

Shark Fin House

Dani Valent, Reviewer
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For such a large food factory, there's plenty that is pleasing here.

Address

131 Little Bourke St, Melbourne

Phone

(03) 9663 1555

Style

Restaurants

Cuisine

Chinese

Hours

Weekdays, 11.30am to 3pm, 5.30pm to 11pm;
weekends and public holidays, 11am to 3pm,
5.30pm to 11pm

Payment

Bankcard, Visa, AMEX, Mastercard, Diners Club

Price Guide

Entrees, \$4.50-\$34; Mains, \$10.50-\$48.



There's plenty that's pleasing at Shark Fin House.

Photo: *Estelle Judah*

It wouldn't be an easy life for a goldfish at Shark Fin House. Sure, you get a nice big aquarium, with rocks, plants and a sandy floor, much nicer than the bare watery cells inhabited by the larger fish, lobsters, crabs and abalone over yonder. But every day of the year, with no respite for Christmas, the goldfish see their cousins scooped out of their tanks, never to be seen again. What might the pretty mini-Nemos think? Perhaps they assume their neighbours have been moved to the piscatorial equivalent of greener pastures. Maybe they know the truth. Either way, it's not good.

Things go better for humans here. This three-storey restaurant isn't exactly refined but, for such a large food factory, there's plenty that is pleasing. A Christmas tree stands next to Chinese good-luck lions in a heart-warming ecumenical gesture.

If regarded with a dose of seasonal spirit, the worn carpet and stained tablecloths seem to speak of consistent, contented trade and cheerful chopstick malfunction, not sloppiness. The service isn't always warm but it's attentive. True, one waiter delivered Kilikanoon shiraz rather than the requested Clonakilla riesling, but the mistake was quickly remedied when pointed out - luckily before the seal had been broken on the shiraz.

The focus is on the food. We're not Chinese, but the waiter took us seriously when we put aside the 12-page menu and asked for his suggestions. We weren't fobbed off with lemon chicken or sweet-and-sour something. Instead, he steered us towards crocodile. We loved it. Not because the meat itself is so delicious: the subtle white flesh is more of a taste-sopper than a striking and flavoursome entity itself, but that's fine when it's tossed with such good, spicy XO sauce, made in-house to the obligatory secret recipe.

Almost as exciting was the roast platter with crisp-skinned pork, roasted duck and a tangled mound of shredded, al dente, fungus-like jellyfish.

I'm a sucker for dishes with therapeutic benefits, so the Jaws and Phoenix shark fin soup appealed. It's delivered with ceremonial solemnity in a ceramic pot, which is uncovered at the table. After being double-boiled for eight hours, the fibrous shark fin is tender as petals, absorbing the strong chicken flavour of the broth. I'm sure I was more fertile and vigorous by the time I got to the bottom of the bowl.

Less dynamic was the pi pa tofu, flaccid bean curd puffs studded with small cubes of Chinese sausage, plopped in gluey sauce.

We turned quickly to the vegetarian law hon jai, an earthy melange of mushrooms, thread-like black moss, snow peas and pine nuts. It's a complex dish that takes you from forest floor to sunny skies.

If you're still not organised for tomorrow, or you've decided you can't face the full family catastrophe, there are probably still tables at a Shark Fin restaurant somewhere. Don't assume you have to come into town. The group includes the original Shark Fin Inn just up the hill on Little Bourke, a young upstart in Keysborough and a noodle stall at Crown.

If bustling Chinese doesn't do it for you, other places trucking on include hotel eateries and most restaurants at Crown and Southgate. Enjoy your meal wherever it is and, if Christmas is a domestic affair, be sure to give your goldfish an extra pat.



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