

Restaurants

Thai me up, Thai me down

If you think that Thai food is all about *cili padi*, you're not entirely wrong, but Kanchanee Pattaravatwong would tell you that you're not entirely right either. Some, according to the chef at Crown Princess Inter-Continental's Mekong, are hot but some are not. But the hot dishes happen to be the ones most agreeable to our "cili padi tunnels".

Asked to describe Siamese food as a whole, Pattaravatwong defines it as a fusion of "hot and not-so-hot dishes". What about the Siamese knack for lacing flat items such as cuttlefish and vegetables with stinging elements such as, well, the *cili padi*?

"If the food is bland, it's boring. You need something piquant to awaken the taste," she explains. Thai cuisine, she summarises, is "not too sweet, not too salty, not too sour, but smooth."

But I'm so intrigued by the worldwide popularity of Thai food, especially in Malaysia. Why do we like *tom yam* so much; what does it have that Malay cuisine doesn't have, and how come Malaysians are not equally receptive when it comes to, say, Indonesian or Filipino cuisines?

First, there's the socio-gastronomical factor. Kelantan, Kedah and Terengganu cuisines, as evident through their orchestration of sweet-and-sour *kerabu* salads, *tom yams*, *laksa* and such, are heavily influenced by Siamese gastronomy. Our sweet-toothed northern counterparts, like their Siamese neighbour, have this unexplicable penchant for fishy and sweet-and-sour fares.

Then there's the palatial factor. Both the Malaysian and Siamese palates are inclined to anything flaming to the tastebuds. Anything has to be accompanied by chilli, one way or another. In short, if the grub is hot, it rocks.

Pattaravatwong can't be more right when she says: "Our cuisines are like brother and sister. Some of the key ingredients are similar to yours. Such as the popular usage of garlic, shallot and fish paste. Also lemon grass. We also use dried chillies and dried flowers like you do."

Let's not overlook the socio-geographical factor altogether. Thai food is not only similar to the east coast cuisines, but true to its Indochinese roots, also features milder, soupy substances physi-

cally similar to the Chinese.

Example? *Tom yam*. I don't have to go into details on this soup. It would be unthinkable not to know anything about it. Like steamboat, it's the thing to order when you don't feel like having rice, the thing to cook when you don't know what else to do with the vegetable excess in the fridge.

And it's not just a soup; it's a medicine. "The *tom yam gung* and *tom kha gai* (a mixture of coconut milk and chicken soup) work best as a medicine," Pattaravatwong recommends. "The *keng liang* (vegetable soup) is also good for health." But Pattaravatwong's skills are not limited to *tom yams*.



Born in south Thailand, Pattaravatwong began her career with Siam Inter-Continental Hotel Bangkok in 1989. Her specialties in Thai cuisine (read: prawn salad, pineapple fried rice, *muc chien gion*, *goi choh tom*, among others) has taken her to Inter-Continental hotels in Dubai, Greece, Manila, Bali and Korea.

Pattaravatwong was pleasantly surprised by the good reception Thai restaurants enjoyed in the Middle East. Despite the Arabs' aversion towards hot food, Thai restaurants are a hit, claiming a space in every five-star hotel, running closely behind the Continental eateries.

At the moment, this petite and bubbly personality is attached to the Crown Princess Inter-Continental KL, preparing Thai dishes alongside the Vietnamese chef at The Mekong. Recently, she par-

ticipated in the Vietnamese & Thai buffet promotion which featured all-time Indochinese favourites, including *goi ga* (Vietnamese chicken salad), *cao xao ot toi ot* (stir-fried flower crab in hot chilli garlic sauce), *tab tim krob* (water chestnut, red bean, jackfruit in sugar syrup and coconut milk), *che chia* (banana in sago), and of course, the *tom yam*.

Pattaravatwong is quite amused by the local extemporisation of the *tom yam*. Though ours is shamefully watered down with bits of tomato pulp, shrimps and crushed lemon-grass inelegantly submerged in thin soup, she finds the Malaysian *tom yam* quite interesting. "It's the Malaysian way," she chuckles with good humour, "but I like it."

Pardoning the local verisimilitude of her native cuisine, Pattaravatwong says: "There's bound to be a compromise with regards to the original taste. Nobody wants to eat the original thing."

More details, call 03-2625522.

By Salina Mohamed

Swiss-Garden Kuala Lumpur's Chinese restaurant, The Blossom, offers authentic Cantonese cuisine prepared by master chef Phua Ah Chon and his team. The menu covers an extensive range of popular and specialised dishes such as shark's fin, bird's nest, pigeon and abalone, barbecued favourites and *dim sum*.

But it's also the ambience that appeals. A mixture of wood panelling and frosted windows adorn the interiors of the restaurant, with the flooring carpeted in black and grey. A timber boulder in the middle of the main dining area adds a touch of privacy while the guests enjoy their meals. Diners can also opt for one of the restaurant's five private rooms, two of which can accommodate up to 20 people for a sit-down dining event.

The Blossom serves lunch daily from 11.30pm to 2.30pm and dinner from 6.30pm to 10.30pm. More details, call 03-2413333 ext 506.

By Ciao Gao



Ampang

10.30pm, Sat-Sun, Dinner only, 124 pax; Amv/Dir/MCNV; \$\$\$\$

Ciao 88

Scrumptious Italian cuisine amidst a cosy and ambience-filled converted bungalow along the busy Jalan Tun Razak area. 428 Jalan Tun Razak, KL; (03-9854827, fax: 03-9862617);



ambience, great meals and appropriately-clad staff are here to make the Spanish eating experience a dream come true! Meila Hotel, 16 Jalan Imbi, 55100 KL; (03-2428333; fax: 03-2426623); 6.30pm-10.30pm Mon-Sun; 80 pax; Amv/MCNV/Dir/JCB; \$\$\$\$

ASEAN

Barn Thai Jazzaurant 85

Thai restaurant with a jazzy concept. The best jazz bands in town are here. 370B, Jin Tun Razak, KL; 03-2446699; lunch noon-3pm & dinner 7-