Eat Like Royalty
The American Dream is alive and well at the Royal Panda.

By Patricia Camen
Contributing Writer

It's ironic that the Royal Panda's restaurant clientele selects from more than a hundred dishes while panda bears themselves only eat bamboo. Their daily diet consists of fresh bamboo served at a relaxed pace in an atmosphere to be enjoyed leisurely, to savor, survive, and continue reading. Even under the most forceful semblance, bamboo will bend without breaking.

Rather like restaurants Tony Lu, born in Fujian, China, Lu came to America 25 years ago to study English; the first stop on a long road to business ownership. The fact that he knew nothing at all about running a restaurant was no deterrence. He started at the bottom and worked his way up, spent a decade in Boston food businesses as a dishwasher, meter reader, waiter and eventually manager. As fate would have it, Lu was conned, there was never a doubt he would open his own restaurant.

"In America, there are opportunities," says Lu. "What you work hard for, you get. As long as you stick your mind, you can get it."

With a wife, mother, sister and brother following his lead, he moved to Lafayette in 1991, and a year later opened Hong Kong Inn, a strip mall location along W. Pinhook Road. His brother adapted the traditional Chinese cuisine he already knew to suit Western palates, while the family worked a gargantuan, seven-day-a-week lunch and dinner shift. Their combination of the ever-popular Chinese American buffet and extensive menu soon attracted a steady clientele, as did Lu's philosophy of providing great Chinese American cuisine to put them at ease.

My goal was to bring the best of another culture, and at the time, Lafayette had to offer," says Lu. "It was a growing town, and there was less competition than Boston. We could open small and survive."

Then came the results of 9/11, when the aftermath of the World Trade Center collapse reverberated emotionally and economically across the United States. An American citizen for 20 years, Lu would seem an unlikely target for retaliation, yet the family found themselves victims of a momentum born as rumblings of anti-American sentiment spread via e-mail throughout the community. Lu feared the possibility of closing his doors permanently when customers stayed away.

"For four weeks, the restaurant was empty," remembers Lu. "But I still had many debts. You don't give up."

Three decades included purchasing land adjacent to what would eventually become Lafayette's new Wal-Mart for the new location of the 6,200 square foot Royal Panda restaurant. Designed by the late Pierre Aikens of Lafayette's MIBB Group, the building took a year to plan and another year to construct. Despite a four-month weather delay, the project was completed in spring 2008, seats 400-500 guests and boasts a和完善 bar, cocktail lounge, two hot buffet lines and a cold fish station.

Houston restaurant designer James Gent is responsible for the laminate-inlay details, including the brass-trimmed, wooden panels adorning the ceiling above the buffet lines, stained glass dining room partitions, gold-tinged four-foot chandelier and a crystal chandelier.

Since the restaurant's opening in April, a steady stream of customers have found their way past the Royal Panda's rooftop deck and mainguards; two carved granite lions from China weighing 1,000 pounds each. The lion was more than doubled his staff to serve lunch and dinner every day, and despite a hectic four months of waiting lines, overcrowded walk and even night shift at his restaurant, he's not complaining. He's is not by closing the door on another restaurant owner to the future. "You don't rule anything out," says Lu. "Everything is possible."

Perhaps a subtle reminder to endure, two panda bears peacefully above the manager's station just inside the entrance. "I'm here, I'm proud," says Lu.

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