

review Restaurant review: Chaophraya



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SERVICE WITH A SMILE: A waitress in traditional costume

A RETREAT of sorts was in order. After the usual round of gruelling Christmas bon homie and witnessing the saliva-freezing reality of Wigan's World Pie Eating Championships I sought the sanctuary of far eastern relaxations to cleanse body and soul.

By eastern, I mean Leeds, or at least a restaurant which traces its origins back to the wrong end of the M62.

Chaophraya has been running at a handy spot in central Manchester for the last few weeks and is the first extension of a successful Leeds establishment, which has earned critical plaudits and a gaggle of appreciative regulars.

We visit on a Saturday, fighting throngs of Christmas shoppers purchasing gingerbread shnitzel and Hansel and Gretel-style handtowels in the congested markets, before escaping to this oasis of culinary calm.

The relaxing gurgle of a giant water fountain greets us as we enter the tastefully-decorated bar and lounge area which occupies the entire first floor

The surroundings are hotel lobby plush. Tasteful and subdued lighting is emitted from dozens of lamps, candles and wall lights mounted across the room. A table-top sized drum is one of a host of ornaments attached to the wall.

The many waiters and waitresses provide faultless service and smile graciously as they lead us upstairs from the courtyard area to our seats.

Monks

A giant video screen plays footage of Buddhist monks and traditional Thai dancers while endless looped jangling music gives diners the faintest taste of infinity (Although two-hours of this eventually has a carthartic effect, the clash of the cymbals and the twang of the Chinese lute loosened up my upper back from Christmas shopping sprains. Natalie fell into a trance).

But by far the most impressive feature was an enormous fish cabinet by the kitchen - with a huge display of fresh sealife on display.

Red snappers, sea bass and cod were turned into an art installation with strings of chilis and whole cauliflowers thrown in for good measure.

Not content with that, someone has carved out whole melons into the shape of giant exotic flowers and put them on show in front of the spotlessly clean kitchen.

It's the kind of thing your local Sainsbury's fishmonger could do, if he put his mind to it, but rarely does.

The menu includes the usual spare ribs, spring rolls and satay chicken but also more traditional appetisers such as steamed dumplings and deep fried seaweed rolls.

Also sizeable salads served as a main course along with filling soups including a creamy Tom Yum Goong Special, where prawns are cooked in a sour broth flavoured with mushrooms, lemongrass and Kaffir lime leaves.

Curries

Unusually, there are seven or eight different curries reflecting different regional specialities and providing a bit more choice than simply green and red gaeng.

Never having been to Thailand, I relied on the advice of my partner that the menu featured authentic ingredients such as galangal, Thai basil, shrimp paste, bamboo shoots.

The rest of the dishes are split into grilled, stir fried, and seafood, including a steamed lobster marinated in curry paste and served with white cabbage (£26).

We chose Gai Nutty - two chicken breast which are marinated in herbs then each have a lemongrass stick surgically inserted into it, grilled and then served with an ochre peanut sauce (£11.50).

Tempted by the fetching seafood display and mindful of the restaurant's watery connections, I ordered plapao - a meaty fillet of sea bass stuffed with lime leaves, wrapped in banana leaves and grilled. It is served with a chilli vinegar sauce (£14).

Both are accompanied by steamed rice in coconut milk wrapped in banana leaf. A delicate sweet flavour was imparted to the rice. I could have gone for sticky rice, egg-fried rice, and boiled rice flavoured with green tea. In short, a lot of rice. And there are noodles, as well.

Lip service

The menu pays more than lip service to vegetarian appetites, with a range of starters, soups, salads, curries and stir fries making use of tofu, potatoes, aubergine and pak choi.

Both our dishes were well infused with flavour and were among some of the best Thai food I have yet encountered.

The restaurant also boasts a small but well-selected wine range, with both red and white seemingly chosen to complement the variously spicy and creamy dishes on offer.

In such plush surroundings, there is the potential to act up and be silly. And the restaurant provides ample opportunity to indulge customers' innate ability for silliness.

Take the Royal Chaophraya set menu - a banquet dreamt up by the management to celebrate King Bhumibol's 60th year in office at the humble price of £80 per person. Requiring two day's notice, this epic feast includes: lobster salad, scallop curry, steamed sea bass with Enoki mushrooms, braised lamb leg, and features ingredients hand-sourced ingredients by the chef. It was certainly something we couldn't countenance.

Chaophraya is one of two landmark rivers in Thailand, for centuries providing food, water and means for people living on its banks - earning it the sobriquet "bloodline of the Thai people".

With faultless service and excellent presentation, its Manchester namesake does similar for hungry city dwellers.

Chaophraya is on Chapel Walks, Manchester. Call 0161 832 8342 for more information.

Links to other web sites

[Chaophraya](#)

Star Rating Key

★★★★★ - Excellent
★★★★☆ - Very Good
★★★☆☆ - Good
★★★☆☆ - Average
★☆☆☆☆ - Poor

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