

A Little Bit
More

Nit Noi Thai

by HENRI MERCERON

The original Nit Noi (which means “little bit” in Thai) Thai Restaurant was founded by family matriarch, Mama Alice, in the Philippines in 1975. In 1987, Houston’s first Nit Noi opened its doors in a small space in Rice Village before moving into a much larger space in the same shopping center. That center was recently demolished to make room for the Sonoma luxury condominium complex. Once completed, Nit Noi will occupy prime space on the ground floor of the complex, securing its continued presence in the neighborhood for years to come.

Photos by Timothy Frederick



Doi Heckler and Malisa Heckler

Today, Nit Noi is a family run business that operates four restaurants and three cafes located from Midtown to the Woodlands. Mama Alice continues to prepare her secret sauces along with her daughter-in-law, Malisa, which are delivered to all the locations. In this manner, patrons are guaranteed that the uncompromising quality of Nit Noi’s food will be consistent irrespective of the location where they place their orders. With respect to the business operation of the restaurants, Mama’s son, Doi, finds his MBA and law degree very useful.

I tend to research restaurants and other businesses that I consider patronizing and read user reviews. While Nit Noi enjoys a considerable following and receives mostly stellar comments, some noted that the food is not “authentic.” Without any prompting on my part, Malisa raised the matter stating, “In Thailand, the flavor of food is bold and spicy. Our food is

authentic but our ingredients are different. We tone down the strong flavors but customers may request them to be stronger if they prefer.”

A friend of mine once stated that Italian food is better in the States than in Italy. This sentiment resonates with me because restaurants that serve ethnic food have to balance authenticity with sound business practices. Whereas, authentic food may be preferred by patrons who grew up in their respective countries, the larger population may not appreciate the full intensity of those flavors. At the same time, fresh ingredients in the U.S. are not going to have the same flavor as fresh ingredients in Thailand, in this case. Harvested produce is infused with flavors imparted by the conditions under which they were grown. This concept is probably most recognizable when one discusses the characteristics and distinctiveness of various wines. The same holds true for produce, meats and dairy.

Nit Noi is considering reorganizing its menu to highlight their most popular items within each category as other restaurants do. I had to rely on Malisa’s expertise to select the items I would be sampling. I had one appetizer, three entrees and a dessert. I found all of the items excellent, including one that tested my tolerance for spiciness – I am thinking that one was probably the most authentic!

The appetizer, Nit Noi Wrap, is not an item that would be found in Thailand. It consists of seasoned stir fried chicken and crispy noodles (for texture) that you wrap in a lettuce leaf and dip into your choice of a delightfully light peanut sauce that includes coconut milk as an ingredient or a mild sweet and sour sauce. Both sauces worked well with the ingredients; the sweet and sour sauce, of course, was lighter but the peanut sauce introduced hints of coconut flavor which I relish. A variation of this wrap is to have the chicken stir fried with basil and hot pepper.



Tiger Cried consists of very thinly sliced broiled beef, cilantro, purple onion and a “secret sauce”, of course. The thin slices of beef are cut in large pieces and appear to be completely fat-free. It was about as lean as it could have been, yet tenderness and flavor were not sacrificed in the preparation. Malisa said that this entree is very popular with people on the Atkins Diet. If this menu was served in Thailand, it would have used meat with a much higher fat content for flavor. In the U.S., there is greater emphasis on health and fitness, hence, no fat. The dominant flavor of this entrée was the beef. The “Cried” part of the entrée is found in the jalapeno pepper sauce that accompanied it. I enjoyed the “Tiger” part and left the other alone just in case it would make me cry. I think this entrée would be fully enjoyed by anyone who likes beef *and* who likes the spice index set to HOT.

The next entrée, Shuu-Shee Sea Shell by the Seashore, was my favorite. Shuu-shee is a style of Thai cooking. The “Sea Shell” ingredients include red snapper, shrimp, curry, coconut milk, asparagus, mushroom and lemongrass. Basically, there wasn’t a single ingredient that I do not like and the spiciness was mild. You can always add hot sauces and spices to elevate the heat, if you desire. I found this entrée perfect in terms of texture, flavor and balance. In many instances when there are so many savory ingredients competing for palate time, they overshadow one another. This entrée had a depth that was layered in such a way that each bite allowed me to relish the distinct flavors of the individual ingredients. They were together but separate. Incidentally, if prepared in the traditional fashion, a whole fish and lemon leaves would be the primary ingredients.

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The last entrée, Putt-Kee-Mao, consisted of shrimp stir-fried with chili paste, brandy, herbs, lemongrass, garlic and, again, one of Mama’s secret sauces. “Putt” means stir-fried and “Kee-Mao” means drunkenness, which is a nod to the brandy that was so judiciously used that I barely tasted it. Usually, this dish is considered spicy but I did not find it so.

Finally, to complete my meal, I had a two-in-one dessert. Whereas, the menu has Glutinous Rice with Mango or with Thai Custard, I had a combination and topped it off with ice cream, which is an option offered on the menu. Consider yourself advised when I suggest that you save room for this dessert (which is the only one offered). I caught myself saying “hmm hmm hmm” several times as I polished it off. Although I doubt it changed the flavor, the purple rice added a complementary splash of color against the yellow mango and creamy vanilla ice cream. It was pretty to look at but best consumed in its entirety!

