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Tastes of a Bangkok Childhood

A Review of Pimaan Thai Restaurant in Emerson

By SHIVANI VORA NOV. 28, 2014

Most casual suburban Thai restaurants aren't known for their innovative menus, offering chicken satay, papaya salad and pad thai, with a few red or green curries thrown in.

The more-than-a-decade-old Pimaan Thai Restaurant in Emerson doesn't skip these crowd-pleasing staples but also stands out for going beyond them, although not always successfully.

The 2,400-square-foot restaurant is off a busy thoroughfare. The dining room has dark wood tables and gray chairs and carpet, but the vases with fresh flowers, set on each table, along with the wood carvings and musical instruments adorning the walls, break up the deep color scheme.

Piped-in pop music — both the oldies and the current stuff — adds more liveliness to the already bustling room. There is a diverse array of diners of all ages, most of whom are dressed casually.

The service is spotty. While the food usually arrives within 10 minutes, the wait staff, though always friendly, can be unreliable.

During one weekend lunch visit, for example, when there were only a handful of other customers, we were left with our menus for more than 15 minutes and had to flag down our waiter. There were long intervals throughout our meal where the room had no servers, even as more diners were being seated.

But where the lackadaisical service might disappoint, the focus in the kitchen is impressive.

“My goal was to open a restaurant serving the best versions of the dishes I ate growing up in Bangkok,” said Penny Pumcharoenwatna, 63, who co-owns the business with her sister, Rosawan Boonnark.

Ms. Pumcharoenwatna relies on one chef and three additional cooks who take turns producing flavorful dishes that rely heavily on pastes ground in house and fresh herbs like lemon grass, basil, cilantro and Kaffir lime leaves.

The cold mixed seafood salad, for example, with large and tender scallops, tail-on shrimp and calamari, was tossed with lemon grass slivers, lime juice, mint, scallions and a fiery roasted chili paste. My fellow diners and I had to negotiate who would have the last bite.

The papaya salad featured a hearty pile of the soft-but-not-mushy shredded fruit, al dente string beans, crushed peanuts and red and green chili slivers mixed in a lime juice, palm sugar and fish sauce dressing. This interpretation hit all the right notes of spiciness, crunchiness, sweetness and sourness.

A less common but equally appetizing find were the deep-fried chive pancakes, slightly crispy rice dough filled with green chives and served with a spicy soy sauce.

Unfortunately, the ever-popular chicken satay didn't hold to the same standard. The skewers of thigh meat were rubbery on the multiple occasions we tried them.

Entrees, too, had a few misses. The Brian-style beef steak, a grilled Angus filet in a basil garlic sauce with a hint of cumin and whole green peppercorns, was chewy and dry. Also, the jumbo shrimp red jungle curry swimming with string beans, eggplant chunks and Kaffir lime leaves was watery and bland.

Thankfully, there were more standouts than mishaps. The pad prik khing with chicken — slices of chicken breast and string beans sautéed in a red curry paste — sang of lemon grass and had a nice kick. And while the pad thai was tasty, the bigger carb hit was the more atypical drunken noodles or flat rice pasta sautéed with basil and fresh vegetables, including napa cabbage and bok choy.

But the biggest thrill was the playfully named squid in love — meaty

rounds of fresh calamari sautéed with jumbo shrimp, sliced chicken, red peppers, scallions and a roasted curry paste made with garlic, onion, dried shrimp and dried red chilies. Every bite had gusto, and it was impossible not to finish all of it.

This wasn't the case when it came to dessert, which isn't worth wasting calories on.

The chocolate soufflé, for example, was more sugary than chocolaty, and the vanilla ice cream had a chemical aftertaste. But since sweet endings aren't usually the lure of Thai food, it's not fair to call these disappointments.

Overall, Pimaan is a better than average meal out: yes, there are slip-ups in service, but these are forgivable given the affordable prices and the mostly successful effort the menu makes in trying to break the same-old Thai food mold.



Pimaan Thai Restaurant

79 Kinderkamack Road

Emerson

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Pimaan thai.com

Good

THE SPACE There are 75 seats in a single dining room spread out among dark wood tables with gray chairs. A dark space with playful and delicate touches that brighten the area. Wheelchair accessible.

THE CROWD A mix of families with young children, younger and older couples and groups of friends in casual dress. The background pop music adds a lively touch.

THE BAR B.Y.O.B.

THE BILL Entrees, \$11 to \$29. Appetizers, \$5 to \$13, Desserts, \$6 to \$9.50.

WHAT WE LIKED Fried chive pancake, mixed seafood salad, papaya salad, vegetable green curry, pad thai, squid in love, pad prik khing with chicken, drunken noodles.

IF YOU GO Closed Monday. Tuesdays through Fridays, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. (till 10:30 p.m. on Fridays); Saturdays, noon to 10:30 p.m., Sundays, noon to 9 p.m. Reservations taken. There is a large parking lot.

RATINGS Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, Poor.

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