

Zun Ke Lai

On a good day, the soup dumplings here are better than any others in Shanghai.

By CHRISTOPHER ST. CAVISH

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Location

G/F, Shanghai Stadium, #66-68 on the Stadium Ring Road (official address, 666 Tianyaoqiao Lu near Zhongshan Nan Er Lu) Xuhui District (天钥桥路666号, 近中山南二路)
Shanghai, China

What to order

pork soup dumplings (鲜肉汤包, xian rou tang bao), Golden Prize hairy-crab soup dumplings (金牌蟹黄汤包, jinpai xie huang tang bao)



Zun Ke Lai topped my soup dumpling index. The way the index was constructed, it basically rewarded places that resolved the implicit challenge of putting a lot of meat and soup into a very thin wrapper—the “*zhi duo, pi bao, ruo duo*” ideal that many Shanghainese subscribe to. By that measure, Zun Ke Lai, on a good day, is better than any other soup dumpling place in Shanghai, with wrappers less than a millimeter thin and a big soupy meatball in the middle. The exact measurements might vary—soup dumplings are always a handmade product, and Zun Ke Lai sometimes swaps out the person responsible for the dumplings at this downtown shop

with someone from their main shop in the suburbs, where they sell sixteen thousand soup dumplings on a slow day. But Zun Ke Lai is always, to my taste, somewhere between good and very good.

One the biggest reasons the soup dumplings here are so good is that they are actually (and always) made to order. Within fifteen minutes of steaming, the skin swells up by about 25 percent (due to the absorption of soup from the inside and residual steam from the outside) and the ratio between skin and filling changes. If you want to appreciate the skill of a really thin wrapper, you've got to get the dumplings straight off of the steamer.

Zun Ke Lai also does a crab-roe soup dumpling, which is good but intensely flavored. There's a big plaque on the wall that says it won "the golden prize," though when or where from is left unsaid. No biggie. Zun Ke Lai is excellent, but nobody's perfect. It's best to go earlier in the day. They close for lunch at 2:30 p.m. (ignore their stated hours of ten a.m. to ten p.m.) and only make a limited amount of soup dumplings each day.

CHINA, HAIRY CRAB, SHANGHAI, SOUP DUMPLINGS
