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Americans are grazers. So are Lebanese and Russians and Spaniards. But nobody has more thoroughly elaborated the art of nibbling from a tableful of little dishes than the Chinese. In Shanghai, Hong Kong and San Francisco, dining rooms devoted to dim sum run six stories high. Even in Washington, Chinese restaurants gear up to serve hundreds of diners at a time from rolling carts on weekends, from checkoff lists on weekdays.

We dim sum devotees are always searching for a new and still undiscovered dim sum parlor. So I never expected to get a strong recommendation for a decade-old place that I'd never heard of, just outside the District line, a mere block away from the Silver Spring Metro station. The weekend couldn't come soon enough.

9:30 Sunday morning. Oriental East gets crowded after 11 a.m. on weekends, I was warned, so I call to check exactly when it opens. No answer.

10. Still no answer. Repeated calls, repeated disappointment. Maybe it's closed this week.

10:35. I give it one more try. Someone answers. The restaurant will open at 11. We dash for the car.

11:10. The shopping-center parking lot is nearly full. Must be lots of grocery shoppers at the Giant. Eight other people seem to be heading toward the red-curtained door of Oriental East. Bad sign: They're running.

Inside, the doorway is thick with people. I shoulder through to check out the scene. We blew it: Dozens of tables, every one of them full. I am squeezed aside by a cart of dumplings being rolled to the dining room. And another. Then a cart of congee in a big stainless-steel pot, with slices of unsweetened doughnuts and scallions for sprinkling on top. Man, am I hungry.

There must be a system, and I'd better learn it before I fall further behind. At the cashier's desk I notice a small pad with a number penciled on it. I signal with it to the cashier. She nods. I tear off the top sheet. No. 10. Not a bad number, until I realize that the place opened only 10 minutes ago and everyone's just started eating. It's going to be a while before even No. 1 is seated.

Except for my hunger pangs, I'm enjoying the scene. Families with happy faces. Babies in hand-knit caps and children in TV-inspired shirts, grandmothers and probably great-grandmothers in candy-colored sweaters and silk scarves, young adults in Sunday best. The crowd is genial, the mood like a school fair. Almost nobody is speaking English.

11:40. Because several people ahead of us have given up, we are seated. We halt the first cart and choose taro fritters – light and lacy – and golden-brown, faintly sweet baked bao

filled with anise-scented Chinese sausage. We probably should resist shrimp paste wrapped in bacon and deep-fried, but we're famished. From the next few carts that roll in our direction, we fill our table with little dishes as the waiters in black vests and bow ties make appropriate marks on our check. They all speak English readily and don't seem to mind our asking about every dish. We're also relieved to see that carts originate from both sides of the dining room so we don't have to worry about the food running out or growing cold before it reaches us. The pace is so fast that the carts sometimes get tangled in traffic jams, and the choices are too plentiful for us to sample them all.

I've made a mistake early on, with the fried dumplings. I should have waited for the stacked-up steamer baskets of lighter shu mai and har gow, and then worked my way up to the heavier stuff. I'm getting full before I've considered half the possibilities. As cart after cart passes, with new dishes I haven't anticipated, I survey our feast. Fun gor – chewy fried rice-dough turnovers – have a succulent shrimp filling. Ditto for flat bean curd-sheet disks filled with chunks of shrimp.

Steamed is better. The har gow – glossy rice-dough bonnets – are pleasantly slippery and filled with ground shrimp that's delicately fresh and studded with crunchy water chestnuts. Shu mai, open-topped, have a soft, airy pork-and-shrimp filling within the thin, resilient noodles. Flat rolls of slick rice-flour crepes are stuffed with bigger, better shrimp than usual, or with pork.

After three visits to Oriental East, I've developed a game plan for the future. I'll save my trips for dim sum. I'll start with steamed dishes, the noodle-wrapped ones or the velvety eggplant stuffed with chopped shrimp. I'll move on to noodles, crepes or clams with black beans, venture into more exotic congee, thinly sliced pig's feet flavored with star anise, vinegar-spiked tripe, jellyfish, duck feet. But I'll leave plenty of time and space for baked dishes – bao or a startlingly delicious pork pie, double-crust, with sticky-sweet pork and onions. Its thin bottom crust is so flaky it shatters at a touch; the top covering is a crumbly sweetish short crust that's almost like an almond cookie.

Dessert is more of the same. The puffy golden baked bao, torpedo-shaped, have lightly sweetened coconut inside instead of pork. And that impossibly fragile tart shell is filled with the softest imaginable egg custard. A brown gelatinous rectangle as chewy as gummy bears is flavorful with sweet bean paste and sesame oil. Then there is the most soothing dessert, spooned from a large tureen. It's clouds of milky-looking almond gelatin, soft as nursery food, ladled with a delicate ginger syrup.

1:20. We're so full we can't remember ever being hungry. A waiter brings us styrofoam boxes for our leftovers. As we walk out, we pass more carts. We never saw that rice wrapped in leaves. What are those rice doughs cut into button shapes and squares? I wonder how the steamed spareribs are. I'm calculating when I'll have another chance to get to Silver Spring at midday.

The host is calling No. 55.