

Catch The 1990

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Robert Bateman
Canadian Wildlife Artist

FREE PUBLIC LECTURE

Friday, March 2 • 8 p.m.
Lied Center for Performing Arts
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The Nebraska Wildlife Federation welcomes internationally acclaimed wildlife artist Robert Bateman who returns to Nebraska to view the Sandhill Cranes.

Appearing with him at public events in Lincoln, Grand Island, and Omaha will be a delegation from Japan: representatives from the Yamashina Institute for Ornithology, the Shizuoka Zoo, and the Utaiko Sanctuary Nature Center of Tomakomai City.

The weekend includes a dinner in Lincoln and Omaha, plus a luncheon in Grand Island.

For reservations and more information contact
The Nebraska Wildlife Federation
410 S. 11th St., Lincoln, 69598 (402) 476-0581



Butch Ireland/Daily Nebraskan

John Huang, co-owner of Hunan Restaurant Inc.

Hunan Restaurant Inc.

The Hunan Restaurant Inc., 328 S. 10th St., has everything most small cafes are known for -- orange vinyl booths, two-toned linoleum, and a radio playing sappy FM love songs. It also has, on every table, a box of Kleenex, a pitcher of water and a hot-pink menu featuring some of the best Chinese food in Lincoln.

If swanky atmosphere is essential for dining pleasure, it won't be found it at the Hunan. What will be found is a wide selection of Hunan, Szechwan and Cantonese dishes prepared to order by owners John and Linda Huang.

The couple, who have operated the restaurant since 1982, previously ran a similar establishment in Mitchell, S.D. Huang learned his trade in several different restaurants in Taiwan. After 20 years there, he decided to try his luck with American diners. Huang taught Linda to cook at the Mitchell location, and she now does a large part of the kitchen work herself.

Huang estimates that the place has between 50 and 70 regular customers. They come in anywhere from one to three times weekly. Mary McGinn, a bartender at a downtown tavern, and Pete Piersol, kitchen manager at the Bistro, who were just finishing a late afternoon meal, said they have been fans for years.

"It's the best Chinese food in town," Piersol said. "It's not Americanized, not bland. Even the mild dishes are full of flavor."

They eat there at least once a week, McGinn said. Some of their favorite dishes include the sliced beef with broccoli in brown sauce, the won tons in hot sesame sauce, and the lo-mein.

"I always order more than I can eat, so I can take some home," McGinn said. "The lo-mein is really

better after it sits a day."

There are, as the Kleenex and water pitchers suggest, some truly hot items on the menu. Huang explained that they had to tone down the original recipes after their opening week, but they still pack a wallop. The dishes listed under "Hunan Hot Taste" surely will impress the adventurous, the bold or the masochistic.

On my most recent visit, I ordered my current favorite, the baby shrimp with nuts and hot pepper sauce. As an appetizer, I chose the won tons with hot sesame sauce. One thing to know about ordering dinner here -- the courses come in no particular order. Diners who are the appetizer-then-soup-then-entree-sort might feel a little disgruntled. The food will come when it's ready, and the unusual sequence can give a refreshing sense of the exotic.

The food was terrific, as usual. Hunan cuisine features meat, fish or poultry mixed with a variety of vegetables. The entree I ordered included carrots, onions, bok choy, bell peppers and celery. Another characteristic of Hunan cuisine is the use of nuts. Peanuts are common, and cashews often are added. As for the fiery quality, that comes from the ferocious little red peppers which are stir-fried with the other ingredients. The current stock in the Huangs' kitchen comes directly from Szechwan region of mainland China.

The sauce used to bring the various elements together is a slightly sweet, very garlicky mixture. After the initial assault on the taste buds from the chilies, the complex flavor of this sauce is especially delicious. It seems the fierceness of the peppers primes the mouth for the less virulent, soothing quality of the other spices.

For spicy veterans, there are condiments on each table that give added "hot" dimension. Try the

hot mustard sauce on any of the appetizers. Don't be put off by the slightly noxious appearance of the brownish-yellow stuff. It's great on won tons, and it will clear the sinuses for the next several decades.

A relatively new addition to the condiment selection, which also features the more conventional soy and Red Devil sauces, is a red chili-garlic relish from Vietnam. I put a little of this on my won tons, and I thought my face might come off. This was just fine by me, though. What's a Hunan meal without some watery eyes and gasping for breath?

As for the won tons with hot sesame sauce, which come filled with a lightly seasoned pork mixture, they're steamed instead of fried. These wonderful little dumplings are similar to dim sum. Try dipping them in a mixture of soy sauce and chili relish, or so as not to be that painful, add a little Trappery's sauce to the nutty sesame paste they're served with.

Of course, there are superb milder dishes for the fainter of heart and palate. The Huangs do a wonderful job of preparing such well-known selections as sweet and sour pork, and sliced beef with scallions. There are many different variations of chow mein, lo-mein (like chow mein with soft noodles), fried rice and egg foo yong.

There are desserts (ice cream and lichee nuts), but I've never seen anybody order them. After the more than generous dinner portions, there really isn't room. No bar service is available, but the hot tea is good. Order a soft drink, and they'll bring you an open bottle with a glass of ice on the side. It's those little touches that endear the Hunan Restaurant to its many devotees. They also appreciate the consistently good food, reasonable prices and unique, unpretentious

See Hunan on 13

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