



diningout

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TOP THAI

New Lake View eatery makes case as one of Chicago's best

There's a long letter posted on the door at Andy's Thai Kitchen, a new restaurant in Lake View. There's stuff about an old restaurant no longer being the restaurant it once was, things about a new chef, preserving Thai grandparents' ancient recipes, and authenticity. As letters on restaurant doors go, it is long. The distilled essence is this: Up until few weeks ago this tiny storefront that shakes and rumbles with every passing of a Brown Line train overhead, was like a hundred other soggy noodle joints in town. Then one day, a Thai master chef, scratch that, one of Chicago's very best chefs, Andy Aroonrasameruang, left one of Chicago's most celebrated Thai restaurants across town, took over this establishment and in a matter of weeks completely transformed it into maybe Chicago's best Thai restaurant.

Andy's Thai Kitchen is not one of best-designed restaurants in Chicago, however. The way the front entrance abruptly ends up against a host station offering a partially veiled view of

ANDY'S THAI KITCHEN ★★½

946 W. Wellington;
(773) 549-7821
Hours: 11 a.m. – 10 p.m.
Monday – Friday; noon – 10 p.m. Saturday, Sunday
Prices: Appetizers: \$5.50-\$10; salads \$7-\$12; soups \$4.50-\$9.50 ; entrees & noodles \$7-\$12; Desserts \$3-\$6
Try: Crispy on choy, kao soy, sai krog issan, garlic pork ribs

In a bite: One of the best Thai spots in Chicago, serving up authentic noodles, salad and curries.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary;
★★★★ Excellent;
★★★ Very Good; ★ Good;
Zero stars: Poor

the long kitchen and ultimately a vista toward the back alley is certainly some kind of violation of Feng Shui. But, where most Thai places are usually some



The kao soy is one of the delightful specialties at Andy's Thai Kitchen, 946 W. Wellington. | SCOTT STEWART-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

kind of muddle of vinyl-backed chairs, harsh lighting, "lucky" bamboo plants and various other vaguely Asian tchotchkes, Andy's is kind of nice. It's gauzily lit by flickering candles suitable for a romantic dinner. Its mahogany chairs, Ikea flower chandelier and framed flower photos are comforting, channeling less a Thai joint and more of a quiet American bistro. The big plate-glass windows and the vista of the elevated train

tracks give it a bit of a Hop-peresque "Nighthawks" vibe, where lonely hearts don't linger over coffee as much as finely stir-fried noodles. Though the pad thai is fine at Andy's, the noodles you want to linger over are *kao soy*. Kao soy translates as "cut rice" to signify that a sheet of rice dough is steamed and then hand-cut in to noodles for this dish. Kao soy is to Thailand-based Thai restaurants what pad thai is to

American Thai restaurants — a ubiquitous standard by which most Thai chefs are judged. Andy's is a nest of crispy fried and soft steamed noodles plunged in to a thin, rich, mild chicken curry spiked with sour mustard sprinkled with toasted peanut and pungent bright lime. Though, before you dig in to such a comforting batch of curry, you'll want to open the palate with *sai krog issan*, a Northern Thai fermented pork

and rice sausage punctuated by stinging chilis and the citrus punch of lemongrass. You'll also probably require a little *kai tod*, marinated fried chicken whose juicy flesh is covered in a magnificent crackling skin that flays from the bone. You'll also need the crispy *on choy*, a righteous jumble of tender shrimp, tempura-fried peppery watercress, scallions, chilis and refreshing mint. The moat of fish sauce-enriched sweet



Garlic pork ribs are a highlight among the many meaty offerings at Andy's.

chili underneath is a burning and bursting yin-yang fireworks display of flavor. It is one of the very best dishes in Chicago. Once you've lit up your mouth with the bright and fiery on choy, it's best to weigh yourself down with some richness. There is no lack of delightfully heavy things — pork belly in all forms — but it's the crispy nubs of garlic-encrusted pork ribs served with a side of Sriracha that I like. I also dig the rib-sticking duck red curry, its hunks of rare duck swaddled in a spicy gravy tempered by plump, bursting, in-season teardrop tomatoes and peeled succulent grapes.

If you're looking for something familiar, skip the pad thai and dig in instead to the *pad see ew* with its al dente verdant florets of broccoli and custardy clouds of egg. Most local versions of this dish are larded with gummy long pan sauteed soggy noodles, but at Andy's they're chopped in to small manageable silky bits. Asian restaurants aren't known for their desserts, but



The crispy on choy salad qualifies as one the best dishes in Chicago. It has a yin-yang fireworks display of flavor.

here they're pretty good. A caramelized banana enrobed in sticky rice and encrusted with a handful of cashews and a luscious custard topped with sweet fried shallot both skew savory, but pack just enough sugar to sate your sweet tooth. There's a guy named Andy Ricker, who in the last few years has been getting a lot of praise for bringing authentic

Thai to America at his Pok Pok restaurants in Portland and New York. In fact he just won a James Beard award for his efforts. Aroonrasameruang's food is just as good and deserves just as much acclaim. Michael Nagrant is a local free-lance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.

THE BIG DEALS

BY DENISE I. O'NEAL
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From upscale to low-cal, the Sun-Times' "Big Deals" column brings readers the dish on food and drink specials that will not break the bank.

Da coach's day

Timothy O'Toole's, 622 N. Fairbanks. Salute Mike Ditka's 73rd birthday, 11 a.m. to 3 a.m. Oct. 18, with Da Super Fan Challenge platter, which includes half-slab baby back ribs, 10 extra spicy wings, Polish sausage sandwich, Italian beef sandwich, and two pounds of fries with a 23-ounce Miller Lite; \$29.99. Down the entire food/drink special and take home the keepsake Bears logo glass. Call (312) 642-0700; timothyotooles.com.

Crab bag

Tavern on Rush, 1031 N. Rush. Alaskan Red King crab specials, beginning the week of Oct. 15, include Alaskan Bristol Bay King Crab legs on ice with lemon, cocktail sauce and honey mustard sauce; \$28, half pound; \$56, full. While supplies last. Call (312) 664-9600; tavernonrush.com.

English grub

English Bar and Restaurant, 444 N. LaSalle. New sliders include the English Dip (thinly sliced roast beef, house made giardiniera, garlic herb jus on a mini hoagie roll); \$3.50. Call (312) 222-6200; englishchicago.com.

Go for the goat

Birrieria Zaragoza, 4852 S. Pulaski. Goat marinated in an ancho-based mole, oven roasted then drizzled with tomato-based consommé with handmade tortillas is the main course of a Chicago Gourmets! dinner at 7 p.m., Oct. 17; \$60; \$50 for CG members. Call (708) 383-7543.

Sake cocktails

Benihana, participating locations. Fall cocktails include the strawberry saketini (Russian vodka, Sho Chiku Bai Nigori sake, cranberry juice and fresh strawberries); \$9.50. benihana.com.

Florida stone crab

Hugo's Frog Bar & Fish House,



The papaya cream (fresh papaya, vanilla ice cream and Creme de cassis liqueur) at Fogo de Chao.

1024 N. Rush. Beginning 3 p.m., Oct. 17, receive one complimentary Florida Stone crab claw per person with the purchase of an entree, dine-in only while supplies last. Call (312) 640-0999; hugosfrogbar.com.

Creme de la creme

Fogo de Chao, 661 N. LaSalle. Stop in for the papaya cream (fresh papaya, vanilla ice cream and Creme de cassis liqueur; \$9.95) during October (National Dessert Month) and the restaurant will donate 20 percent of the proceeds to the Chicago Fire Department's "Ignite the Spirit" charity. Visit fogo.com.

Regional dishes

Henri, 18 S. Michigan. Chef Dirk Flanigan's La Carte de France program features cuisine and wines from Alsace on Sunday and Monday evenings Oct. 14-Nov. 19. Call (312) 578-0763; henrichicago.com.

Drink of the week

Fion Wine & Spirits, 426 W. Diversey. Toast National "I Love Lucy" Day (Oct. 15) with the "I Love Lucy" (vodka, triple sec, lime juice, and parfait d'amour; \$5) cocktail. Visit barlevents.com.

Deal of the week

Socca, 3301 N. Clark. Chef Roger Herring's four-course Fall Harvest dinner, 6 p.m. Oct. 18, features a course of fennel dusted sea scallops with smoked pig cheek and porcini risotto; \$45. Call (773) 248-1155; soccachicago.com.