

PETE'S TAHI KITCHEN

BY SUNIL MALIPATI

Of rice fields and tamarind trees



When it comes to food, 'authentic' is not particularly high on my requirements. As cuisines travel, they change and adapt just as immigrants in a new country do. However, if you assimilate too much, you are in danger of losing the essence of the cuisine and end up with chop suey.

Successful chefs retain the core elements of their cuisine while adapting to new situations and in doing so, please both themselves and their clientele. The aptly named Pete's Thai Kitchen (PTK) does exactly that: bringing the flavors from central and northern Thailand to Dubuque, but reflecting the singular vision of Pete Utthachoo.

Pete hails from the central rice-growing plains of Thailand while his wife Chayvam comes from the mountainous Northern region and the menu at PTK reflects that heritage. Pete emigrated to US following his mother and established a restaurant in Sioux City. Brad and Joanne Pinchuk, his business partners convinced him to make the move to Dubuque (a story related with panache in their menu!) and we are all the richer for it.



PTK is housed in the lovely building that housed Café Fraiche recently and the exposed brick walls are decorated with murals from the Thai version of the Ramayana. The artwork serves as a fitting introduction to the cuisine: the Ramayana is an Indian epic that mutated its identity after traveling to Thailand and now graces the walls of PTK as American graffiti. Influenced by Indian and Chinese cuisine, Thai cuisine developed its own identity and PTK has adapted it to cater to the steady stream of Dubuquers who are discovering new gustatory pleasures.



Thai cuisine has two general features. One, the food is prepared fresh and utilizes mostly fresh ingredients.

Two, the flavors are balanced in very complex ways unlike any other cuisine. Any given dish balances the salty, sweet, sour, bitter and umami tastes while providing intense aroma from fresh herbs and spices. Fish sauce and shrimp paste typically provide the salt and umami flavors, palm sugar the sweetness, lime or tamarind the tangy sour taste and bitterness from vegetables or herbs. With subtle variations in herbs, a chef can create a symphony of flavors. I cannot possibly describe the very extensive menu (though I did I sample most of my way through!), though I will try and be a guide.

First, a general note about the spice level. Thai food is known to be blazing hot, but the dishes indicated by a fire symbol at PTK are only moderately spicy. They do not take requests to make the dishes spicier: I asked Pete and was gently rebuffed. However, they do have a condiment tray to increase the spice level by yourself. The tray has chili sauce in vinegar, chili sauce with fish sauce and lime juice, pickled jalapenos and ground roasted chilies. While I would have loved more heat in many of my dishes, the complex balance of flavor in each dish would have been impacted by it and I have to defer to the chef.

I could very well make a meal out of appetizers! The expected chicken satay, spring rolls and crabmeat rangoons are elevated by judicious choices. The grilled satay is tender and served with a robust peanut sauce and a tangy cucumber salad to provide the right counterpoint. The herbs in the Crabmeat Rangoon cut through the cream cheese filling and add a lot of flavor. The spring roll with gently spiced ground chicken and crispy jicama and vegetables felt wonderfully light, especially when paired with a sweet lemon-chilli sauce.

The unusual appetizers are worth seeking out. The Thai meatballs are made in house with ground beef, simmered in an aromatic beef broth and served with a sweet turmeric sauce that is divine in its subtlety.

The Fried Sweet Potatoes are a delightful surprise: Japanese sweet potatoes that are pale yellow in color and taste sweeter are dipped in a coconut batter, deep fried and served with a sweet peanut sauce (would



actually make a good dessert!). The best appetizers for my money are the crispy wings and the crepe: I cannot decide which I love more, I could happily eat just those two for an entire meal. The Crispy Wings are stir fried in hot oil and bathed in a sticky tangy sauce that is addictive- these are among the best wings I have ever had. The Thai Turmeric Crepe is a thing of wonder: a crispy crepe filled with ground chicken, shrimp, bean sprouts and sweet garlicky peanut sauce. The dish feels light while still delivering complex flavors.

The menu boasts 15 salads, many of which would qualify as a meal. The Fried Fish Salad delivered the most intense flavors of any dish on the menu. Crispy pieces of fried tilapia are served with thinly sliced red onion and carrots with cashews, expertly combined with herbs and dressed with a bracing ginger-lime vinaigrette. A simple salad of undressed greens accompanies the dish, just to cleanse your palate intermittently while each spoonful of the main salad explodes in your mouth like a flavor bomb. The Beef Salad combines tender charbroiled beef strips with a similar mixture to the fried fish salad, but with a spicy lime vinaigrette that provides a completely different flavor profile, much more suited to beef.

Among the soups, the tamarind based Tom Yum and coconut based Tom Kha are always good bets. Pete suggested the specialty Kang Jeed- by definition a clear soup. Pete's version comes with bean thread noodles and highlights seasonal vegetables. The vegetables used will change with the season.

And now the heart of the menu: curries and stir fries, influenced by Indian and Chinese cuisines respectively, but with a uniquely Thai identity. The Yellow Curry shows the Indian roots most clearly with the turmeric-based sauce and has a slightly gritty texture that made me feel at home. The Panang Curry and Roasted Duck Curry are the standouts, redolent of the central rice-fields and the mountain airs gently wafting down from





the Himalayan foot-hills. The Panang curry base has peanuts lending an earthiness that contrasts beautifully with the aromatic lemongrass and kaffir lime, the whole balanced with galangal (Thai ginger- milder in flavor) and coriander. The Roasted Duck curry uses a red curry base and adds a few sweet notes with bell peppers, tomatoes and pineapple. The sweetness wonderfully balances the richness of roasted duck as well as the coconut milk red curry sauce.

Among the stir fry options, Cashew Chicken and Garlic Peppercorn (both very good) show the most obvious Chinese influences. The Tamarind Fish has fried tilapia pieces with vegetables floating in a tamarind sauce that is surprisingly delicate (tamarind can be very strong if not used correctly). The two standout dishes for me were Thai Basil and Thai Peanut. The Thai Basil has an aromatic garlic chili sauce with the basil leaves adding to the heat of the chilies. The Thai Peanut has a stunningly

complex peanut sauce covering steamed cabbage, broccoli and carrots and choice of meat/ tofu- if there was any complaint at our table, it was that everyone wanted more of that wonderful sauce.



All curries and stir-fries come with a choice of meats: chicken, pork or tofu with beef, shrimp and mixed sea-food costing extra. They are served with steamed jasmine rice with brown rice, sticky rice, garlic rice and rice noodles available separately as options. The Noodles and Fried Rice options are great for those wanting a one-dish meal. Every Thai restaurant has to have a Pad Thai, and PTK's version is quite delicate with the tangy sour lime notes balancing well with the sweetness of radish and palm sugar and the savory notes of fish sauce, everything grounded by egg and peanuts. Fresh

bean sprouts and green onion add crunch to this ever-popular dish. The flat rice noodles come in two varieties; Thai Wok noodles with soy sauce and Spicy Wok noodles with garlic peppercorn sauce. Pete recommends the Spicy Wok noodles as a house specialty and my friend Michael liked it. Among the fried rice items, I loved the Spicy Basil Fried Rice with its garlic-chili base and the aroma of basil woven through the dish.

PTK has a small dessert menu that I have not tried. The Sticky Rice with Mango sounds great, though it will only last through the Mango season. The drinks menu consists of beer, wine and Thai iced tea and coffee. There

are two Thai beers- Singha and Chang available in the beer menu. Thai iced tea and coffee are both made with milk and tend to be on the sweeter side.

As I began writing this piece, the death of Anthony Bourdain was still fresh in my mind. He believed in food as a way to understand people, culture and the land. I'd like to think he would be pleased with Pete's Thai Kitchen, reflecting the journey of Pete and Chayvam from the central plains of Thailand to the river city of Dubuque. As I chew on some panang curry with jasmine rice, I imagine sitting underneath a tamarind tree breathing in air from the rice fields and I feel nostalgic for a land I have never been to... ■



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609 E 22ND ST, DUBUQUE, IA
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PETESTHAIKITCHEN.COM
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