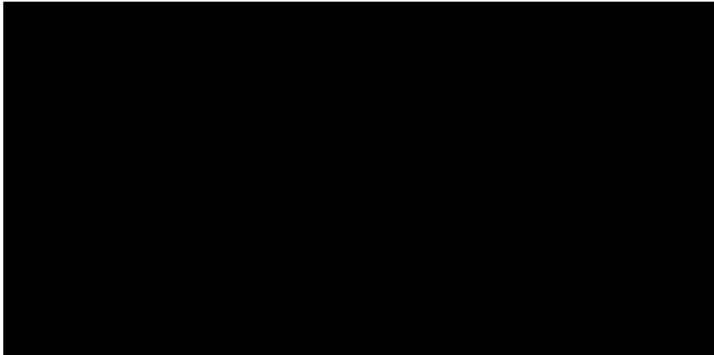


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For years, fans of roast duck have flocked to Le's Chinese Bar-B-Que. Photo: Seeta Mangra-Stubbs

FOOD & DINING

Tried and true: Le's Chinese Bar-B-Que

Writer: Seeta Mangra-Stubbs

Despite its location on busy Second Avenue north of downtown, Le's Chinese Bar-B-Que has racked up only 150-some reviews on Google Maps since it opened 21 years ago. By comparison, Either/Or has garnered a few more since its opening just last summer. While one Facebook commenter "drove by that place for years and always thought it looked sketchy," most of Le's diners rave about the food.

I'll admit to thinking like that Facebook user. In fact, that's what sparked this new "tried and true" series. What is it about Le's? How does a restaurant with such a low profile have such long-lasting success?

Short answer: the duck. It's easily the dish that gets the most praise. The roasting golden birds, with their heads still on in the display case, are familiar sights in Chinatown in bigger cities like Chicago. But whole barbecued ducks aren't as readily available here in Des Moines, so they're understandably intimidating to some diners, myself included.

I'll confess: I'd never tried duck before my trip to Le's, but I would definitely return for it. The meat is juicy and ridiculously tender, and the skin is comparable to baked chicken, simultaneously pliable and firm. I tried the duck on its own since the sauce options on the table — an intense chili oil, hoisin and Sriracha — would have overpowered its delicate flavor.

During my visit, two separate customers came in to request ducks from the display case. Amey, who works up front, quietly but firmly chops them up, preparing them to go. It's a fast, seamless transaction she's obviously performed many, many times, even on that day alone. (Still, I didn't hear anyone order the "duck tongue," as advertised.)



Le's also serves roast pork, a marvel of hot pink, marinated sweetness that's as tender as can be. Sometimes, you'll see a whole pig in the display case, too, which is an unusual sight even to a lifelong Iowan. There wasn't one during my recent visit, but a handwritten sign near the cash register noted the price of "pork bone."

That kind of specialization is why the eatery continues to succeed, according to the chef Kevin Le. "A lot of Asian people ..." he said, pointing downward in a circle to indicate the surrounding neighborhood. He said Le's offers dishes folks can't find anywhere else in town. And besides, they're as tasty as they are versatile. The duck is juicy, and you can eat it with rice, with vegetables, in soup and so forth — in the small dining room or in whatever recipe you'd like to prepare at home.

Le's is in a small building with a small parking lot, the definition of a hole-in-the-wall restaurant. But chef Kevin, who started with new owners in 2009, said the humble spot suits him just fine. They stick to the basics.

I had one more question for chef Le, but with the perfectly spaced parade of customers, I didn't get a chance to ask. I wondered about the sign outside that reads, "HEO QUAY VIT QUAY."

Turns out, it means "roast pig, roast duck." This whole time, the answer to the restaurant's staying power has been right in front of our eyes.

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