

eat & drink

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Som tum salad
 LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS

Taste of Thai Town offers casual dining, community

Serving great expectations

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Before Charlie Trotter, there was Arun Sampanthavivat.

In 1985, two years before Trotter launched his eponymous world-famous restaurant, at a time when Thai food awareness was relegated to gummy pad thai and shrimp chips that tasted like Styrofoam, Sampanthavivat opened a prix-fixe temple serving scratch curries and noodles sprinkled with gold leaf. Like Rick Bayless showed America that Mexican food was more than chimichangas, Arun elevated Thai food in the local and national consciousness.

Arun's original restaurant in Irving Park is still going strong, but with prices ranging from \$75 to \$100, it's out of reach for many, something Sampanthavivat is hoping to change with his newest spot, Taste of Thai Town. "Arun's is fine dining," he said. "It's not accessible to [the] public at large. Taste of Thai Town is very casual and priced competitively." Inspired by Chinatown and Little Vietnam, Sampanthavivat, who estimates that the Thai ex-pat population in Chicago

is "at least 15,000, probably more," wants to create a central Thai district beginning with Taste of Thai Town, which is located in a repurposed vintage police station in Albany Park. "I'm trying to bring the Thai community together commercially and socially," he said. "However, Chinatown took too long. It evolved over 100 years. I want this to go faster, that's why I've worked so closely as a joint venture with the city [Chicago provided TIF funding for the building's renovation]."

I stopped in recently to see if Taste of Thai Town had the tasty goods to be a foundation for Sampanthavivat's vision.

A crab rangoon walks into a Thai restaurant

If you want to build a true Thai community, it seems you would start with a menu heavy on authentic regional dishes, but the appetizer list at Taste of Thai Town, which includes crab rangoon, potstickers and spring rolls, reads like a greatest hits of every American pan-Asian takeout restaurant in Chicago. Crab rangoon is actually thought to be an American invention created at the tiki-craze pioneer Trader Vic's. The crab rangoon, potstickers and spring rolls are all served as part of a deluxe appetizer platter (\$9.95) with something called Larb Moo Tord, a delightful one-bite fried version of a traditional Thai minced pork salad. When I asked Sampanthavivat why he serves crab

rangoon at a Thai restaurant, he said, "People in the neighborhood expect it." He added, "I don't cook fusion food, because that's often confusing, but I do believe in serving the very best versions of dishes from other cultures. It's important to building community." The rangoon featuring a crispy hand-crimped wrapper and velvety pureed cream cheese is an above-average rendition, and the potstickers are silky, but they're not the kind of thing you'd travel far for. The croquettes, though, had an intense porkiness and ate like smoky addictive doughnuts that were crispy on the outside and warm and airy on the inside.

A touch above takeout

Though Arun opened the floodgates back in the '80s with Thai fine dining, in the past decade casual Chicago-area storefront Thai restaurants such as Spoon Thai, Aroy Thai, Tac Quick and Andy's Thai Kitchen started serving authentic regional delicacies like

REVIEW
Taste of Thai Town
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 ★★☆☆☆
 Take it or leave it



Roasted duck curry

banana blossom salad, funky spicy Isaan sausage, traditional beef jerkies and pungent fish-sauced, chili-riddled curries. Few of these kinds of dishes are on the expansive Taste of Thai Town menu, which is instead populated with the usual suspects such as pad thai, pad see ewe and basil chicken. If these versions were the best in Chicago, that might be OK, but the chicken pad thai (\$8.95) is cloying and has very few contrasting notes or textures. I had a hard time tasting much egg, peanut, fish sauce or tangy tamarind in the preparation. The grains on the crab fried rice (\$10.95) were firm and well-cooked, but it had barely a whiff of garlic and only a few slivers of crab meat. A roasted duck curry (\$12.95), however, was redemptive. Medium-rare slivers of duck breast bobbed in a sea of flaming curry bursting with heady notes of kaffir lime. Sampanthavivat doesn't use curry from a jar, and you can tell by the herbaceous perfume that wafts from the bowl.

Seek out the special stuff

Som tum or papaya salad tends to show up on a lot of standard Thai menus around town, but rarely is it served with a fiery chili edge or briny bits of sweet-fleshed salt crab like it is at Taste of Thai Town. Though the som tum poo (\$8.95) was delicious, it still wasn't better than the som tum made tableside in a mortar and pestle by chef Dave Beran during Next restaurant's Thai menu. That version, bursting with freshly crushed peanuts and sliced bittersweet papaya juice, is my all-time-favorite variation of the dish.

Part of what's frustrating about the Thai Town experience is that the duck curry and the som tum suggest Sampanthavivat has serious chops and a few secrets up his sleeve, but he's pulling punches because he feels Chicagoans have certain expectations for casual Thai cuisine. Because of some research one of my friends did before we came, we knew there were a couple of "secret" dishes or specials that weren't on the main menu, a sour curry and "ham hock" dish. We ordered the ham hock (\$17.95) featuring braised planks of ham tossed with bok choy, hard-

boiled egg and meaty shiitake mushrooms glazed with a blend of mirin rice wine, shoyu sauce and miso broth. While it was decidedly Japanese-influenced and not Thai, the dish was unique and creative and had a layered depth and assertive earthy rich flavors. "I hope to do more of that kind of stuff," Sampanthavivat said. "I plan to run many specials like the ham hock and the sour curry."

Brahma is watching

As a gathering place, Taste of Thai Town succeeds. The facility is huge and divided up into a handful of rooms including a bright and airy solarium and a banquet hall-like side room featuring traditional Thai art celebrating the reign of King Rama V, a monarch who prevented Siam from being colonized. The shrine of Brahma in the front of the restaurant is a nod to a similar shrine found at the Erawan hotel in Bangkok and a tribute to the highest Hindu god. Sampanthavivat, a genial presence, strolled the restaurant's foyer and lit candles in front of the shrine the night I visited.

The next day, when I interviewed Sampanthavivat, I asked him why a guy so successful has taken on the tough challenge of building such a grand facility (he started working on this venture in 2011). "I've had a good life," he said. "It's time to give now. I believe in reincarnation. I'm getting older. I have to be very careful now. Once you get older you get wiser. I really want to build a lasting community so people can connect."

Bottom line

Taste of Thai Town's noodles, curries and appetizers are better than your average Thai takeout joint. But it's Sampanthavivat's unique dishes such as Japanese-braised ham hocks and sour curries that really shine. If Thai Town is to become the destination and community gathering spot he envisions, he should focus on integrating more of those specials into the regular menu.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@REDEYETCHICAGO.COM | @REDEYEATRINK

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