

Though there were a good variety of hot and cold appetizers, we all started out rather prosaically with an eggroll (\$1.10). Then, Dave selected the Poet Li-Bai's Chicken (\$9.95) because it was a dish that won Chef Li the Gold Medal in the Chinese National Cooking Competition in 1988. Tender morsels of chicken were cooked in a piquant sauce along with broccoli and Chinese vegetables prepared *al dente*. It was a flavorful dish—but *hot!* It took two glasses of water to put out the fire.

Louise was delighted with Li's Smoked Duck (\$10.95). It was half a tea-flavored, boned, smoked duck with crispy skin and tender pink breast slices served in a Peking duck sauce and accompanied by Chinese pea pods. The menu explained that the tea is used to reduce cholesterol and fat. This was not highly seasoned and is a wonderful choice for those who are reluctant to try the hot dishes.

Our friend Doris enjoys highly spiced food so she chose "Li's Black Peppered Beef" (\$11.95) and a splendid choice it was. We all sampled and found the beef chunks to be exceptionally tender, pink, and juicy served in a zesty garlic sauce with broccoli. There was simply too much

of it to eat at one sitting even with all of us helping. Could she take the leftovers home? The waitress was prepared with a take-out carton and bag.

Allan was more conservative and opted for "Shrimp with Chinese Vegetables" (\$9.50). He was most satisfied with the plump, tender, pink shrimp nicely served in a delicately seasoned sauce.

Tea and steamed rice came with our dinners. Fried rice is 50 cents extra and next time we will try that. The portions are most generous and the service is excellent.

It's not surprising that we found the food superb or that the newly opened restaurant was comfortably full on a Saturday night when you consider the qualifications

of the cooking staff at the Panda Garden. Head Chef Li Cheng Heng and his three associate chefs each have more than 25 years of cooking experience in China. They are all ranked as "Special Class Chefs," the highest category in China. Before coming to Roanoke, Chef Li had been cooking and teaching by invitation in hotels and restaurants in Sweden, Norway, Italy, Holland, the Philippines and New York.

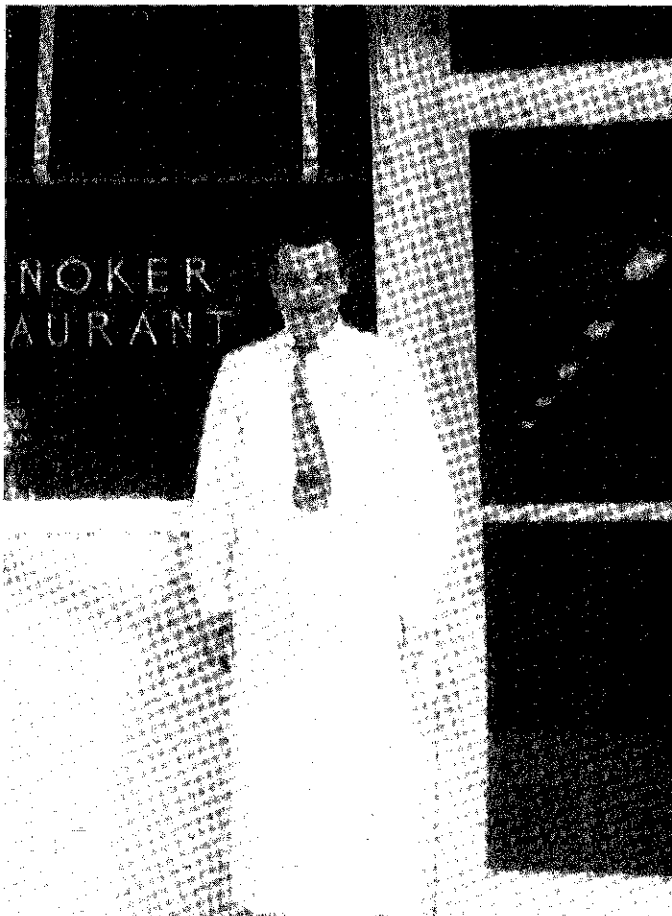
If you enjoy fine Chinese cooking, you, too, should be pleased by some of the original dishes created by Li Cheng Heng at one of Roanoke's newest restaurants—the Panda Garden.

## The Roanoker Restaurant Celebrates Its 50th Anniversary

In a city where restaurants can open and close within a six-month period, one that has survived and flourished for half a century has performed some sort of a miracle. The Roanoker Restaurant, "The Home of Good Food" at 2522 Colonial

Ave., has done just that. In June, the restaurant will have been feeding thousands of satisfied customers its "homespun" food for 50 years.

E. Crafton Warren (father of the present owner) with two other partners and a credit



THEN.

E. Crafton Warren in front of the Roanoker Restaurant's third location—on Jefferson Street—in 1955.



NOW.

Roanoker Restaurant owner E.C. Warren in front of the Colonial Avenue restaurant: "We put out the type of food we think people want."

## THE ROANOKER RESTAURANT

2522 Colonial Ave. (at Wonju)  
(703) 344-7746

Hours: 7 a.m.-10 p.m. Mon.-Sat.  
8 a.m.-10 p.m. Sundays and  
holidays

Credit Cards: MC, Visa  
Reservations: Not accepted

line of \$600 started the business in 1941 down on Jefferson Street almost across from the new Dominion Tower. When World War II started, his partners marched off into service and he ran the business alone. When they returned, they sold their shares in the business to him. He then moved to the other side of Jefferson Street. In 1956, he again relocated the restaurant, this time to Salem Avenue across from the C.B. Halsey warehouse. After five years, that building was torn down so he jumped over to Towers Mall where he operated for 20 years. The present owner, E. C. Warren (who says he has worked in the business since he was eight years old) moved to the current location in 1982, the year his father died.

Throughout all these moves, The Roanoker's customers followed faithfully. When asked what is the secret of the success of the restaurant, E. C. Warren makes it sound simple: "We just put out the type of food we think the people want, like Southern fried chicken, country style steak, ham steak with redeye gravy, macaroni and cheese—home style dishes like that."

And vegetables? "Oh my—yes! String beans, greens, potatoes, tomatoes, pickled beets, potato salad, cole slaw—and any fresh vegetables that are in season. We buy them fresh from local farmers who drive up to the back door with their produce."

"These foods," he continues, "were always served here and they are always going to be served. We do feature some of the 'newer' dishes like taco salads, sautés and blackened fish. We will add new things but we'll always keep the basics. It's 'comfort food'."

Could there be any other secrets? Of course. The portions are generous and the prices are reasonable. It's run as a "family-type" business with longtime employees who are dedicated to providing the friendly comfortable atmosphere for which it is famous.

The restaurant's dining rooms are finished in dark wood with both tables and booths. Memorabilia adorns the walls, and the areas are warm and pleasant. Right off

the entrance hall is a long narrow room containing booths that leads to an old fashioned lunch counter.

Although liquor only accounts for about five percent of its gross sales, The Roanoker prides itself in its 22-foot bar and serves mixed drinks, beer and wine by the glass. The wine selection includes mostly Virginia and California wines by the bottle and a limited number of wines from France, Germany and Portugal.

Anything else that draws customers back year after year? There is an extensive breakfast menu served until noon—full of the wonderful, calorie-laden dishes we all love: eggs, breakfast meats, biscuits and hotcakes with daily specials served until 11 a.m. Roanoke businessmen consider it a home away from home and flock in regularly for breakfast.

"These foods," Warren says, "were always served here and they are always going to be served. We do feature some of the 'newer' dishes like taco salads, sautés and blackened fish. We will add new things but we'll always keep the basics. It's 'comfort food'."

"Lots of major real estate deals have been cut here," Warren says.

The menu for the rest of the day features luncheon specials and a large choice of substantial sandwiches and salads, as well as the usual selection of chicken, seafood and meat entrees, but 80 percent of the meals that are ordered are chosen from flyers on daily specials—"the 'comfort foods,' rather than from the regular menu.

E.C. Warren is a genial host with a relaxed disposition, but he has very strong feelings about how he treats his customers.

"When you get to the point that you think you can take any guests for granted, you'd better watch out," he cautions, "because you're headed down."

For 50 years, The Roanoker Restaurant has never taken its guests for granted. It's a good bet they'll continue that policy for another 50 years. ☆

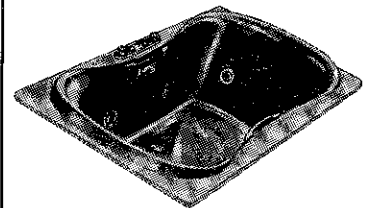
**veal bella boca** (vēl bel-e bo' kā) *n.* [Ital.] Prosciutto ham and mozzarella cheese drenched in garlic butter, stuffed between two veal cutlets and sautéed in wine sauce. Serve with fresh broccoli and parisian potatoes.



**Roanoke's Best Italian Restaurant**

1986, '87, '88, '89, '90 Roanoker Readers' Poll  
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