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Gather 'round me, children, and let me tell you a tale, a tale of Grandma’s Dumpling’s.

The story begins at high noon on a chilly Melbourne Friday. Six hungry coworkers journeyed forth in search of food. For minutes we travelled the streets of Melbourne until we came before a restaurant named Grandma’s Dumplings. "This looks alright", we thought, "and cheap, too.”

We ventured into the small restaurant, soaked in the cosy atmosphere, and waited to be seated. And we kept waiting to be seated. We looked at each other, and pondered whether we should take a seat ourselves. After some five minutes of receiving no indication whatsoever that the staff was aware of our existence, we decided we had best seat ourselves.

And so we sat and waited. And we waited and sat. We sat and waited for a full ten minutes before one of the wait staff asked if we were ready to order.

"Would I be able to see a menu, first?” said I. The waitress disappeared, presumably to fetch a menu.

And so we sat and waited. And we waited and sat. We observed our surroundings more closely, noticing that the left and the right walls of the restaurant were completely different in style. We tried to read the menus stuck up on the wall, but the text was too small and too far away. All we could do was wait for a menu.

Time passed. The waitress came by with glasses – not for us, but for the table in front. However, there was one spare glass so one of the friends I was seated with got that. Between the six of us, now there was one who could drink.

Before long, the waitress hurried back again with more glasses, and with menus. She then made a second run for menus so that there would be enough for all six of us.

The menu was incredible. Everything on it looked good – and prices were great compared to those of many similar establishments. $10 lunch boxes with a free can of drink, noodle and rice dishes ranging from just under to just over $10. Even the more fancy items on the menu tended to sit under $20 – incredibly
good value considering what was on offer. The variety was great, the pictures informative.

It was on my second look through the menu that I began to notice the finer details. Several menu items had been added by hand – pieces of paper with menus items either printed or handwritten on had been sticky-taped at various points throughout the menu. And, as all great menus, this one had lore.

In many restaurants such as this, the lore (the history, the backstory, the pitch) is written in English, or in a combination of both English and the native language of the cuisine in question. In this case, the lore was only in Chinese, so we had to rely on Google translate. However, if this translation is faithful, then the menu boats of a "strange and peaceful source in the middle of the country", of "snacks, ancient and traditional". "Once the taste us often tempting," the menu says, "and the taste is different, but it smells like it, it tastes aroma, it is the characteristic of tofu". This is not the best restaurant lore I have seen (that honour goes to Dolan Uyghur Food Heaven), but still quite encouraging.

While we were peering through these marvellous menus, a man took a seat at the table formerly for four which we had split into a table for two. He spent a great deal of time trying to flag down a server to no avail. Eventually he gave up, and instead asked us for one of our menus. We were only too happy to oblige – we knew how difficult the acquisition of menus in this place could be.

There were promotional signs around the restaurant advertising that a customer may receive a free drink with any lunch purchase. Being an experienced luncher, I knew that there would be some conditions on this. When I asked the waitress the response was very confused and confusing. I'm not sure who had more difficulty: we in understanding her, or her in understanding us. However, it was eventually clarified that cans of soft drink would be free. The status on plum juice remained ambiguous until the bill was printed.

It was roughly 12.40 when we finished ordering. The waitress left us to contemplate the choices we had made. The experience, up to that point, had already been remarkable. Surely the food could only add to this experience of wondrous bewilderment.

Ten minutes later the waitress reappeared at the table, letting us know that two of the requested dishes could not be made. This was no major obstacle – changes were made painlessly – however the fact that it took a full ten minutes between us ordering and us being told that we needed to change our order did not bode well. Those of us with free afternoons were already giddy with delight at this place. Those of us with pressing time commitments were starting to panic.

And so we sat and waited. We waited and sat. We saw customers who had arrived after us being served, eating their fill, paying and leaving. The man from the table next to ours managed to order, be served, absolutely demolish a plate of dumplings and leave before we had even received our drinks.

And then we received our drinks.

This is the point at which we began to realise that Grandma’s Dumplings is no ordinary restaurant.

Five cans of coke were placed on the table, along with one bottle of plum
juice (the menu had a picture of a can of plum juice, but alas it came in a bottle and for that reason was not free). Around me, my friends were opening their cans and imbibing the sweet fluid within. Not wanting to be late to the part, I opened mine.

It exploded with violent force, spraying me all over my shirt and pants. This can and this can alone had been shaken to near the point of eruption. Given the haphazard nature of everything else in the restaurant I can only speculate as to whether or not this was intentional. Did they set up their own sick game of Russian roulette? Or is their storage method such that somehow one can in six becomes shaken to oblivion? At the time I didn’t care – all I cared about was mopping myself off with the box of tissues provided in lieu of serviettes.

So there I was, sticky and hungry, sitting and waiting. Waiting and sitting. From my seat I had a good few of the counter and the kitchen window. I could see the frantic and confused staff trying to figure out what to do with the meals that kept appearing from the kitchen. Each of these plates underwent a journey, usually landing on at least two different tables before arriving at their final and intended destination. Some went back and forth from the kitchen a few times. There was one plate of food that spent some time sitting alone at a completely unoccupied table. The level of general confusion among the staff was unlike any I have experienced before. I was in awe.

Finally it came time for our food to arrive. It trickled in one dish at a time over the course of about an hour. No two members of our party of six were ever eating at the same time. The less fortunate of us had to see a wave of friends receive and finish their food before theirs even left the kitchen.

The pumpkin cakes arrived first, as is tradition. (I have eaten many a pumpkin cake in many a restaurant – no matter what else is order, they always come first.) The pumpkin cakes themselves were very standard, however they were served with a bowl of sweet chilli sauce, presumably for dipping. I was taken aback when I saw this. This is not a flavour combination I would have expected. But who am I to say I know better than the restaurant? Surely they knew their own cuisine better than I did!

They did not. Pumpkin cakes with sweet chilli sauce is an insane combination that makes no sense on any level. It was not good. Dear reader, if you ever venture forth yourself into Grandma’s Dumplings, I can recommend the pumpkin cakes, but please do not dip them in the sweet chilli sauce. Not even once.

The dumplings were good. This is an unambiguous win for the restaurant. Grandma’s Dumplings does good dumplings. Moving on.

Of the mains, the lunch boxes came first. These were a very plain affair but I will be honest, reader, it is hard for me to focus on the quality of the food. The restaurant itself was so distracting. The service was impossible to ignore – not only the general confusion but also the slowness of it all. Recall that I mentioned the panic of those of us with time commitments that afternoon. One of our party had to teach a lab at 1.30 – they wolfed down as much of their lunch box as they could in the 10 minutes afforded them before they had to dash off, leaving half of a lunch box and $20 note.
I, myself, ordered mapo tofu, which took just shy of 40 minutes to arrive and was about as plain, standard and uninteresting as mapo tofu can be. Not bad, by any stretch.

All in all, it was an experience I will never forget. 5/5 stars. Highly recommended.