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LaoJie Hotpot: Chinese

a. How were you addressed when you entered the restaurant? Did you need to make reservations? How long was the wait before you were seated?

LaoJie Hotpot is a Chinese restaurant located on 86th street in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn.

Although the restaurant does take walk-ins because of how popular it is, the wait time can be over an hour, so it is best to make reservations. When making reservations you are immediately greeted in Chinese by a native speaker, after responding in English the host speaks English but with a heavy accent. The exterior of the restaurant displays clearly that it is a Chinese restaurant, featuring traditional features of Chinese architecture above the windows. The decor on the exterior has Chinese writing of the translation of the name of the restaurant as well as traditional Chinese red lanterns lining the width of the building. When one first enters the restaurant you are immediately hit with the smell of food, the sound of Chinese music, and bright red decor.

Walking into the restaurant one must walk over to the host standing behind a small stand and give the name their reservation is under, and you are then given an approximate wait time. With reservations the wait time is only about ten minutes, without reservations you risk waiting up to an hour for a table.

b. What are the cultural differences you notice? (Use class notes) Using your five senses of taste, touch, sight, smell, & sound describe some of the cultural differences that you are not accustomed to in comparison to All-American restaurant or restaurant chains. For example, one can describe but not limited to the sights in the restaurant décor, odors from unusual foods, and sounds from music. One should use all five-senses in this cultural experience.

As soon as one walks into LaoJie Hotpot, Chinese culture can be recognized through all five senses. Culture is considered a “primary socialization” within a large group of people where symbols, shared understandings, world classifications, and shared activities are all shared. Every

culture is influenced by religion, ethnicity, region, gender, and social class. (Adomaitis, 2023).

All of these aspects of culture are felt by the five senses when you enter LaoJie Hotpot. It is truly an immersive experience into Chinese culture and cuisine.

As soon as you open the door at LaoJie Hotpot one is hit with the amazing scent of the food. You can't pinpoint exactly what food it is that you are smelling, but the amazing blend of all the food makes an amazing scent that carries through the entire restaurant. When entering LaoJie Hotpot it is immediately clear that it is a Chinese restaurant because of their use of red in the decor. For centuries, red has been the most important cultural color, being a symbol of power, celebration, fertility, prosperity, and repelling evil even (Stuart, 2016). Small pieces of red decor are placed throughout the restaurant such as traditional Chinese lanterns that hang from the ceiling. The entrance of the restaurant where you wait to be seated also features a small red accent wall. The music that is played throughout the restaurant is only Chinese music, there are no songs in English played which really adds to the authentic Chinese atmosphere. When seated at the table there is no table cloth instead there is a heavy duty wooden table and it has four electric stove tops for each person to place their pot of soup on. No spoons, forks, or knives are brought to the table, instead everyone is given a set of chopsticks and there are serving utensils provided to allow everyone to take from the food placed in the center of the table. When the meat is served it is not seasoned or cooked, it is instead cut in thin slices with no seasoning as you are expected to cook the meat in your soup and your soup is also supposed to provide the seasoning and flavor for the meat.

c. Look at the menu. What are the types of foods they offer? What are some unusual items? Do they describe the ingredients in the food? List various food items from the menu. What menu items did you order? Is there more than one language used to describe the foods on the menu?

Being that this is an all you can eat restaurant, they have a very large menu with a variety of Chinese dishes. The menu features many images of the food and under each image the name of the food is written in both English and Chinese. There are no written descriptions of the food offered, instead there are images above every food item offered. The items I started my order at LaoJie was a hot and spicy soup base and then as a table ordered the various foods that were going to be cooked in the soup. The food items ordered included beef, lamb, quail egg, dumplings, udon noodles, rice cakes, lotus root, enoki mushrooms, and Chinese cabbage. If I was to return to LaoJie I would definitely want to order some other items and try some new dishes such as the Chinese yam, fried tofu, yan noodles, crab meat sticks, and the spam.

d. Is a traditional salad offered? If not, describe what is offered. What types of breads are offered ? What type of desserts? What are they like?

Rather beginning your meal with a salad as is common in many American restaurants, at LaoJie Hotpot one must first select their soup base which is where you will be in essence “cooking” any meat or vegetables that you order. There are seven soup bases offered which includes herbal soup, bone cylinder soup, hot and spicy soup, fresh mushroom soup, dark chicken satay wolfberry soup, tomato soup, and the clam, scallop, winter-melon soup. There are not any types of bread or chips offered, after you select your soup base you then move on to the “all you can eat” menu and select different foods that you want to cook in your soup. There is no dessert part of the menu, instead LaoJie offers only one dessert item which is always brought out at the end of the meal. LaoJie mango pudding is an excellent way to end your meal, it includes the delicious mango pudding as well as fresh slices of mango.

e. What types of beverages are offered? Do they have an alcohol menu? What is not typically offered in an American chain restaurant?

LaoJie Hotpot has an amazing variety of drinks on their menu, the only typical

“American” drinks offered are Coke, Sprite, and Orange Soda. There is no alcohol offered but instead have a variety of yogurt drinks, teas, juices, and smoothies. Teas take up a large part of the drink menu as it is a major part of Chinese culture. Tea has been held important to the Chinese people for centuries, they value its qualities of being medicinal, its ties to nature, its inexpensiveness, and its overall taste. (Maxwell, 2017). With tea dating back centuries in China and the way it continues to be held in such high regard by Chinese people today it makes sense that tea would have such a large section on the LaoJie menu. Some of the drinks on the menu that stand out are cucumber honey juice, honeydew smoothies, matcha smoothie, supreme fruit tea, strawberry yogurt, and mango juice.

f. How is the food reflective of the cultural geography and the economic geography (Use class lecture notes)? (i.e. spices are abundant in India which is rich in spices & fish (sushi) is popular in Japan & it is part of the G8). Describe approximately where in the world (continent & location) and from country this culture’s food is best known.

Cultural geography refers to the way in which people live their lives in various regions throughout the world (Sternquist, 2007), and *economic geography* refers to the distribution of industrialization or wealth within a country (Rosen, 2002). The food at LaoJie Hotpot reflects both the *cultural* and *economic geography* of China. The restaurant offers a variety of meat options which is common in China. It is common for Chinese people to eat meat from a variety of different animals, as well as eating every possible part of the animal. It is said that this tradition dates back to when China faced a famine in 1959-1961 and had no choice but to eat whatever they could find in order to survive (Wickham, 2023). This is reflected in the LaoJie menu, where one can find options such as lamb, beef stomach, tripe, beef tongue, pork blood, pork liver, spam, duck feet, and duck blood. Eating every part of the animal shows how when living in a country where the economy can create challenges people learn to adapt and work with

what they have, and now today those actions of survival have become an important part of Chinese culture.

g. Describe the dress? (Dress is inclusive of all five senses – you smell perfume, hear jewelry, see make-up, etc....) What are the employees, such as hostesses or wait staff wearing? Please use Eicher-Roach-Higgins (1992) article to define dress and answer appropriately.

Dress is an important part of every culture and every culture has their own unique ways of dressing. Dress is an effective means of communication and it is a way for people to establish their identities” (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Dress goes beyond just clothing and covers everything from scent to jewelry and makeup. The entire wait staff including both men and women wore variations of simple black tops and black slacks. The women who had long hair, had their hair pulled back into a low ponytail and *wrapped* tightly with a simple rubber band. All of the waitresses had very minimal makeup, at the most they had some very subtle mascara *applied* to their eyelashes. The jewelry worn by the wait staff was all very minimal as well, with some having small and simple earrings *inserted* in their earlobes, and some had what appeared to be wedding rings *inserted* on to their ring fingers. Neither the men or women had any nail polish *applied*, if there was any it may have been a clear coat that was not easy to notice. Overall, the dress of the waitstaff at LaoJie Hotpot was very conservative, simple, and dark.

h. Rate your experience as a food critic. Ratings should be dependent on taste, service, décor, cleanliness, authenticity, quality and price and should range from A-F (“A” being the best). Explain why you chose this rating. Be thorough and detailed in your explanations. Be sure to write at least 2 paragraphs.

My experience at LaoJie Hotpot would definitely be rated an A, and is a must try for everyone in New York City. As I experienced the taste and quality of the food was exceptional. As a person who enjoys spicy food, the spicy and hot soup base that I had chosen was perfect. All of the vegetables and meats served were presented beautifully and tasted high quality and fresh. I would say that LaoJie Hotpot is an authentic Chinese restaurant, not your typical

“Chinese takeout” spot. For an all you can eat place providing a wide variety of food, the price was fair being \$30.00 per person, as well as offering discounts for children 15 years old or younger. The service provided by the waitstaff was a major reason for the “A” rating as they were kind, helped to explain items on the menu that were unfamiliar, gave recommendations, and brought the food out without too long of a wait despite the restaurant being so busy.

Truly the most outstanding part about the restaurant is how effectively they are able to run even though they are always packed with customers, the staff still manages to pay attention to everyone and keep the place clean. I enjoyed that the decor wasn’t too over the top, it was kept rather simple yet still was reminiscent of Chinese culture. They achieved this through Chinese writing seen on some of the walls, their use of red, and small traditional Chinese decor such as lanterns.

i. What did you learn from this experience that you could contribute to a multicultural experience in a class discussion.

After dining at LaoJie Hotpot one will have a truly authentic experience of Chinese cuisine and will be exposed to a variety of foods that are not typically found in day to day American life. I would say that having experiences such as this one where you go to places that are out of your comfort zone are amazing learning experiences. Travel can be expensive and requires a lot of time, so going to an authentic restaurant is a great way to get exposed to new cultures. I may not ever get the chance to visit China, but I was still able to have an authentic taste of the culture. Additionally one is able to see just how closely tied food is to culture, this not only applies to China but any culture anywhere in the world.

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