

## Chaophraya \* \* \* \* \*

If anyone is allergic to hyperbole then I suggest that you look away now, because what you are about to witness is eight hundred words of praise so fulsome that in one breathless go it has exhausted my entire supply of OTT adjectives, metaphors and superlatives. The cause of all this giddiness is the city's new Thai restaurant, Chaophraya. It is so good that I've planted flowers in my garden in a configuration that reads "CHAOPHRAYA RULES!" so that even passing jets, anyone with access to Google Earth and exceptionally tall people will know exactly how I feel.

The single downside is that even within the echoey confines of my own head I still can't pronounce the name correctly. The Chaophraya (or Chao Phraya depending on who you believe) is one of Thailand's major rivers, which I was excited to learn begins at the confluence of the Ping and the Nan. When I tried to pronounce the name in the restaurant I got a warning look from the waitress and I think I sprained my larynx, so I'd advise caution. Perhaps we can follow the lead of the restaurant's owner, Atcharaporn Kaewkraikhot, who also goes by the name Kim, and generate an easier alternative - answers on a postcard please.

The barman welcomed us to the restaurant with a wai, the Thai greeting that looks like a split decision between a bow and a prayer. Rather than looking phoney, here we got the distinctly unfamiliar sensation that the staff were glad to see us. We ordered the house smoothie, which tasted not unpleasantly like Angel Delight and snooped around the Yee Rah Sizzler Grill which does a lunch menu and offers the nosey and the paranoid the option of having their food cooked in front of them. Finally, we ascended to the 120 seat a la carte restaurant upstairs. Some serious money has gone into dressing the restaurant; from the sculpted wooden stools in the bar to the hotchpotch of Buddhas, dragons and curios that populate the restaurant. Best of all, the restaurant's tables offer diners a solid platform and the chairs are as spacious and comfortable as thrones.

With nearly 100 dishes on the menu we decided to start with a couple of familiar dishes. The Gung Yang BBQ (£6.50) comprised of two bamboo skewers pierced through hot and fragranced chunks of pineapple, peppers, shallots and the fattest king prawns you could care to imagine. The taste was sensational: ripe, plump flavours and that delicious sensation where the vegetables are actually a joy rather than just insipid add ons. I think I might have spontaneously yodelled whilst eating this. The Poh Piah Tod (chicken spring rolls £6) had to be returned to the kitchen for further warming but our gracious waitress rectified the situation with a frank apology.

If you want a one-course introduction to Thai cuisine, the soups are a good place to start. We had a terrifically clear, hot and sour Tom Yung Gai (£6) and a rich coconut-creamed chicken Tom Kha (£6). Between them they offered an introduction to some of the classic Thai flavours: red and green chillies, coconut milk, galangal (like a milder ginger), lemongrass, all blended with consummate skill into dishes with clearly delineated tastes which dance lightly across the palette like a ballerina wearing extremely tasty shoes.

Our mains of Gaeng Kiew Wan (the classic Thai green curry - £8) and Nueng Ma Now (steamed sea bass with garlic and chilli - £12) revealed another plus, generous portion sizes. Rather than the palm-sized fillet you usually get with sea bass, here we got a forearm-sized cut that was steamed to perfection with each flake held together only by the fish's natural moistness. I can think of no higher compliment to the chef that the accompanying brown rice actually tasted nice. The curry also constituted a generous serving, arriving in a deep bowl which could probably have fed two people. The rich oils of the coconut milk were evident and balanced perfectly with the sharpness of the spices. One very minor point, the menu's heat rating system may need work. My "two chilli" sea bass was not as hot as my wife's "one chilli" curry, which was arguably a little too hot, judging from the fact that she couldn't talk and tears leaked continuously down her pretty face.

Dessert was a forgivable aberration – we wanted to investigate the deep-fried ice-cream (£4.50) which came with chocolate sauce and rum-soaked raisins. The result looked like a cross between a chicken kiev and a hernia but tasted more like the hernia. Next time I'll try the Thai pancakes or just stick to the Jasmine tea (£5 for a pot for two). As we sipped the fragrant tea it was evident that Chaophraya is a serious new opening and comfortably qualifies as a five star restaurant for the service, the decoration, the incredible

cooking and the value for money. Once my ability to generate affirmative metaphors recovers I will be back there quicker than something that's really very quick which is heading towards something it really likes a lot, that's how good it is.

**Andrew Shanahan**