

Scenes from the Past...

Once located on the southwest corner of the popular intersection of Columbia Road and 18th Street in the heart of Adams Morgan was the now infamous Knickerbocker Theater. Its roof collapsed in 1922 under the weight of a heavy snowfall resulting in the death of close to 100 persons and more than that trapped and injured. The gently curved building had been built beginning in 1915 to the designs of local architect Reginald Wyckliffe Geare and sat 1,700 patrons.

Its neoclassic style featured blind arches on the ground floor executed in Indiana limestone. It was built for Harry Crandall, a local rag-to-riches owner of a chain of Washington movie theaters that included such notable landmarks as the Lincoln on U Street and the Tivoli on 14th Street. The Knickerbocker opened in October 1917.

Just over five years later, however, a heavy snowfall began at dusk on January 27, 1922, continuing for more than 29 hours until 28 inches of snow lay on the streets and rooftops of the city. The following Saturday evening, the Knickerbocker Theater opened its doors to patrons wishing to view a silent film, *Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford*. As the organist played the ending tune at 9:10 p.m., theater-goers heard what must have been a horrifying sound described as groaning and cracking coming from above. Two minutes later, the entire roof collapsed on the crowd burying them in tons of snow, large beams, and debris. In all, 98 lay dead with 136 trapped beneath the rubble.

Newspaper accounts reported that rescue workers had an extremely difficult time making their way through the 3,000 curiosity-seekers to attend to the situation at hand; so much so that a company of Marines were brought in at 11 p.m. to restore order. One reporter wrote that no description of the scene could convey the awfulness of what he had witnessed that night. By midnight, 200 police, soldiers and firemen were working to free the trapped and living victims. Residents of the surrounding neighborhood supplied coffee and food to the rescue workers, which had numbered 600 by 2:30 a.m. The rescue effort was hampered by the heavy mesh screen of the ceiling that had once supported its ornate plasterwork. The Christian Science church one block east on Columbia Road served as a makeshift morgue for the dead. The rescue effort lasted until the following afternoon.

Across town, 1,000 stranded passengers at Union Station were cared for by the Quartermaster Corps of the Army with food, cots, and blankets.

Subsequent investigations and a lawsuit found that architect Geare was

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

photos—courtesy, Washingtoniana Division, MLK Library



Within the theater, now open to the sky, the devastation was total.

As day broke, the street was still filled with concerned onlookers, below.



Scores of onlookers gathered along 18th Street on the morning following the collapse of the theater's roof.



The theater stage was clearly visible at the right in this view taken from the adjacent rooftop.

Hundreds of rescuers worked through the night while crowds of residents kept vigil, below.



RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Alexandra Greeley*

CHEN'S GOURMET Little China

Sometimes it pays to listen to advice. A foodie who'd lived in Taiwan—and who has also taught Chinese cooking—raved about an unpretentious Chinese carryout she'd found along MacArthur Blvd. It's an unlikely place, she noted with delight. And then went on to talk about the menu, the sauces, the crisp vegetables, the on-target flavors, the dressed-up tofus. Try it, she urged.

And I did, marking Chen's Gourmet among my top picks for DC Chinese eats. True, it is not in the same league as Cleveland Park's Yanju (Ed. Note: See June 1999 review, "Can Yan Cook!"; text available in restaurant review archives at www.intowner.com), but for sturdy home-cooking with undeniable quality, Chen's has few equals. Besides, you can eat here—well, not actually in house, since there is only one table indoors, five outdoors—for less than \$30 and probably comfortably feed four—that is, unless you order their duck.

Duck from a Chinese carryout? That's one of the improbable finds here, and admittedly, not one I've tried. But with its modest price tag—Peking duck comes for \$11.95 for a regular order, \$21.95 for large—it is sure to find its place on some upcoming carry-away order of mine.

And the lack of seating may be the real clue to the restaurant's budget prices. No seating cuts down on such overhead items as waitstaff, cutlery, glassware, and plates. This cash-and-carry proposition, however, is no real hardship if you live in the neighborhood. And if you don't, eat in the car or just drive straight home.

Chen's has expanded its horizons in the past year or so, moving from strictly Chinese to a more pan-Asian effort, and maybe that's not such a successful step. Take the pad Thai, for example, a colorless and spiritless dish when I tried it that lacks the dark hues of a rich pad Thai sauce based on tamarind juice and palm sugar, and it misses out on the textures from preserved radish, crushed peanuts and crunchy bean sprouts that a true pad Thai has. Maybe the chef was taking a break; who knows? The kitchen is also offering both Singapore and Taiwanese-style rice

noodles, assorted other Thai offerings, and a handful of Japanese tidbits—California rolls and a few tempuraed items.

Apart from that, the main menu stands as a tribute to Chinese stir-fries and lots of them. For a kitchen that can't hold more than two or three woks and not much workspace, Chen's manages to put on quite a show. Start off with the sesame noodles salad, perky with its creamy nutty dressing, and add on the hot and sour soup. Trite and commonplace, but this version has real guts.

Also commendable for their winning ways: the orange chicken, slightly sweet and citrusy but few chilies; crispy beef, in very crispy shreds; and the pork with eggplant and ginger, a delicate dish made with the costlier Asian, not Western, eggplant.

In the past, friends and I have tackled the lemon chicken, which fortunately does not taste like it comes as part of a lemon meringue pie; shredded pork with string beans; and the jet-fueled Szechuan eggplant. And I remember one hot evening sitting on the front porch tucking into a shrimp dish, but can't remember which. Never mind: they'll all surely be worth the calories.

But you've now come to the end of the menu, unless you want to sample the only dessert: steamed sweet buns, 2 pieces, in buttermilk, lotus or red bean flavors. Buttermilk?? That's a puzzler, but Chen's probably does it well, whatever it may be.

Drinks are limited to Chinese jasmine tea, soft drinks, juices and bottled water. And if you are thinking about cutting down on fat, the kitchen will steam those dishes marked with a green dot. The red chili logo, of course, means spicy. □

Chen's Gourmet, 5117 MacArthur Blvd., NW; tel., 364-8313. Hours: Daily for lunch and dinner, and in-between. Entrée prices: \$4.75 to \$21.95.

Alexandra Greeley is a food writer whose books have been published by Simon & Schuster, Doubleday, and Macmillan. She formerly was a food editor/writer with the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong. These days she is food editor of Vegetarian Times and contributes reviews and articles for a variety of publications, including The Washingtonian, The Washington Post and "e-zines."

SCENES

From p. 13

not to blame for the tragedy, but the contractor, who had inserted the steel beams of the roof only two inches into the load-bearing walls instead of the required eight inches. As a result, new building codes were passed in the city, and several other theaters were closed until their deficiencies were corrected. In 1923, Crandall commissioned New York architect Thomas W. Lamb to design a new theater within the walls of the Knickerbocker, coined "The Ambassador."

Architect Geare's career and personal life never recovered from the tragedy, however, and he ended his own life in 1927. Theater owner Harry Crandall also ended his own life, bankrupt, in 1937. Like many of the city's theaters, the Ambassador closed its doors following a decline in attendance



The storm that was responsible for the terrible disaster was a slow moving low pressure system that dumped more than two feet of snow on the city over 24 hours.

due to the onslaught of television, and was finally razed in 1969. The site remained vacant until a branch of the Perpetual Federal Savings and Loan Association was built on the site in 1978-79.

—Paul Kelsey Williams
Historic Preservation Specialist
Kelsey & Associates, Washington, DC

TWO 4 ONE
MARTINI
DESTINATION

MONDAY - THURSDAY
5PM - 8PM

HAPPY
HOUR



AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT WAY TO CHILL



17TH & R, NW
THIRTYDEGREES.COM