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A Taste of Burma

Sietsema Review

One day, I hope to eat my way through all the possibilities at Taste of Burma, whose menu runs almost 100 dishes long. In the meantime, it's hard for me to veer from Gold Mountain Noodles, (\$9.95). The main course -- a slippery mound of egg noodles tossed with garlic- and ginger-stoked chicken and sweet coconut cream -- lives up to its description, and before it lands on the table, Chef Jona Nila Davis adds a squeeze of fresh lime and a sprinkling of cilantro and onions. Notice the heat? There are chili flakes in the weave, too. The yellow squiggles? The garnish turns out to be fried rice noodles. Novices to Burmese cooking should know that it treads into Thai, Indian and Chinese territory, and the custom is to serve much of the food at room temperature. Regulars of this soon-to-be 2-year-old restaurant can tell you the family-run dining room delivers as much comfort as the food: Warm towels welcome guests; fresh flowers brighten the tabletops; and pillows on the banquettes and embroidered panels on the walls are luxuries you don't expect, but are delighted to find, amid so many bargains.

--Tom Sietsema (Dec. 16, 2007)

Lewis Review

A Star in Burmese Cooking Is Born

By Nancy Lewis

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Over the past two decades, as restaurants featuring Thai, Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese and Japanese cuisine have become so common that many people don't think of them as foreign or exotic, Burmese cooking has remained the exception.

Burma has largely been cut off from the Western world by a civil war. Until recently, there have been only a few places to sample Burmese cooking.

A Taste of Burma opened in January in Sterling's Countryside Shopping Center. It's a grand addition to dining in Loudoun County, introducing this intriguing cuisine, which is similar to many of its neighbors' -- including those of India, Thailand, Laos and China -- but not quite the same.

Tri Ha and his wife, Jona Nila, worked in the U.S. Embassy in Rangoon and came here when the military took control of Burma in 1988. For the past 18 years, they have been honing their restaurant skills. Ha's sister operates Myanmar restaurant in Fairfax County. Over the years, Ha has worked there and as a sushi chef at Sushi-Ko in Georgetown and at Safeway, Giant and Stop & Shop supermarkets.

A Taste of Burma is the couple's first restaurant. Ha said he and Nila, who is the restaurant's chef, searched for a location for more than three years. They are still working out some of the details: training the kitchen help and working to get a liquor license. Already, this family operation -- their son, a high school senior, helps wait tables -- is an exquisite oasis in the suburban landscape.

The decor is serene but luxurious, with bejeweled embroidered panels on the walls and fine lacquer ware exhibited in lighted niches. All those elements allow the food to be the star, and shine it does.

The menu has nearly 100 items, including dozens of vegetarian offerings, and every dish I saw was arranged on brilliant white dishes, just the right size for each portion. The house special tempura -- a combination of shrimp and squash tempura, split yellow pea fritters and samosas (turnovers filled with potatoes and peas) -- comes on an oblong platter. Salads arrive on square plates, rice in square bowls.

It's hard to know how to find representative selections on such an extensive menu, but a Burmese acquaintance once advised me to look for authenticity in the salads and noodle dishes. Both are superb here.

The menu includes 15 salads. The grilled beef salad (Ame-Thar Thoke) is similar to the beef salads on most Thai menus, though milder. The dish combines tender slices of grilled beef with slivers of onion and cabbage, cilantro leaves and a chili-lime dressing. It's a perfect dish for people who suffer from spring allergies and long for something tangy.

The green mango salad (ThaYetTheeSane Thoke) is a lovely tangle of shredded mango, cabbage, onion, cilantro, crushed peanuts and hot chili flakes. The colors are pretty against the white china. The textures range from just firm to crunchy and the flavors are perfectly complementary.

The fermented tea leaf salad introduces even more textural counterpoints. The pickled tea leaves -- authentic and imported, Ha said -- are soft against a backdrop of shredded cabbage, tomato, crisp sesame seeds, crunchy peanuts and broad beans, browned garlic chips, tangy lime juice and other seasonings. It's the best tea leaf salad I have had among the area's various Burmese restaurants.

Other salads feature green papaya, pickled ginger, chickpea tofu, cellophane noodles, samosas and crispy spring rolls, similar to those served in Vietnamese restaurants.

Singapore street noodles (KyarZan Gyaw) are often found on Chinese menus, but none I've tried measures up to this version. The thin, stir-fried rice noodles are pungent with curry and laced with pieces of moist chicken.

Ha recommended Mandalay chicken noodles (NanJi Thoke) as the most authentic of the noodle dishes. The soft rice noodles, thick as Italian bucatini (hollow, spaghetti-like pasta), mixed with chicken, onion, coriander and roasted chili flakes, virtually evaporated as I ate them. The dish was accented with a fried version of the same airy noodles.

Main courses of ginger shrimp, crispy Mongolian-style beef and pepper steak were similar to their more familiar Chinese counterparts. The shrimp came with snow peas, water chestnuts and shiitake mushrooms and a mild sauce. The Mongolian beef dish featured crispy slices of beef that were meltingly tender inside. The pepper steak was mostly beef with slivers of pepper and onion.

There are other familiar dishes from which to choose, including versions of pad thai, basil chicken and lemongrass beef.

Desserts are limited. I tried the Burmese halawa, which is a firm, custardy cake prepared with cream of wheat and warm tapioca in a mild coconut cream. Ha said it's usually a breakfast dish. Nearby diners suggested the parfait, which I'll try on my next visit.