

TIMEOUT DINING

A little Laos adds piquant touch at Thai Osha

By John Birdsall
TIMES CORRESPONDENT

When I tell her about this week's review, my friend Tess is skeptical. "How can you review a Thai restaurant?" she says. "They're all the same, more or less."

She's wrong of course — and she's right. Pad Thai and tom kai gai are the chop suey and wonton soup of our age, boilerplate dishes in the text of any Thai menu. But a good chef can reveal his personality — the region he's from, the foods he grew up with — far more subtly, as in the formal language of old-fashioned courtship, where pacing and emphasis carry all the meaning.

Reading the face of a good Thai restaurant can require quiet attention. Thai Osha's Fresh Mango Salad (\$7.95) hits you like a shout from a bullhorn at close range. Shards of ripe mango and red onion, iceberg lettuce that squeaks against your teeth, cashews, meaty prawns and pieces of cuttlefish exploding with the flavor of lemon grass: It's a blistering dish, packed with color and the bite of chiles. The dressing is sweet and tart and salty, sweating the mingled fragrance of mint and Asian basil. It has so much character, you sense the chef behind it, personality expressed in the margins of a standard Thai menu.

The chef (and owner) of Thai Osha, which opened in February, is Chanhthalangsy Thavone — call him by his nickname, Touk. Touk's mango salad is a kind of love note to his mom, the memory of after-school snacks of fruit glistening with vinegar and sugar, bracketed within the elements of a typical Thai seafood salad.

Touk's not even Thai. He grew up in Laos, just across Thailand's northeast border, in the city of Huay Xai. His cooking glows with the rustic spirit of the northern Lao, with big seasonings — especially chiles — and a love of fruit, of sugar and honey, fermented fish paste and vinegar. Compare Touk's cooking with the refined, artfully balanced Bangkok-style dishes of Kathy Rattapituck at Won Thai in Hercules, and you begin to sense the region's culinary geography.

Touk's at his most personal in dishes that aren't even on the menu, in the little bowl of tofu soup the server brings as you



Fresh Mango Salad

THAI OSHA

REVIEW VISIT ON MAY 25

■ **WHERE:** 1968 Contra Costa Blvd., Pleasant Hill (in the Pleasant Hill Plaza mall).

■ **HOURS:** Lunch 11 a.m.-3 p.m. daily; dinner 5-9:30 p.m. Sundays-Thursdays; 5-10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

■ **PARKING:** Free mall parking.

■ **CONTACT:** 925-825-2148.

■ **DATE OPENED:** Feb. 11, 2005.

■ **PRINCIPALS:** Chanhthalangsy Thavone, chef/owner.

■ **RESERVATIONS:** Parties of any size.

■ **PRIVATE PARTIES:** Up to 44 in the dining room.

■ **NOISE LEVEL:** Low.

■ **MOOD:** Neat and quietly elegant (there are tablecloths and cloth napkins at lunch and dinner), with the bare-bones informality of white walls, enormous mirrors and teak carvings.

■ **SPECIAL AREA:** None.

■ **SERVICE POINT:** Servers are professional and slightly formal, and meals unfold with skilled pacing.

wait for your meal, a gift from the kitchen. Today it's an intensely sweet and sour broth fragrant with fish sauce and lemon grass; on an earlier visit, Touk has fortified it with coconut milk, the surface mottled by droplets of orange-stained chile oil. On a hot afternoon, with waves of heat rising from the asphalt surface of the Pleasant Hill Plaza mall, these soups are oddly cooling.



JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO/TIMES

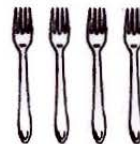
WAITERS PREPARE for the Friday night dinner rush at Thai Osha in Pleasant Hill.

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Angel Wing (\$5.95) is a mess of deep-fried drumettes stir-fried in a hot wok so sugar caramelizes on their surfaces, tossed with leaves of crispy fried basil, onion and sweet pepper, and a scant home-style sauce of black soy and fish sauce. The only thing that drags is the flavor of the chicken meat — it tastes reheated.

Tofu Satay (\$5.95) shows off a similar understanding of the transformation possible with blistering heat. Thick rectangles of marinated bean curd are grilled over flames so fierce, their skins become charred and leathery, while inside the tofu is soft and curdled as scrambled eggs — a neat bit of street food magic. Goon Gra Borg (\$6.95) — split prawns and a morsel of garlicky shrimp paste rolled up inside won

FOOD



(overall value rating of our visit, out of a possible 5)

■ **CUISINE:** Traditional Thai with northern Lao touches.

■ **PRICES:** \$ (entrees \$5.95-\$13.95).

■ **HOME RUN:** Fresh Mango Salad.

■ **STRIKEOUT:** None.

■ **VEGETARIAN:** Most dishes can be made with tofu.

■ **KIDS MENU:** None — but try Thai fried rice or chicken satay.

■ **DESSERTS:** The usual — Sweet Sticky Rice with Mango (\$4.50), Ice Cream (\$3) and Fried Banana (\$2.50).

■ **FREEBIES:** A small bowl of intensely sweet and sour tofu soup.

■ **BEVERAGES:** Beer, wine and soft drinks.

■ **CHECK:** \$55.70; three appetizers, four entrees, one dessert.

ton wrappers and deep-fried — are better than any egg rolls. Green Curry Fried Rice with Beef (\$7.50) is a home-style dish: jasmine rice, green beans and morsels of beef flank stir-fried with curry paste and a splash of coconut milk. The effect is, well — homely, the kind of thing you'd throw together from a refrigerator shelf of leftovers.

Spicy Catfish (\$10.95) with eggplant and coconut milk laced with red curry is so hot, you feel guilty for making the server refill your glass so many times. Grilled BBQ Chicken Salad

(\$6.95) is nearly as spicy, with warm strips of chicken breast grilled under a weight (to heighten the charred skin, though it desiccates the flesh), and the same profoundly sweet, sour and salty dressing that flavors the mango salad.

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