

Assignment: Review a restaurant that fits a college student's budget. Choose one that he or she may not have visited. Make a recommendation, positive or negative.

The Siam Café
by Alfredo Guzman

Some suburban Harper College students won't go into Chicago for love or money—certainly not for an evening's entertainment or a meal. To these timid souls, ethnic food is microwave egg rolls, a hamburger with pizza cheese, or a tortilla that tastes like it was made by Hostess. There are, however, many Harper students who are a little more adventuresome. For them the big city is a place to go for good fun and great food. If you're one of them, the next time you're in Chicago—hungry for adventure or just plain hungry—you should try one of Chicago's newest cuisines and one of its best, the food of Thailand.

Suspended between India and China, Thailand has borrowed from both, especially the curries, sweet sauces, and strong spices from India and, from China, complex ingredients, fresh vegetables, and the wonders of wok cooking. The result is food rich in contrasting temperatures, tastes, and textures. The best place I know to savor these contrasts is The Siam Café, just fifteen minutes north of the Loop on Lakeshore Drive (exit at Wilson Avenue, drive three blocks west to Sheridan Road, turn north one block, and you've arrived). There, in the middle of inauspicious, "urban renewal" Uptown, you'll find some of the most flavorful and least expensive food you'll ever enjoy.

As soon as you open the door, you know you're not in one of those trendy but bland pretend-ethnic restaurants. In the foyer, posters written in intricate Thai script announce Thai golf outings, businesses, and social events, all suggesting the large Thai community in metropolitan Chicago. An anteroom furnished with straight chairs, plants, and Thai wood statuary tells you The Siam Café has a thriving takeout business—a clue to its quality. The large dining room is divided in the middle by a trellis, the seating is primarily in booths for four, and the oak-paneled and poster-hung walls have that earnest "home-decorating" look. The customers are a mixed crew: Latinos, African-Americans, Thais, Chinese, Indians, and southern whites from Uptown; young urban types from Lincoln Park, New Town, and Evanston; and even groups of seniors bussed by mini-van from Glencoe and Highland Park. Wherever they come from, you're not likely to hear much from them; they're here to eat.

If you're new to Thai food, the tall menu, half in Thai, half in English, with dozens of strange-sounding dishes, may be baffling. The only clues to the food are stars to identify hot dishes. But you won't go wrong ordering what have become my favorites. Start with the most popular Thai appetizer, Satay, here called "Siam Bar-B-Que": tender strips of curry-marinated pork or chicken broiled on delicate wood skewers and served with a spicy peanut sauce for dipping. On the side are toast squares that contrast with the lacy textures of the meat and a small cucumber, onion, and chilli salad that balances the temperature of the meat. The salad dressing, a blend of water, vinegar, and sugar, is itself a study in contrasts. Unless you eat the chillies in the salad, satay is spicy but not hot.

A second spicy but mild appetizer is egg salad: fried egg on a bed of cucumber and tomatoes, sprinkled with sliced scallions, crushed peanuts, and coriander and doused with a sweet oil and red pepper sauce. A third mild appetizer is mee krob: small crispy rice noodles deep fried in sweet oil and mixed with tiny dried shrimp. For hot appetizers, try the carrot salad—it looks but doesn't taste like the carrot salad your mother used to make—or yum nam tok, lightly cooked beef salad, a mixture of tender beef, onions, lettuce, and the ubiquitous green chillies. If Cantonese cooking is as adventuresome as you feel, The Siam Café will cook you up a crunchy order of thin but well-packed egg rolls.

My favorite main dishes are pad Thai (here called "Thai rice sticks") and garlic chicken, two more good dishes for diners new to Thai food. Pad Thai is a mound of wok-fried bean sprouts, rice noodles, tiny dried shrimp (fresh jumbo shrimp, \$1.00 extra), red pepper, crushed peanuts, and coriander, all covered with a light, sweet sauce and served with wedges of lime and cabbage for taste and texture contrasts.

Garlic chicken is a simple dish: chunks of white meat on a bed of rice covered with garlic sauce, scallions, and coriander, accompanied by peeled cucumber slices.

Another mild dish is wide noodles in oyster sauce: chopped greens, rice noodles, thin slices of beef, and black beans (some say that The Siam Café serves Chicago's best version of this dish). A bit spicier, especially if you pour on the Tabasco-like red sauce, are fried mussels: fried mussels mixed with fried egg and laid on a bed of bean sprouts. Cuttlefish in garlic is also on the spicy-but-not-hot-side. If you want hot main dishes, the hottest and the best are chilli chicken, beef, or shrimp: meat topped with garlic sauce, crushed basil leaves, and fresh chillies, all on a bed of white rice. As you take a bite then pause to wipe perspiration from your brow, you'll discover that chillies have flavors as well as temperatures; different kinds of chillies lend different tastes to the foods they spice.

To cool the fire, you may want a bottle or two of Sinha, imported Thai beer. The house white wine is good, too, but tastes more like California than Thailand. Best of all is Thai iced coffee: dark, sweet coffee floating on heavy cream and ice cubes.

The desserts are the only disappointment to American tastes, usually sticky-sweet tarts made from stewed fruits you've never seen or tasted before. The fruit should provide a welcome balance to the spices and fire of the main dishes, but the effect is more of an apprentice Middle Eastern pastry chef who doesn't know how to make baklava. I usually pass on the desserts.

The food is served by a staff that will never be hired by some cutesy theme restaurant. They are reserved, they don't chat or shmooze, they won't tell you their first names, and they write your order on your ticket in Thai and serve your food as soon as it's ready, sometimes almost immediately, sometimes after a few minutes' wait. Like everything and everyone else at The Siam Café, they suggest that this is a place for eating, eating, eating, not for jawing, gawking, or being seen.

The Siam Café is a no-nonsense-casual restaurant, sometimes crowded but rarely full. Don't worry about reservations; even on weekends you shouldn't have to wait for a table. And the prices are rock-bottom. Last weekend a friend and I spent \$28.00, including drinks and tip. The Siam Café offers one of the cheapest great meals in town. It is located at 4712 North Sheridan Road, parking available. Hours: Monday-Thursday, noon to 10:30 p.m.; Friday, Saturday, noon to 11 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 10 p.m. Major credit cards accepted. Telephone 773-555-1652.

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