurks a bright, spicy sauce that vividly illustrates the ma la effect. Chengdu spicy dumplings (\$5.95) feature chewy, fresh wrappers around spiced-pork filling in a chili-oil sauce, topped with sesame seeds—less memorable than the noodles, but satisfying nonetheless.

Sichuan kung bao chicken (\$9.95) is smokier and more complex than Americanized versions—the chunks of chicken are napped in a sweet, pungent, soy-based sauce and mixed with not much more than fresh peanuts. Another revelation is the Sichuan double-cooked bacon (\$10.25): pork-belly chunks have been boiled, very thinly sliced, and then stir-fried in a fiery sauce with mild green chiles.



duck, bamboo, scallion, and other vegetables echo each other as they mingle in a sauce that's savory, sweet and just a bit spicy. It's a delight.

Sichuan-style green beans (\$8.95) add welcome balance to the spicy meat dishes – "dry-fried," they arrive blistered but still bright green, with bits of fermented soybean. Broccoli with yu xiang sauce (\$8.95) offers quite a kick, the vinegary sauce seemingly amplifying the chili, garlic and pepper flavors. Slithery wood ear mushrooms provide a nice visual contrast to the crisp, green florets and red chili flakes.

A few token wines are on offer, but beer stands up better to this food – a variety is available in the \$4 to \$5 range, including Tsing Tao and Sam Adams.

A satisfying dinner will cost around \$25 per person, including tax, tip and drinks. Service is efficient and friendly; dishes arrive promptly but not all at once, as is appropriate for a fast-cooked cuisine that's meant to be shared. Servings are generous, so bring some heat-seeking friends along to sample a wide variety. They'll agree, it's well worth the trip.

Ma po tofu with minced pork (\$8.95) is another famous Sichuan dish – the homemade tofu is silkily tender and arrives swimming in a gelatinous sea of bright-red broth, alive with chili flavor but needing a bit of soy to balance its flavors. As with most these dishes, it's at its best with plain steamed rice.

Chengdu spicy sliced lamb (\$13.95) is a stunning dish – the thinly sliced lamb has been generously dusted with dried chilies and cumin, and is served over a bed of carefully trimmed cilantro. The lamb is meltingly tender and blazingly hot – this dish takes your breath away, but you can't help returning to it for another bite, and then another.

Sautéed shredded duck, family style (\$12.95), is a weekend special that shows off the chef's clever skills. The slivers of

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