

**International Palette:**

A Multi-Sensory Experience as a Food Critique

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October. 12, 2020

## INTERNATIONAL PALETTE

### SEA Thai Restaurant

Upon arrival at the local Thai hot-spot SEA in Williamsburg, a female hostess who welcomed us to patron the establishment greeted my boyfriend and me. Following our warm welcome, we were offered hand sanitizer and asked if we would be dining in or taking out, as we opted to dine in we were told that the wait time would average between two to three hours. It came, as no surprise that our wait time would be so long as the only dining option most restaurants have today is outdoor. Outdoor dining has become the new normal in the world today due to COVID-19, a pandemic that has swept the nation killing millions. Unfortunately due to the restaurant only taking walk-in reservations, my boyfriend and I decided to take our food to go as the wait time became too much. We were offered a menu and a seat by a giant Buddha statue until we were ready to place our meal orders. As well, it is advisable that diners who prefer to spend some quality time with family and friends patron the restaurant early before the dinner rush, in order to truly enjoy the ambiance.

As one enters the restaurant, they come face-to-face with the majestic statue of Buddha at the end of a long rectangular fountain with rows of seating for two on either side, with the picture of a lotus in the background, as shown in **Figure 1**. The restaurant gives a modern take on romance with dimly lit lamps and candles on each table; with spotlights placed beneath the fountain to highlight the mystical Buddha statue. House music filled the restaurant blaring throughout as if you were at a rave or nightclub. Unlike the typical pop, rap, and rock music genres that are played in the more frequented American restaurants, this Thai establishment opted to play instrumental music.

## INTERNATIONAL PALETTE

The aromatic smells of ginger, coconut, and curry filled my nose. The heavy wooden tables the restaurant provides seats between two and four guests with larger tables for bigger parties, and is decorated to evoke the feeling you are in Thailand. The décor sees a mix of floral wall murals reminiscent of the jungles in Thailand. The use of wood liberally is native, as Thai's tend to use wood extensively in making tables, chairs, and benches for their homes or businesses. The restaurant has also rattan pendants and chopsticks on the tables, adding to its Asian influence, adding texture to the interior decor. One can easily see the use of rattan for furniture, light fixture, and wall art is evident, as shown in **Figure 2** above.

The differences in Eastern and Western cultures are evident in the way the Thai's treat their guests in contrast to the Americans where you are hardly greeted and shoveled of to some booth waiting what seems like an eternity for a waiter to take your order. When it comes to taste, Thai food is one of the most popular Asian cuisines in the world, as well as Chinese and Japanese cuisine. Thai food can be categorized into 5 tastes: sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and spicy. One may notice when sampling SEA's menu an abundance of sweet and spicy flavors especially if they are used to genuine Thai food, whereas Americans tend to prefer more salty and spicy foods.

The expansive menu as seen in **Figure 3** is filled with many affordable Thai delicacies and it's hard to just pick one thing you like. The menu described meals in English but a few of the dishes names were written in the native language. Some of the popular dishes on the menu include appetizers like Crispy Basil Spring Rolls (vegetarian rolls with lime mustard vinaigrette), Grilled Chicken SA-TE Wraps (grilled chicken with crispy noodles, lettuce, peanut sauce, and cucumber salad), and Andaman Dumplings (pork and shrimp with black bean sauce). Some salads included on the menu were Green Papaya Salad (green beans, tomato, peanuts with chili

## INTERNATIONAL PALETTE

lime dressing) and Crunchy Seafood Salad (shrimp, squid, scallop with a sriracha cream sauce). The restaurant's menu featured soups such as Original Tom Ka (chicken or tofu with mushrooms, galangal, coconut milk), and Southern Soup (shrimp, squid & scallops with spicy lemongrass, lime leaf and mushrooms). Also displayed is a variety of entrees, curries included Malay Massaman Curry (sweet, sour, thick & mild with peanut, onions and potato) and Bangkok Panang Curry (blended taste of sweet, medium spicy and slightly salty curry with string beans & lime); ocean specialties include Tamarind Whole Fish (crispy red snapper with a spicy tamarind chili sauce) and land specialties like Volcanic Chicken (half of a baked chicken with a spicy lava sauce and mixed vegetables).

SEA is well known for their stir-fry noodles and fried rice, their most popular dish is Pad Thai Noodles (chicken and shrimp, rice noodles, egg, peanuts, bean sprouts, scallions, radish, and smoked tofu) as shown in **Figure 3**. The costliest dish on the menu was the Lion Cry, which is priced at \$39 and with most of the other dishes listed ranging between the \$10 to \$20 bracket. My boyfriend and I chose several menu items such as Tup Tim Fritters (crispy chicken and shrimp dumpling with a sweet and sour sauce), Shrimp Shu Mai (steamed shrimp dumpling with a black bean sauce), Pad Woon Sen (vermicelli noodles, eggs, onions, ginger, scallion, carrots, mushrooms, and bean sprouts), Sea Thai Chili Chicken Wings, and Siamese Fried Rice with Beef (sautéed rice, egg, tomato, onion and scallion) as seen in **Figure 4**.

There is no traditional salad or bread that is offered complimentary by the restaurant. Although, you are welcome to order some of the signature salads on the menu, like their Caesar Salad which features an Asian twist of miso dressing instead of the typical creamy Caesar dressing. As for dessert that night we opted not to order any but the menu did feature two desserts, which were Warm Molten Chocolate Cake with pistachio ice cream and Green Tea

## INTERNATIONAL PALETTE

Cheesecake with a raspberry sauce. SEA Thai restaurant has two bars one towards the front and the other in the back, with bartenders that create signature drinks and the typical beverage you can find at any American restaurant/bar. Some of the specialties drinks I have tried during my previous visits to SEA with friends were the “Wanthong” which is a Thai martini made of Reyka vodka, muddled strawberries and guava, the other drink I had was called “Seeda” that is a frozen cocktail made with Hendricks gin, raspberry, mint, and lemon.

SEA Thai Restaurant located in Williamsburg, Brooklyn is known for serving authentic Thai delicacies. The food is influenced by Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Dutch, and Portuguese cultures. Thailand is located in Southeast Asia and is divided into four regions, Burma, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Laos. Traders would cross the peninsula region where Thailand is located which helped to influence the diverse flavors seen within the country. Some of these influences came from India’s rice and spices, Chinese noodles, Japanese Sushi, and European flavor all add to Thailand’s culinary development. The country’s capital Bangkok is a large city widely known for its vibrant street life and food. Thailand’s food is prevalent of their cultural geography and it comes as no surprise that the country’s major exports is seafood products, which makes up around 18% of the country’s food exports followed by rice, and sugar. Majority of the people in Thailand live impoverished lives, rice is typically seen as the country’s staple food, and for every meal rice, shellfish, and some sort of curry are made depending on the region.

The traditional Thai dress is the chut Thai. Men and women wear it, but for women, the dress also includes a blouse. The hostess was dressed in the traditional chut Thai dress while male waiters and cooks wore western wear consisting of black t-shirts, pants and aprons around their waists. The hostess was beautiful in her reddish-brown chut Thai dress, she wore minimal face makeup with a bold red lipstick, and had an alluring scent to her that I picked up to be a mix

## INTERNATIONAL PALETTE

of jasmine flowers and bergamot. Her hair was neatly tucked in a high bun with antique gold dangly earrings and a dainty necklace to match.

The overall experience I had at SEA Thai restaurant was impeccable. The restaurant was clean even the bathroom, the service provided was attentive and efficient, and the prices were reasonable for the modern atmosphere the restaurant gives. SEA was truly authentic to its cultural background; everything from the décor to the food was exceptional. If I had to give the restaurant an overall grade I would give them an A. The reason I would give SEA an A grading is because they never fail when it comes to great taste their food is always consistent and so are their prices. If anyone was looking for a chic but affordable place to impress a date or to just have a fun night out with friends. The only concern I would say I had was with the delay in seating being that before Covid-19 happened the typical wait time was around 45 minutes to an hour, so I did not let that influence my grading.

After my visit to SEA and researching the culture of the restaurant I was able to fully appreciate the authenticity the restaurant provides. This assignment opened my eyes to learning about different cultures through food. I was able to understand why majority of the menu was filled with a variety of rice and seafood, which are the country's main exports. As well, it was fascinating to learn how about Thailand's traditional "Chut Thai" dresses while working on this assignment, and that these garments are not limited to just women but men and children as well. Overall, this experience better helped me to become more culturally aware and inspired me to continue trying different cultures cuisines.

Images



*Figure. 1* SEA Thai Restaurant “Buddha Statue and Fountain” (September.26, 2020)



*Figure. 2* SEA Thai Restaurant “Jungle Décor” (September.26, 2020)

# INTERNATIONAL PALETTE



Figure. 3 SEA Thai Restaurant “Menu” (September.26, 2020)



Figure. 4 SEA Thai Restaurant “Appetizers/Entrees” (September.26, 2020)



INTERNATIONAL PALETTE



Figure. 5 SEA Thai Restaurant “Receipts” (September.26, 2020)

## **References**

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