

Thai Food for Tough Times

Red curry, longan fruit and secret menus abound in the West 90s and 100s

By Nancy J. Brandwein

Five Thai restaurants—drawn by the promise of hungry students—are rapidly forming a “Little Bangkok” on upper Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway. Wallet-friendly prices and a focus on authentic Bangkok street cuisine keep them hopping at night as other restaurants struggle to lure diners.

“The first time we opened,” said Jane Manprasong, manager at Thai Market, “it was really crowded—a full house! We didn’t expect it at all.”

When Thai Market owner Danny Ngosuwat’s 20-year lease expired for Siam Inn, a Midtown theatergoer’s favorite, he moved to Amsterdam and 107th in April 2007 to open a trendier, more relaxed restaurant geared specifically toward Columbia University students, a large percentage of whom are Asian. The food quality is much higher, however, than the usual student fare. Each visit to Thai Market yields satisfaction and new delights from dishes “translated” from their street food tastings in Thailand—whether it’s the daikon cakes or Pla Dook Pad Ped, sautéed catfish sold on a stick in Bangkok but laid out attractively on a large white plate here.

The street market theme is evident in the decor. “We took all these pictures ourselves,” Manprasong says proudly of the wall-size photos of vibrant Bangkok market scenes, lit from behind. Bangkok street names hang down from the ceiling along with large red umbrellas, and behind the jam-packed bar, a gold wall glitters with temple bells.

You’d think it would be commercial suicide to open up a Thai restaurant across from busy Thai Market, but Wondee SiamV owner Bert Cormack says it was a deliberate business decision. A Scotsman who doesn’t speak a word of Thai, Cormack says, “I opened a boutique at the age of 19. Two conglomerates opened up across the street. My business doubled.”

So far, Wondee SiamV, which opened in December with a more extensive menu than Thai Market, is doing well, according to Cormack, though he concedes, “It’s difficult.” He’s particularly proud of the number of Thais who frequent the restaurant.

“Our goal is to offer Thai cooking as Thais would eat it. One lad comes in to eat twice a day every Sunday.”

It’s likely that this “lad” would order from the “secret menu,” written in Thai. An affa-

ble waiter who goes by the name Mr. T tells me that a Thai-speaking person might order Gant tai pla: a shrimp lover’s delight, featuring whole shrimp, two types of shrimp paste, various shoots and Thai herbs.

“It’s so secret it’s not even on the secret menu,” laughs Cormack.

Around the corner and four blocks down on Broadway, Sookk doesn’t hide unfamiliar ingredients from its patrons, but uses the little-known Yaowarat cuisine to distinguish itself. Bangkok’s Chinatown,

“bowl” entrees that are usually \$10, including a creamy red curry jazzed up with pumpkin and Thai eggplant. Manager Sopochani So says more than 10 ingredients are needed to make a dish authentically Thai, but when I question Sura’s profitability, he says, “My goal is to make the customer happy. When I got my liquor license, people are mad. I still have BYOB available from Sunday to Thursday. People want to save money. Why not help them enjoy their life?” With an \$8 lunch special from 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. and happy hour immediately thereafter until 7 p.m., Sura gives cash-strapped customers plenty to enjoy.

While its Uptown neighbors strive for “authenticity,” Charm Thai on Amsterdam near 95th seeks simply to offer “basic” Thai food, according to the chef, who goes by Mr. Kay. In the two years since it opened, Charm, which means “bowl” in Thai, has drawn a loyal clientele that wanted another neighborhood option besides Lemongrass. A quartet of British diners told me, “It’s always excellent.”

Our family found the food definitely “basic,” but not as inspired as the other contenders. Still, with its attentive service, soft lighting and exposed brick wall decorated with assorted lovely bowls, Charm might draw those seeking Thai comfort foods instead of culinary adventure. Certainly, the number of lone diners who seemed at ease there attests to its appeal.

In all, I was impressed with the new Thai vanguards’ optimism during tough times and their desire to put customers’ pleasure over profit—from Wondee’s 10 percent student discount to Sura’s happy hour prices (note: deals, based on menus available at press time, may have changed since publication). At Thai Market, Manprasong told me the owner would soon offer a discount for people who’ve lost their jobs, as long as they can show proof. Expect to find a line out the door soon.



Jane Manprasong is manager at Thai Market, one of a cluster of five Thai restaurants on the Upper West Side.

Yaowarat, fuses Thai, Szechuan and Cantonese cuisines in a huge nighttime market where vendors line a curving, dragon-shaped road. The menu features a legend revealing the healthful properties of ingredients ranging from longan fruit (soporific) to the ginkgo nut (anti-inflammatory) or fish maw (fiber-full). Sookk’s fans, however, talk more about the taste and price point than the medicinal qualities. My foodie friends Jason and Jill say even Thai standards get Yaowarat treatment; they loved the sesame-crusted tofu starter and pad thai wrapped in an egg white crepe.

You won’t find an omelet swaddling your pad thai at Sura Thai Urban Kitchen, three blocks south of Sookk. But you can eat a bottomless bowl of it for only \$6 at happy hour—along with three other generous

LUNCH SPECIALS AT A GLANCE

Wondee Siam V
969 Amsterdam Ave.
(betw. 107th & 108th)
212-531-1788
Lunch special hours:
11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Price: \$8 (cannot be combined with other discounts)
Select one from each:
Appetizer (9 choices)
Main course (16 choices)

Thai Market
960 Amsterdam Ave.
(betw. 107th and 108th)

212-280-4575
Lunch special hours:
noon to 3:30 p.m.
Price: \$8
Select one from each:
Appetizer (7 choices)
Main course (8 choices)

Charm Thai
722 Amsterdam Ave.
(betw. 95th & 96th)
212-866-9800
Lunch special hours:
11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Price: \$8
Select one from each:

Appetizer (5 choices)
Main course (7 choices)

Sookk
2686 Broadway
(betw. 102nd and 103rd)
212-870-0253
Lunch special hours:
11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Price: \$7 w/ chicken, veg or tofu; \$8 w/ beef or shrimp; \$9 specials
Select one from each:
Appetizer (7 choices)
Main course (17 choices)

Sura Thai Urban Kitchen
2656 Broadway
(between 100th and 101st)
212-665-8888
Lunch special hours:
11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Price: \$8
Select one from each:
Appetizer (7 choices)
Main course (12 choices)
Dessert included (not in delivery)

—Nancy J. Brandwein