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Restaurant Profile: Ocean Zen - adventures in flavor fusion

Jul. 26, 2013



Mongolian glazed grilled lamb chops. Ed Peaco/For the News-Leader

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Fusion-cuisine combinations roll off the tongue of Jyh “Johnson” Tan, owner of Ocean Zen, Springfield’s restaurant for Pacific Rim fare.

“For Pacific Rim food, you want nice fish with a French sauce, a couple of Asian ingredients, and fuse it all together,” he says. Then he gets specific. “Ribeye with Chinese barbecue sauce and green beans and bacon cheddar mashed potatoes.” He goes on to describe an appetizer with sashimi-grade ahi tuna on a tortilla shell. It’s tuna pizza.

Ocean Zen

• **Where:** 600 E. Battlefield Road
• **Hours:** 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Dinner starts at 4 p.m. each day. Happy hour every day, 4 p.m.-6 p.m. and the last two hours before closing.

“It’s the fusion of food. It’s what we do.”

Tan was describing a couple of items on the new menu he introduced last week, created in large part by chef de cuisine Rick Ramos, a graduate of the culinary program at Ozarks

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Island style barbecue pork steam buns. Ed Peaco/For the News-Leader

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Community Technical College. Tan said he learned the art of Pacific Rim cooking at Scottsdale Culinary Institute in Arizona and by working under Roy Yamaguchi, founder of the cuisine.

Diners at Ocean Zen should expect pleasant surprises of fused and layered flavors — it's an adventure that encompasses not just seafood and sushi, but also beef, pork, lamb, chicken and burgers.

The menu at Ocean Zen changes roughly with the seasons, Tan said. He presented three items from the new menu.

• **Fresh ahi tuna pizza** (\$12.95): Sweet soy grilled tortilla, guacamole, tomatoes, red onion and spicy mayo. The assembly projected a light, almost fragile effect. The tortilla was delicately crispy and impossibly thin, and the thinly sliced tuna had a velvety essence. The avocado smoothed out the gentle bite of heat from the spicy mayo.

• **Island style barbecue pork steam buns** (\$8.95): Grilled chargsui pork, cucumber salad and Thai peanut sauce. This appetizer presented a contrast of consistencies: the sturdy slices of pork within the fluffy buns. Two dipping elements formed a semicircle around the rim of the plate: First dip the bun in Thai peanut sauce, then take a dip of minced peanut. The peanut sauce balanced the sweet Asian barbecue sauce on the pork. The buns were adorned with a small bunch of tiny scallion strands — a delicate touch for a hearty appetizer.



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• **Mongolian glazed grilled lamb chops** (\$32.95): With five-spiced carrot puree, zucchini mint, teppanyaki vegetables and garlic mashed potatoes. This dish was an expedition that spanned the homespun to the exotic, bold to delicate. The lamb was optimally grilled, with a firm outside and a pink inside. The glaze combined a little sweetness, a little citrus, and a touch of sour. The sauces of opposing flavors set the path for the expedition. It began with the zucchini mint sauce of sweet and intense mint flavor, which might trigger tastebud flashbacks of how Gramma prepared lamb for Easter dinner. At the other end of the journey, the carrot puree was a revelation — subtly, slightly sweet and airy. “It’s all balancing of flavors and layering,” Ramos said.

• Other items on the new dinner menu include: **fresh seasonal oysters** in raw, Rockefeller and casino fashion (six for \$12-\$13 or 12 for \$24-\$26); **orange crispy glazed chicken** (\$15.95); and **blueberry glazed teriyaki salmon** (\$24.95).

• The lunch menu offers many creative entrées under \$10 — **crispy wok chicken, crispy orange glazed sirloin, Thai style grilled chicken or shrimp chopsticks salad** and a **Kobe beef burger**.

Ocean Zen should not be considered only as a special-occasion restaurant, said Michelle Winfree, who handles catering and events. Whether you’re wearing jeans or formals, you’re welcome, she said, and the menu includes affordable entrées. Winfree is on hand to help customers plan events at the restaurant or arrange meals catered in their homes.

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