

The New York Times

Thai Spot Pleases the Palate and Pocket

Sunday, January 12, 2003



King and I

545 Broadbridge Road, Bridgeport (203) 374-2081

Good

ATMOSPHERE: Narrow, subdued storefront, dimly lighted but not inelegant.

NOISE LEVEL: Generally quite low.

SERVICE: Variable.

RECOMMENDED DISHES: Anything fried; nam sod, larb, yum, vegetarian's delight; chicken-cocunut soup; pad ma keur; ped grob; goong grob; kai snow pea.

PRICE RANGE: Soups and appetizers: \$3 to \$9; Entrees \$8 to \$15; Desserts: about \$2.

CREDIT CARDS: Most major credit cards accepted.

HOURS: Lunch 11:30 to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday; Dinner: 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday through Thursday; to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

RESERVATIONS: Accepted, but usually not necessary.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBILITY: Part of the restaurant is completely inaccessible; narrow aisles will make the rest difficult at best.

By MARK BITTMAN

PERHAPS King and I, the Thai restaurant situated in an anonymous strip mall on the Bridgeport-Stratford border, has gotten better in the 10 years since I first ate there, or perhaps I am better at discerning the difference between average Thai restaurant food and that which has been elevated a notch or two.

Whatever the reason, when I was taken there recently by a friend from Weston- who told me that "dozens" of people from her town routinely made the journey up the parkway- I was impressed.

I returned on a few other occasions and am pleased to report that although I'm not ready to anoint King and I "The best Thai restaurant in the country," or even necessarily the best in the state, I will say I haven't eaten at a better one on the East Coast.

Most of the appetizers are worth ordering. Pirate treasure (can we forgive the name?), a mix of shrimp, chicken and glass noodles, is complex in the way Thai food is supposed to be: sweet, sour, spicy, and salty.

Likewise for the nam sod, ground pork with ginger, peanut and lemon. Larb, usually done with pork but here with chicken, is ground meat mixed with ground toasted rice for crunchiness and soured with a sour, lemon-based dressing. It could be spicier.

If you are in the mood for fried food, the prawn rolls- little more than shrimp wrapped in thin dough and deep fried – are super, as are classic tod mun, the rubbery but oddly delightful fish cakes, which are on the fiery side and which I could not stop eating.

In fact, the fried foods are consistently great. An appetizer of fried tofu and fried taro is crackling-crisp and completely lacking in oily residue. You would think the morsels were baked. If only...

I have never been a taro fan, but this could change my mind, In fact it has; I ordered the dish on two separate occasions. Served with a sticky sweet garlic sauce that works this is a must- have appetizer.

A couple of times when I ate here there were vegetarians at my table, so I sampled more meatless dishes than I would if things were entirely up to me, and I'm glad this happened.

A dish of ginger, scallions, baby corn and mushroom mixed with tofu (in the typically sensible style of Thai restaurant, this could be done with chicken, shrimp, pork, etc.) was alluring despite its tameness. The scallions, for whatever reason, were incredibly delicious. Similarly, pra ram pak, steamed mixed vegetables with peanut sauce, is a dish in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Other dishes I enjoyed were pad ma keur, eggplant with shrimp, chicken, pork, Thai basil (there is a difference) and ginger; fried whole fish(usually pompano) with tamarind; quails, deep-fried(of course), with garlic; and snow peas with chicken in a mild garlic sauce.

As I said, the food is consistent. I get the sense that the kitchen does not get ahead of itself, but takes one dish at a time and makes certain that it is done well before moving onto the next. When I ordered just a few dishes, they come out one or two at a time. When I went with a crowd and ordered 15, they still came out one or two at a time. I take this as a good sign.

The atmosphere at King and I is pleasant enough, the room sprinkled with Thai antiques (or faux antiques) and the lighting reasonably low. But to be rated a terrific restaurant, King and I would have to make quite a few changes. The tables are small, the chair uncomfortable and the walkways narrow.

There is a wine list, but it isn't much of one(stick with the quite acceptable Pinot Grigio or Singha, the classic Thai beer). Service is effective when the place is not crowded, but can easily

become overwhelmed. Desserts, well, you might try fried banana with ice cream, but the ice cream is the best part.

All of this is the price we pay for good \$20 meals. If they were upgraded, some tables taken out, the place redecorated, the furnishings replaced, and so on, the food would cost twice as much, and it wouldn't be any better. So take the little inconveniences in stride, because you are going to have to travel a lot farther to find better Thai cooking.