

Daniela Peckova Watanabe

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***International Palette:
A Multi-Sensory Experience as a Food Critique***

Sawadee ka greeted the waitstaff at the Sabay Thai Restaurant located at Elmhurst, New York. Having lived in Thailand for four years one could tell the greeting sounded familiar and original. The visuals did not resemble anything traditional, the decor was quite humble and western but the restaurant was chosen for being an original Thai, food made and served by people born in Thailand. If there is one thing one can learn from being in Thailand is that street food and simple restaurants are tastier than fancy ones. The best papaya salad one can eat might happen to be sold at a bus stop, something hard to imagine when one lives in New York. As one entered a smell of fish sauce could be felt in the air, it's not the most pleasant smell but the recommendations were good, and expectations remained high even after the long way from Manhattan to the restaurant. Besides wearing a face mask there wasn't much COVID-19 protocol in place as the vaccination card was not asked for. There was an easy-going typical Thai vibe in the air, the music was traditional Thai.

Next, the group ordered, watermelon smoothies that were different from the American smoothies as it doesn't contain yogurt or milk, just the icy natural fruit juice and sugar, fruits in Thailand are naturally extra sweet, the waitstaff mentioned the fruit was imported from Thailand, whether it was true or not it tasted just like it did in Thailand. The next order was a Papaya Salad or *Som Tum* (ส้มตำไทย), an all-time favorite, for its zesty sauce, with a quite unique and spicy recipe. The traditional Thai salad is made of shredded unripe papaya or green papaya, cherry tomatoes, Thai basil, raw snake beans, and the sauce includes palm sugar, crushed peanuts, garlic, fish sauce, and bird's eye chili, some places include dry shrimp (Nagi, 2021), but it's rare. The salad was outstanding, and very spicy, even if one asks for only a little spicy, in a Thai restaurant that would be spicy to an almost unbearable level. As a chili lover, it was just perfect. Next, it was the mains, which included Thai fried rice with shrimp, two soft shell crab salads with mango, and a *Tom Yum* soup. Thai fried rice or *Khao Pad* (ข้าวผัด) is an everyday dish you can find everywhere in Thailand, it is comfort food, something will keep workers fulfilled until the next





Fried Rice



Soft-Shell Crab Salad

meal, but it's something that no matter what class people are if they are Thai they will eat on a daily basis. The steamed Jasmine rice is fried on a *wok*, a Chinese-style large pan, where all ingredients are mixed, garlic, egg, soy sauce, oyster sauce, oil, broccoli, onion, and a source of protein, most commonly is beef, shrimp, or tofu. The original Thai fried rice comes with a fish sauce named *Prik Nam Pla* (พริกน้ำปลา), an oil sauce with chopped chili that it's added to the taste.



The soft-shell crab salad with mango is quite a gourmet experience, not an obvious or traditional Thai dish but quite spectacular, including breaded deep-fried soft-shell crab, unripe mango, scallion, onions, tomatoes, peanuts, and cilantro. The last main dish was the *Tom Yum Goong* (ต้มยำกุ้ง), a delicious authentic Thai soup that contains shrimp, coconut milk, Thai chili paste, lime, fish sauce, sugar, oyster mushrooms, cilantro, shrimp stock and a garnish of lemongrass,

galangal and kaffir lime leaves (Chongchitnant, 2017). It is quite an explosion of flavors, a cuisine that's unlike any other, every taste is new. To end the tasting experience, the desserts ordered were the coconut ice cream with sticky rice and the fried banana pancakes, both delicious and extra sweet. All the food for 4 people came to \$140 with a 20% tip, the restaurant is on the \$, value side, still offering an original Thai experience in the suburbs of New York City.

Notice the food described above has ingredients in common, like seafood, rice, chili and fish sauce; that's because Thailand stands between the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, an inlet of the South China Sea, between the Pacific and the Indian ocean (Britannica, 2017); with plenty of water around seafood is a staple. Thailand is still a Kingdom and managed to remain uncolonized when all the surrounding countries were dominated by the European countries, that's why its cuisine remained so unique and original. Thailand is a uni-cultural country, comprised mainly of one culture and it is also a High Context country, meaning that the country relies on general agreements with the basic intent of the partners (Adomaitis, 2022). Thailand escaped colonization but its economy to this day remains agricultural, 40% of Thai people work in the fields, with 16 million working in rice fields (Economist, 2013), which explains why rice is a staple in the country's cuisine. Thai cuisine is known for being spicy:



“Thai cuisine is widely recognized by people from all over the world. They might not know every dish, but what they know very well is that the spiciness that comes from chili is Thailand's national flavor.” (Sukphisit, 2019) but according to the Bangkok Post article “Chili's Complicated Story,” it wasn't until the 15th century that the spicy appeared in Thai recipes, spices were traded by the Portuguese from India, the Middle East and reached Thailand during the early Ayutthaya period.

There are dozens of Thai restaurants in town, basically, every neighborhood in Manhattan has one, but with quite Americanized or Chinese-tasting dishes, the *Sabay* Thai restaurant tasted original. Based on the experience as a whole, the restaurant rating is B, based on the taste excellence and originality; points were lost when it came to visuals since the waitstaff was wearing a plain black uniform and the restaurant décor and ambiance didn't include Thai features or much effort in general, that's a big difference from Thailand since no matter how humble the space is, Thai people have the eye for beauty and decoration. The restaurant staff won points on courtesy and professional service, the staff was very kind and attentive, that was expected since Thai people are known for being very welcoming and warm, a reason why besides the country's natural beauty, tourists love Thailand. If you are in the area, it is recommended to visit *Sabay* Thai and learn about the country and its rich cuisine and culture.



Tom Yum Goong Soup at the Sabay Thai Restaurant

“As the only South-East Asian country to not be colonized during the Western imperialism in Asia, the Thai cuisine was able to remain largely unaltered by the European regime and taste buds.”
- Fabian Jackson, “A history of Flavours”.



Thai woman preparing a traditional dish. South China Morning Post.

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