

dining



KING OF SIAM Dave sings the praises of Regina's newest Thai restaurant

Jessica Telford

Suitably Thai

Siam one of Regina's best Asian eateries

SIAM	1946 HAMILTON STREET 352-8424
DINING RANKING:	

by Dave Margoshes

If the people running Regina's newest Thai restaurant seem just a tad smug, perhaps they can be indulged.

Their place is called Siam, the old name for Thailand, and the menu declares it an "authentic Thai restaurant." It also boasts, "We serve real Thai food." To underscore that, even the last four digits of the phone number (352-8424) spell out T-H-A-I.

There's plenty of Thai food in Regina already — but mostly in Vietnamese restaurants. Even two places with seemingly strong Thai credentials, Viet-Thai and the Thai Garden, have Vietnamese owners.

But Sirilorn Srisodsai, a pleasant woman called Youi, and her family, the people running Siam, are from Thailand, and Siam is the real deal.

The little hole-in-the-wall space on Hamilton Street, just around the corner from Victoria Avenue, housing Siam has been through a number of restaurants — all Asian — in recent years. Just in recent memory it was a Chinese noodle shop, a Vietnamese pho shop, and a Thai restaurant with brilliant, if somewhat rough-around-the-edges, food but a lack of business acumen that led to an early demise. Now it's morphed from the generically titled Asian Cuisine into the more assertive Siam, and let's hope it hangs around longer than its predecessors.

I had my first taste of Siam at its lunchtime buffet, which runs 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. weekdays and costs a very reasonable \$8. Buffets are a great way

to get an introduction to a new restaurant's menu, allowing a taste of this and a taste of that. Plus, the dynamics of the buffet — which require dishes to stay fresh and hot even while sitting out for a long while — are demanding: a kitchen that does a buffet well probably can be counted on to do dinner even better.

And Siam does the buffet very well indeed. In fact, while the range is narrow (there are only eight dishes), this is one of the best Asian buffets in town, and probably the best weekday buffet of any sort downtown.

Buffet food is already prepared, of course, so you can't ask for spices to be moderated. No worry. All the dishes I've tried have definite personality — they make an impression! — but they're not unbearably hot.

The kitchen makes excellent use of flavourings like garlic, chilies, lime, tamarind, coconut, fresh mint

and cilantro.

There's usually two soups available on the buffet: the red curry soup with chicken and bamboo has a sweet bite to it, and the hot and sour soup (tom yum), sometimes with chicken, sometimes with shrimp, is not the glutinous liquid most Chinese restaurants prepare, but a cloudy, silky broth studded with flavour.

Pad Thai, the ubiquitous noodle dish, is meatless on the lunch buffet (it comes with shrimp at dinner), studded with bits of tofu and veggies, and is one of the best versions of this dish I've had; sweet and sour pork, with slices of pineapple, is more of an adult dish than you'll find in most Chinese restaurants, with subtle rather than blatant flavours; the amusingly-named Three Musketeers is a pleasing mix of carrots, beans and mushrooms in oyster sauce; and carrot/cabbage salad is just as the name implies, a cool mixture pungent with cilantro that doesn't taste anything like deli-style coleslaw. Perhaps my favourite item on this buffet, though, are the succulent corn fritters, deep-fried, sweet concoctions of corn and batter. They are definitely hard to resist.

A kitchen that does a buffet well probably can be counted on to do dinner even better.

Dinnertime is another matter, with a wide range of dishes from the menu available (few cost more than \$9, none exceed \$12). The menu, by the way, is a work of art in itself, coming in a heavy wooden case inlaid with Thai warriors in worked metal. (Later, the bill comes in a similar but smaller case.) To help in choosing, there are colour photos of many of the dishes in the back. Dishes are divided into a number of categories, starting with appetizers and running through salad, soup, pork, chicken, beef, seafood, and rice/noodles.

You could easily build a meal at Siam around soup and appetizers. Among the latter are a number of notable items, such as the Golden Purse — delicate pastry pouches filled with ground chicken and shrimp, tied right with a strip of

green onion and lightly deep fried; they're served with a spicy sauce but are delicious on their own. The fish cakes and shrimp cakes are also quite good, but the appetizer I've fallen completely in love with is beef jerky, soft, chewy strips of flavourful beef completely unlike the cowboy staple of the West. It comes in a pork version as well.

As for the soup, I've already mentioned a couple tried at lunchtime. Another one of note, shared with several friends at dinner, is the delicately flavoured sour curry soup with shrimp, which comes in an elaborate hot pot.

Many Thai salads are served warm — like one featuring glass noodles, ground pork, shrimp, squid, onion, chili and cilantro, and the delicious spicy sour salad with grilled pork, crunchy ground roasted rice and red onion — but one cold offering I took a liking to is the carrot salad, similar to the green papaya salad found at Angkor, the Cambodian restaurant on the east side, but made, obviously, with carrot — colourful shredded heaps of it, with green beans, cherry tomatoes, red peppers, and studded with tiny dried shrimp to give crunch, and served with shredded cabbage and hot rice, for a mixture of temperatures as well as flavours and textures. But be advised — there is a lot of carrot in this dish.

There are numerous other dishes to try. Some, like the beef in green curry — thin slices of beef with thicker slices of cucumber — are familiar; others, like the heavenly "holy basil pork," are not.

Previous tenants of this space haven't been licenced, but Siam is and offers a small but good selection of wines, mostly from B.C. and California with a few from Chile, and beers, including Singha, a good brew from Thailand. At lunchtime you might want to try cold red Thai tea, a deliciously sweet concoction I haven't seen elsewhere in Regina.

The space Siam occupies has been renovated a bit since its last incarnation and it's nicely decorated with Thai masks and other figures on the walls, providing a more pleasing ambience. Service is brisk, cheerful and efficient.

Siam is open every day but Sunday. Weekdays it's open 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and again 5:30 to 9 p.m.; Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. **FD**