



Tantra Thai Bistro
2055 Holliday Drive, Dubuque, IA, 563-588-2345
HOURS: Mon – Fri: Lunch: 11 am – 3 pm, Dinner: 5 pm – 10 pm
Sat: 11 am – 10 pm, Sun: 11:30 am – 9:30 pm
DINING STYLE: Casual Dining, **NOISE LEVEL:** Comfortable
RECOMMENDATIONS: Tempura Green Beans, Thai Beef Jerky, Coconut Shrimp, Avocado Roll, Spicy Basil Noodles, Spicy Basil Wok Stir Fry, Asparagus Shiitake, Pineapple Fried Rice, Pad Thai, Ginger Tilapia, Teriyaki Salmon, Panang Curry, Sundown Mountain Roll, Shrimp Tempura Roll.
LIQUOR SERVICE: Full Bar; Tantra Martinis, Mojitos, large assortment of imported beers, impressive wine list.
PRICES: \$5.95-\$14.95 **RESERVATIONS:** Recommended for 1 to 100
PAYMENT OPTIONS: Cash, Debit, NO Checks, All Major Credit Cards
WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Yes **KIDS POLICY:** High chairs & boosters available
TAKE OUT: Yes **DELIVERY:** No **PARKING:** Strip mall lot



Tantra Thai Bistro
by Rich Belmont

It's hard to miss the Tantra Thai Bistro sign on the west side of Northwest Arterial in Dubuque. So you are probably aware a restaurant specializing in the cuisine of Thailand is now in our sophisticated city.



Now before you say "why do we need another Chinese restaurant, we already have six of them," you should know Thai food is very different. Thai cooking uses many herbs and spices that are uncommon in Chinese food. Some of these are fish sauce, galangal, lemongrass, curry powder, lime leaves, cilantro, fresh garlic, sweet Thai basil and red and green curries.

Thai food employs noodles as often as rice. Condiments and sauces always complement the meals. And Thai food is heavily influenced by flavors from the neighboring countries of Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, and of course China.



Pictured above from left to right are Dixon Fung, proprietor, originally from Hong Kong, Gigi Kaewkerd, a server from Thailand, Kevin Zhang, proprietor, and Gordon Gao, proprietor, from China.

Tantra Thai Bistro in Dubuque has only been open for a couple of weeks. It is already developing an enthusiastic crowd of regulars. That's because the owners, managers and cooks are all very experienced. The senior proprietor, Kevin Zhang, who is originally from mainland China, graduated from the Lüzlau Hotel and Restaurant Management School located near Lucerne, Switzerland. He traveled to Los Angeles to learn the English language and after training in several American and Chinese restaurants he relocated to Davenport, Iowa. There, in 2001, he created the Fuji Japanese Steak House and several other Asian restaurants in Muscatine and the Quad

Cities. Today he still operates the Tantra Asian Bistro in Davenport. Kevin says that restaurant offers an assortment of cuisines: Thai, Indian, Korean and Chinese. It is an entirely different experience than the restaurant here in Dubuque which is focused only on the food of Thailand.

Kevin knew he could not open Tantra Thai Bistro without an experienced and dedicated staff. So he brought to Dubuque co-owners Dixon Fung and Gordon Gao who have been with him for several years and George Chao, a creative and expert



Sushi Chef (pictured at right). He also transferred several of his cooks and servers from Davenport.

It is true the Tantra Thai Bistro offers a complete menu of Thai cuisine. However, it would be more correct to state the menu is a collection of the most popular dishes from the four main regions of the country, Northern, Northeastern, Central and Southern and also Royal Thai as well as Thai versions of Indian, Chinese and Japanese favorites.

Kevin and his chefs have expertly crafted all of his specialties to cater to American tastes. For example, most Thai dishes are prepared with fish sauce. But here only about one third of the entrées contain fish oil and only in very mild form so there is no fishy taste at all. Likewise, Westerners perceive all Thai food to be spicy hot. At Tantra Thai, though, most dishes can be ordered either mild, hot or really hot. Only some of the curry dishes are



already hot and cannot be made in a cooler version. On the other hand all of the mild menu items can be prepared hotter to suit your taste.

When you go to Tantra Thai Bistro you will find the cuisine is prepared from a number of key ingredients. There are three kinds of rice: Jasmine, an aromatic rice, Sticky rice, the everyday street food variety and Japanese Sushi rice, which has more texture. There are six different noodles: The most popular are Rice, Wheat, Egg and Wheat, and Mung Bean. The bean



one is transparent so it is called a Glass noodle and is sometimes known as a Cellophane noodle. Kevin's favorite is the home made fresh noodle served in the Thai specialty Pad See Ew.

The vegetables are tomatoes, cucumbers, sweet potatoes, squash, corn, mushrooms, Asian eggplant, Napa cabbage and broccoli which is used as a substitute for Gailan sometimes called Chinese broccoli. There are primarily three chilies used to spice things up. They are Thai Chile peppers, Jalapenos and Chile pepper powder or flakes.



The sauces are what makes Thai food so fascinating. They include Sweet Chili, Pepper, Sriracha, Hoisin, Ponzu, Nam Pla Fish Sauce and Spicy Brown Sauce.



The menu is easy to understand because it is divided into sections. Each of the styles of food have a set price. Included in that price is your choice of beef, chicken, pork, tofu or shrimp.



The first section is on appetizers. You should not skip over these because you would be missing out on some exquisite tastes. For example, the Chicken Satay are white chicken strips marinated in Thai herbs, grilled on skewers and served with peanut sauce. The Tempura Green Beans are dusted with rice flour, deep fried and served with a delightful

plum sauce. The Spicy Basil Mussels offers fresh mussels seasoned with Spicy Basil. All the Spicy Basil dishes are wonderful. Thai Basil is different from the Basil we are used to. It has a sweet and





slightly licorice taste. The fresh basil leaves are handpicked from the stems just before cooking. Then there is my favorite appetizer, the Thai Beef Jerky. Marinated beef strips are conjoined with Thai Sriracha hot sauce. This sauce is so good and it's not really very hot. It is a paste of chili peppers, distilled vinegar, garlic, sugar and salt.

The next two sections are soups and salads. Try the Thai Hot and Sour Soup made with your choice of chicken or shrimp in Tom Yum broth. Tom Yum is a hot and sour soup made from a stock of ingredients including lemon grass, Kaffir lime leaves, galangal, lime juice, fish sauce and crushed Chile peppers.

Now we get to the noodle dishes. The most popular one is called Pad Thai. It is stir fried with egg in a Tamarind Sauce. This sauce is home made from scratch. Vinegar is mixed with plum sauce and the fruit of the Tamarind tree; pods with a sweet and sour pulp. My favorite is the Spicy Basil Noodles that are stir fried with bell peppers, onion, egg and those delicious basil leaves.



Next on the list are the Wok Stir Fries. The Kung Pao has scallions, bell peppers, squash and roasted peanuts in a spicy brown sauce made from soy and oyster sauce.



If you like mushrooms you must try the Asparagus Shiitake Stir Fry (pictured at the next column). This dish combines shiitake mushrooms and asparagus in a spicy and delicious black pepper garlic sauce.

All the Curry dishes except for Pumpkin Curry are spicy hot. Curry dishes are usually of Indian origin and are meat and/or vegetable stew-like dishes. However, Thai Curry is very different from Indian because in addition to curry powder and other seasonings Indian is made with yogurt and Thai is prepared with coconut milk. The Panang Curry is very well known. Panang Curry is a special paste of fresh garlic, shallots, galangal, cilantro and dried chilies.



There are seven Fried Rice dishes on the menu. The most popular one is Pineapple which also has egg, cashews, raisins and green onions.



The Seafood entrées are all quite exquisite. The one most ordered is the Teriyaki Salmon. A generous Norwegian fillet is basted in a tangy teriyaki sauce and is served with fried rice and asparagus. The Lemongrass Prawns are amazing. Shrimp are sautéed in a lemongrass red hot chili puree. The Chef blends roasted garlic, sweet onion, fresh chopped lemongrass, chili peppers and Asian dried shrimp. In case you haven't tried it before Lemongrass is actually a tropical grass with inner stalks having a strong lemon flavor.



Eating Thai food is all about experiencing a myriad of flavors. So don't forget to try the sauces that are brought to your table. They impart complimentary flavors that will only add to your enjoyment. The red sauce is a freshly made chili paste and it's not that spicy. Be careful with the green one, though, it's a Thai fish sauce that is really hot!



Now if all of these exotic meals still haven't enticed you to visit Tantra Thai Bistro how about this: It's also a first class Sushi Bar.

Sushi Chef or Itamae George Chao is a very experienced and creative artist. For thirteen years he honed his skill in the family sushi restaurant in Dallas, Texas.



Chef Chao has created special Sushi Rolls called Sundown Mountain and Galena just for us Dubuque people. The Sundown is a mountain of tempura shrimp mixed with spicy crab meat and is sprinkled with crunchy tempura flakes.

The Galena roll is unusual because it is a tempura chicken tender with cream cheese, topped with grilled eel and thin cut avocado. The Elephant Roll has a white fish rolled with Masago which is the roe from the Capelin Smelt fish. This comes with Ponzu Sauce on the side. You will love this sauce. Tantra's version of this Japanese dipping sauce is made with lemon juice, fresh oranges, rice vinegar, soy sauce, Mirin (a Japanese sweet, golden rice wine) and Kumbu. The latter is sun dried sheets of kelp.

And while I am thinking of kelp there is another thing you should know. Many sushi rolls are made with Nori, a thin sheet of seaweed. I myself am not a big fan of Nori. So I discovered I can request any roll to be made with either soy or rice paper instead. Now I love Sushi!

So while we are talking about it perhaps we should review some of the rules of polite sushi eating:

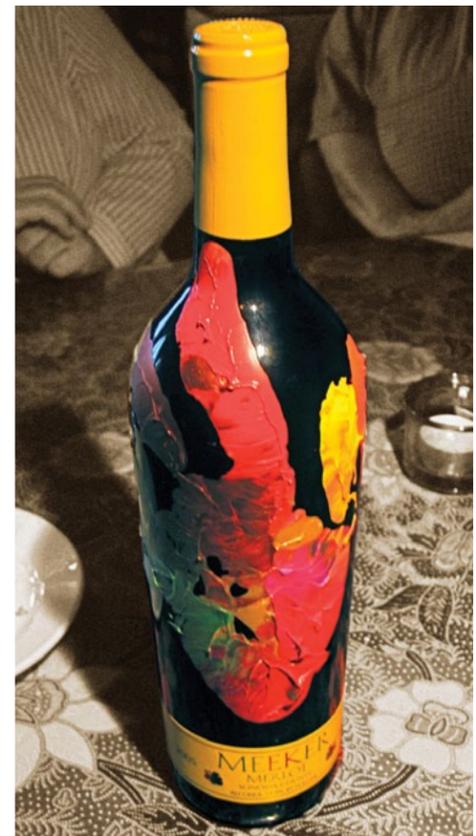
1. The word Sushi actually means "with rice". Sushi generally refers to rolls made with cooked fish. Sashimi is made with slices of raw fish.
2. Sashimi should be eaten with chopsticks but it is perfectly OK to eat Sushi with your fingers.
3. If sitting at the Sushi bar it is polite to only order one roll at a time.
4. Order side items from a server and not the chef (Itamae).



5. Look at the Sushi before you eat it. It is an art form and the Itamae will be pleased!
6. Place Sushi in your mouth upside down so the fish is directly against your tongue.
7. Sushi is served with soy sauce (Shoyu), pickled ginger (Beni Shaga) and Japanese horseradish (Wasabi).
8. It is incorrect to mix Shoyu and Wasabi together. Mix it a little at a time.
9. Leaving anything on your plate, even rice, is offensive to the Itamae.
10. Sit at the Sushi bar and watch your Itamae prepare your dinner. Offer him a sake or a beer. Don't tip with cash since Asian food preparers do not handle money.



Tantra has a delicious assortment of Martinis. On several recent visits my guests enjoyed Asian Pear with Pear vodka and pear juice, Mangotini made from Cruzan Mango Rum, Lemoncello and Mango Puree, and Raspberry Lemon Drop. There are several flavors of Mojitos, also exotic house special drinks and even flavored sakes like blueberry and raspberry. There are also 18 mostly imported beers from such far away places as Thailand, Viet Nam, Japan, China and India.



The wine list is quite impressive. Kevin has obviously done some research to identify wines that pair well with the various entrées on the menu. Just for fun ask to see the Meeker Merlot from the Winemakers Handprint Collection. Each colorful bottle is personally hand printed by the wine maker and no two bottles are alike. The Merlot is excellent too with a superb blackberry bouquet and soft, ripe flavors of black cherries, cassis, truffle, pepper and spice.

Much to my surprise this Asian restaurant even has dessert! The Banana Split Maki is almost too pretty to eat and the Mango Sticky Rice is sweet and highly unusual. Chai-Yo, Chai-yo, Chai-yo!