

restaurants

A taste of Thailand at Seattle's four top spots

by Schuyler Ingle

History

THAI PEOPLE, I'VE BEEN TOLD, DON'T GO out alone, nor with a friend. That wouldn't be much fun. In Thailand, you go with a dozen people at least, several families. Food is often at the center of Thai social exuberance. And one taste explains why.

There is something joyous about Thai cuisine, something friendly and welcoming and familiar despite all the exotic (to Western taste) flavors. Thai cooks through the centuries have taken from Chinese, South Indian, Moghul, and Malaysian kitchens and created something all their own. It is a cuisine for a hot climate, a cuisine of flavors that spring alive and wake up an appetite made sluggish by heat and humidity. Sauces tend toward the light and accentuate the triad of Thai cooking: spicy, sweet, and sour. You will find no cornstarch-thickened sauces lying heavy on the plate.

Nick Gunderson



Rama House's owners: strict attention.

Seattle is fortunate to have had four good Thai restaurants open in the past couple of years. Two are in Belltown, one is down on Elliott, and the fourth is in West Seattle. Bangkok Hut in Pioneer Square serves a careless version of Thai cuisine, like greasy fast food, and won't give a very good first impression. Grand Palace in Federal Way has the most elegant presentations, a factor in Thai food almost as important as taste, but with so much to choose from right in Seattle, the drive is hardly necessary.

Seattle's best Thai restaurants include Rama House at Second and Bell, Thai Tahnee at Second and Virginia, Sa Was Dee on Elliott, and Thai's Taste in West Seattle on California SW. All are family-owned and -operated, and the warmth of the family is brought to the meal.

After a week of eating Thai lunches and dinners, I have to say that Rama House is my favorite. I had the feeling I would be eating the same meal there if I were a guest of the

family, not just a customer at the restaurant. Strict attention is paid to ingredients and all the dishes are prepared as they are ordered, not beforehand. Our group of five went to Rama House for dinner and ordered *ton yum goong* (\$4.50, hot and sour shrimp and mushroom soup), beef satay (\$3.95), chicken curry (\$3.95), chicken screamer (\$4.25), scallops in a garlic and chili sauce (\$5.50), and the ubiquitous steamed rice.

First the soup. This is a standard dish, uniquely Thai, a sour soup. The tartness comes from lemon grass and lime leaf; the fire comes from cayenne. The soup also contains garlic, coriander, lemon juice, bay leaf, and chopped scallions as well as shrimp and whole straw mushrooms. Friends who have tried replicating the soup say they have come close, but never succeeded. (A lesson in Thai food: it appears to be simple only because it is so complex.) Like many Thai dishes, this soup is spicy. Even when mild it can send the unsuspecting into fits of coughing and crying. But it is worth taking the risk. One suggestion: don't inhale the fumes while eating. Rama House produces a stellar version of *ton yum goong*.

Beef satay (or pork, if you prefer) is typical of Thai borrowing. This dish is Malay, but popular in Thailand. Thin strips of beef are marinated in a mixture of coriander, cumin, fennel, shallots, garlic, lemon grass, ginger, turmeric, brown sugar, and a taste of tamarind. Then the beef is worked onto bamboo skewers, grilled, and finally dipped in satay sauce. The sauce tastes like peanuts and coconut milk and chili and garlic and tamarind and lemon, not too spicy, too oily, or too sweet. The sauce is different in each of the four best Thai restaurants in Seattle, and it is difficult to say whose is best. Satay is served with a side dish of sliced cucumber and sesame seed pickled in sweetened vinegar and lime juice.

As Indian as curry might be, it is at the center of Thai cuisine, and a Thai meal without a curry dish is a meal out of balance. These are soupy curries, whether made with chicken, pork, or beef. The sauce is meant to cover ample servings of rice. Each Thai cook has his own version of curry spices, mixtures that in Thailand can be purchased fresh every day. So the curries will differ from restaurant to restaurant, some spicier, some sweeter. Another main ingredient of Thai food is coconut milk, and its flavor comes through in the Rama House chicken curry as a refreshing clashing of sweet and spiced flavors.

Thai cooks make constant use of fresh herbs; this may show up best in a dish Rama House calls "chicken screamer" and Thai's Taste calls *pad plik kapaow*. Pieces of chicken are cooked with fresh basil or mint, chilies, onion, green pepper, and garlic. Fish sauce is used often where you would expect to taste soy sauce. Rama House produces the least oily version of this dish, without overdoing the fish sauce. (Too much fish sauce can be too salty and leaves a lingering aftertaste.) Thai's Taste, I suspect, produces the most authentic version.

The scallops left the mouth atingle. They had been pan-fried with cilantro, lime juice, and curry paste, and the delicacy of the scallops was never lost. The dish was something of a fireworks display with the lime juice and cilantro competing up front, then the curry paste suddenly moving in behind and erupting like sparklers. Rama House is straightforward about its stars, one through four, indicating how hot you want a dish. Four is hot.

My guest at Thai Tahnee, an old hand at

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this and a longtime resident of Bangkok, ordered her chicken curry with five stars. What came hardly merited one star, so if you do like spicy food hot you have to be convincing here. I had the feeling at Thai Tahnee that too many customers had wandered in thinking they were sitting down to a Chinese meal, and the restaurant has begun to bend their menu in compliance. A noodle dish that should have had distinct Thai flavors could have passed for Chinese; was bland where it should have been exuberant. My guest found her curry too sweet and too oily, though I thought it quite pleasant. I quite enjoyed the satay here, the sauce a bit sweeter than at Rama House. The *kai phad king*, ginger chicken with straw mushrooms, green pepper, carrot, onion, and baby corn (\$4.25), was as delicious as it was good to look at, the mixing of colors signaling something special. Thai cooks are often complimented as much on how a dish looks as on how it tastes.

The sweetest waiter working in Seattle is at Thai's Taste. His wife is the cook at this small West Seattle neighborhood restaurant. "If you don't see what you want on the menu," Mr. Chulsuwan told us, "just ask. And if you can't remember the name, describe it and we will try to figure it out." So I described one of my favorites from a Thai restaurant in Los Angeles, a dish I had not yet seen in Seattle. Mr. Chulsuwan was calling the dish hot and sour beef salad on his menu, not *larb*. At least not in English. The dish is described in the Thai alphabet.

"Usually only our peoples like this," Mr. Chulsuwan told me. But let me recommend it to everyone else.

Finely chopped beef is boiled in a strainer for a half-minute, then drained. It is then combined with finely ground toasted rice, chopped peppermint leaves, coriander, onion, lemon juice, fish sauce, and chili powder. The stuff is very hot, as in spicy. Mr. Chulsuwan is careful to ask you how hot you want your food, and then gives you what you have asked for. The *larb* is served with strips of raw cabbage and lettuce, and you load a leaf with the spicy meat and eat the dish by hand as a salad. The price is \$4.25, the experience priceless. The rest of the meal at Thai's Taste—the soup, a light, spicy broth loaded with fish, crab, scallops, mushrooms, and lemon grass—was just as good.

My lunch at Sa Was Dee on Elliott was entertaining. Shortly after 1 sat down, a Channel 7 news crew waddled in and set up camera and lights to film an interview with a couple who have written a book on cheap eats in the city. Thai food certainly falls within that territory and Sa Was Dee will soon receive a blast of attention.

Deservedly so. The satay sauce was crunchy with peanuts, was sweet and spicy and as thick as gravy. The strips of pork had been thoroughly marinated. The soup was light with a distinct flavor of lime and chili. The shrimp were crisp, and the straw mushrooms fresh and firm. It was a bit on the salty side, though. This can be true of any Thai dishes

calling for fish sauce. If you are sensitive to salt, tell your waiter to go easy and the kitchen will comply. If there is a universal truth about any of these Thai restaurants in Seattle, it is that they all want to please the diner, to introduce strangers to a new eating experience, to be as helpful and as good-hearted as possible.

It is difficult to rate any one of these restaurants as better than the others. They are simply different. Rama House has the easiest access for Western diners, dishes that hold true to Thai but respect current conventions in Western cooking (like a light hand with salt and oil). Thai's Taste has the broader range in dishes and smacks of unyielding authenticity. Thai Tahnee can deliver dishes as good as any I had during the week, but the waiter has to be assured that you are looking for the real thing. And Sa Was Dee falls right in the middle. So try them all. The price is certainly right. ■