

Dan Kislenko Sat Mar 09 2013 09:47:25

Taking a tasty trip down memory lane



Fast-paced Thai Memory downtown has revamped its menu, offering as authentic a selection as you'll find anywhere.

John Rennison/The Hamilton Spectator

Some restaurants, like bottles of fine wine, do get better with age.

When I lived in downtown Hamilton, Thai Memory was something of a regular Friday night haunt. Really good food.

But I hadn't been back since I moved out of the city four years ago. Until last week. Not only was it as good as I remembered, it has actually improved.

They have revamped the menu, introducing some new twists to the conventional Thai dishes that are so rightly popular everywhere.

Thai Memory is busy and fast-paced. Reservations are a good idea. The crowd is generally younger and convivial. Walk into the place and you are greeted by the exotic perfume of coconut, chilis, pungent fish sauce and ginger.

The selection is varied, as authentic as I've seen anywhere (admittedly not having been to Thailand yet), and as you'd expect from Thai cuisine is vegetarian friendly. The prices are a little above the norm for Hamilton, but the quality of the dishes more than makes up for that.

The meal on this night was simply wonderful, an adventure in complex flavours. Lemongrass, fresh lime leaves, zesty galangal. The kitchen will make any dish as fiery or as mild as you wish, although the menu does include a recommended strength for each (and even what kind of rice goes best with it).

We started with a couple of contrasting choices from the "hors d'oeuvres" section of the menu, the Spicy Chicken Spring Roll (\$6) and the Cold Fresh Roll (\$7).

There were four of the chicken rolls, neatly wrapped and fried until crisp. They were very hot, both in temperature and temperament, with the shredded chicken and carrot filling offering an assertively spicy note of curry. The sweet/spicy chili dipping sauce alongside fanned the flames a bit further.

Curiously there were only two pieces of the vegetarian fresh roll, but they were large. The tender rice paper enclosed a generous filling of crisp shredded lettuce, raw carrot and fresh mint. My only quibble was the whole thing could have been wrapped more tightly; it was a bit difficult to eat without making a mess, especially with the accompanying warm peanut/chili/tamarind sauce drizzled over top.

Next up was a bowl of the famous Thai lemongrass soup Tom Yum (\$7), in this case a mushroom version. The crimson broth looked fiery, yet once in the mouth was beautifully balanced between spicy and sweet, with a distinct citrus/lemon tang and even a suggestion of honey in the background. The soup was studded with lots of fresh button mushroom chunks, cherry tomatoes, and pieces of lemongrass (for appearance and flavour; they're too fibrous to eat).

One of my favourite dishes at Thai Memory in the old days was the Panang Chicken Curry (\$13). They suggest you have it medium spicy, but as this was a stroll down memory lane we asked for it extra spicy (\$2 more). Panang curries traditionally are among the mildest in Thai cuisine (yes, I know extra spicy is a contradiction), and always feature crushed peanuts and coconut milk.

This version was definitely hot. The strength is not for beginners or the timid. Yet the coconut and peanut sauce did soften the blow of the chilis, and there was plenty of tender chicken, slivers of onion and sweet red pepper. Thank God we had that bowl of plain steamed jasmine rice on the table to help sop up the sauce (and further douse the fire a bit).

Everything had been delicious, but for me the highlight was that "new" dish, Yum Pak Bung Grob (\$15). It's described in the English translation as a "Thai morning glory salad," but it is actually a cooked main entree. Don't think garden flowers here. This morning glory is a semi-aquatic edible plant common across Southeast Asia, also known as water spinach or river spinach. Not surprisingly, it looks and tastes a lot like spinach, although the stems that we usually discard are tender and tasty.

A big bowl arrived, filled with sautéed ground pork, three large shrimp, cashews and the centerpiece, a generous pile of tempura-style fried morning glory. The whole dish had been tossed and coated with a robust sweet-sour-tangy gravy. It all tasted fantastic and exotic, the sauce playing off the crisp batter on the lightly wilted vegetable, the pork and shrimp lending a meaty tenderness, the nuts adding crunch. Definitely a dish to try.

We left Thai Memory full but not stuffed, one of the trademarks of this style of cuisine. Yes, the tastebuds were still smouldering, but that heat in the curry had been my choice and it had delivered as promised.

One thing for sure, I won't wait another four years to go back.

Thai Memory

25 King William St.

905-296-1077

thaimemory.ca

The look: Exotic, tropical

The feel: Very busy, young

Hours: Sunday to Friday 5 to 10 p.m., Saturday 4 to 10 p.m., Thursday and Friday 11.45 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

What you'll pay: From the appetizer and salad side of the pretty extensive menu, chicken satay is \$8, Thai papaya salad is \$9 and coconut shrimp is \$9. Tofu soup with seaweed and veggies is \$8. Fried (basa) fish fillet with mango salad is \$18. Spicy Holy Basil stir fry with chicken, beef, pork, vegetables or tofu is \$12, while classical pad Thai is \$12 with your choice of meat/seafood.

The restaurant is wheelchair accessible.

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