



THAI DUCK WITH PINEAPPLE FRIED RICE



BIRD'S NEST

Lina's Thai Bistro & Lina's Lounge

Comfort in a Bistro or a Lounge

By Sunil Malapati

A food psychologist named Brian Wansink categorized cooks based on why they cook—he would have pegged Gordon Gao as the *giving* cook*, the one who sees food as a way to make people happy. Gordon is not the flashy type who wants to impress, rather one who wants to offer comfort. His wife, Lina Qiu, shares that philosophy. No wonder she acts as the proprietor of Lina's Thai Bistro and now Lina's Lounge where Gordon can offer comforting food and drink.

(*For the record, the five types are giving, methodical, healthy, innovative, and competitive cooks.)

Both Lina and Gordon had restaurant experience before opening a Thai restaurant in Dubuque. Lina brings restaurant management experience from Chinatown in Chicago while Gordon has wide-ranging experience from Northern China to Switzerland to Los Angeles to Davenport. Obeying the old adage “see a need, fill a need,” they saw the absence of a Thai restaurant in Dubuque and opened one. This was about a decade ago, and Lina's Thai Bistro has become a beloved mainstay of the Dubuque food scene. When a storefront opened up a couple of doors down on the same block, the idea of a sports bar with pool tables and darts and a wide-open space

took root. Gordon told me that they were not necessarily looking to open a bar, but the space nearby and the lack of a decent sports bar in the neighborhood after the closure of Courtside provided a need they could fill.

Lina's Lounge is still a work in progress. The name “Lina's Lounge” conveys a welcoming area for all groups; the cool blues and greens with metal accents and an open layout with large bay windows and a high ceiling provide a relaxing physical space. The furniture ranges from cheery booths to small bar tables and stools, restaurant tables and chairs, and a large central bar service area. Several large screens are high up on the large walls for easy viewing, while not making the space feel claustrophobic; a trap too many sports bars fall into. There is even an outside patio for the warmer months (seems this December almost fits that bill!) Lina and Gordon designed everything to make the customers want to dawdle and hang out.

A good sports bar needs a large selection of drinks, and Lina's is quite prepared for the crowds. Forty (yes, 40) beers are on tap, and the list is diligently organized into various types. My eye quickly went to the ales, especially IPAs, and I was quite happy to see some excellent IPAs like River Rock, Lagunitas, and Elysian Space Dust represented. The other categories similarly provided a good selection for the varied palates. There are also canned beers, ciders, and seltzers available as well as a good wine selection and an offering of cocktails imported from the menu at Lina's Thai Bistro. I was glad to see one of my favorites, the pear mojito; a delightful combination of pear vodka, Asian pear juice, and lemon juice with mint. They also added a small selection of margaritas.

The bar menu itself is limited to pizza, wings, chicken sandwiches, and burgers. They have a small kitchen in the back with an oven and decided to limit the menu here and allow patrons to order from the full Lina's Thai Bistro menu. I think it is an excellent compromise to running two full kitchens. If you are looking to just hang out for a game, drink some good beer, and have some basic bar grub, the Lounge kitchen fulfills that need. Since the restaurant menu is extensive, I decided to highlight a few of the dishes that

would work really well in the Lounge. For the record, I have eaten almost every dish except pork dishes on the menu, and I feel pretty confident about my recommendations.

When Lina's first opened, Dubuque did not have Thai or Japanese cuisines, and the Bistro menu has a pan-Asian feel to it. A quick glance at the eighteen (yes, 18) appetizers shows Thai, Japanese, Indian, Chinese, and American influences, and every one of these would work well in a bar setting. Edamame, steamed soybean pods with salt crystals, is a great bar substitute for shelled peanuts. The lettuce cups are a great interactive food—the crispy lettuce cups have chicken and veggies while the Spicy Thai version has more oomph to it with herbs and lime juice. If you want lighter fare, there are multiple rolls; indeed, an extensive sushi roll menu beckons tantalizingly. One of my friends orders the Fresh Summer Roll every single time she visits Lina's; with its beguiling mixture of rice noodles, steamed shrimp, herbs, lettuce, and cucumber and served with a rich sweet sauce, they can be the perfect start to a meal or a light meal by itself. Sushi rolls work well with many beers, so you can really mix and match and see what works best for you. I would probably pair my IPA with the Dragon Roll—shrimp tempura and spicy tuna with avocado and grilled eel.

When I think of bar food, fried stuff immediately springs to mind. If you are in a group, I would recommend the tempura green beans, lightly breaded and deep fried with a sweet plum sauce. I add a bit of Sriracha to my plum sauce for some kick, not that the fried beans need any help. These are always a big hit with my friends. Coconut shrimp and vegetable samosa are other favorites that should work well with a nice drink.

There is a range of soups, salads, curries, stir-fries, and noodle dishes—I did mention the menu is extensive! The spicy beef salad really earns the spicy title; as with most hot Thai dishes, the basil really accentuates the heat level. This is also true of basil fried rice as well as spicy basil noodle and drunk noodle. In general, the spiciness at Lina's is tailored to Midwestern palates. If you want to add real heat, I ask for the green chilies



LINA'S LOUNGE ENTRANCE



LINA'S LOUNGE POOL TABLES

in fish sauce or Sriracha. The garlicky heat of Sriracha is great with fried rice but sometimes can take away from the complex balance of flavors Thai dishes achieve; the green chilies marinated in fish sauce often complements the dishes instead of adding an extra garlic note.

For the milder palates, I would recommend the mango coconut fried rice, pineapple fried rice, pad see ew, and the ever popular pad thai. The addition of real fruit and nuts to fried rice makes them feel like a complete meal instead of an accompaniment. Pad see ew is unusual in having very wide noodles and a black bean sauce, a more pronounced Chinese influence among wok-stir fried noodles. Thai cuisine is influenced by multiple cuisines around the region, and stir fries speak of their Northern neighbors. Among the fourteen (yes, 14) signature stir-fries, my absolute favorite is the spicy eggplant, as much for its mix of peppers and chili-flavors as for sentimental reasons. It was my dearly departed dad's favorite dish at Lina's, and I always think of him when I order it.

Since Gordon and Lina are both of Chinese descent, I asked Gordon about how much their background seeps into the menu and Gordon's cooking. As befits a *giving* cook, Gordon is careful to follow the Thai recipes as they were taught to him when he worked at Exotic Thai in the Quad Cities. A few explicitly Chinese stir-fries like kung pao and red hot szechuan do show up on the menu, but Gordon reserves his multiple influences to a small and well-curated Chef's Specials menu. There are only eight (yes, 8) dishes on this list, and a brief discussion of two of them might illuminate Chef Gordon's process.

Thai Duck consists of well-seared duck breast with pineapple fried rice and grilled asparagus with a sweet and sour sauce on the side. The seared duck breast cooked in its own fat and cooked perfectly medium speaks to the chef's hospitality training, with the grilled asparagus a lovely French touch. The pineapple fried rice with cashews and raisins and delicately seasoned complements the duck with the typically Chinese sauce pulling the whole dish together. It is not a flashy dish; it simply aims to please.

Bird's Nest has an arresting presentation with a stir-fry nestling in fried noodles made to look like a bird's nest. The stir-fry is delicate with celery, carrots, bell pepper, and shitake mushrooms all fried with garlic and ginger and an unctuous sauce (and with your choice of protein) and shows both Thai and Chinese influences. The fried noodle presentation is from Southern China and is often woven into an elaborate shape—Lina's version is more homespun and served with a side of jasmine rice. Even the flashiest dish Lina's offers aims more for comfort than to show off.

I should admit to the readers that I have been a regular at Lina's Thai Bistro ever since they opened and might be a tad biased in my opinions—this is a comfortable place for me and my friends. I hope Lina's Lounge continues in the same vein. Lina and Gordon certainly seem to want to do nothing but to please us all, and to that I say good cheer! ■



Lina's Thai Bistro & Lina's Lounge

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