

THAI ONE ON

SOUTH ANCHORAGE'S TASTE OF THAI

RESTAURANT REVIEW BY LISA MALONEY



BY THIS POINT IN MY LIFE, I've sampled most of Anchorage's neighborhood restaurants. You know what I mean: The place within easy walking distance that you automatically turn toward when your stomach rumbles. In Spearhead, it was the Bear Tooth Theatrepub; in Mountain View, it was Hula Hands (until they moved). And now that I live in South Anchorage, it's Taste of Thai.

A true, dyed-in-the-wool Thai food fanatic would get into fisticuffs over which of Anchorage's restaurants makes the best homemade noodles. I have no such convictions. What I have instead is a near-Pavlovian response to Taste of Thai's red curry lunch special with chicken (\$12.95) and their stuffed pork rolls (\$10.95).

The latter is particularly surprising because I don't, as a rule, like pork. In fact, the rolls looked so deflated on the plate the first time I purchased them, I thought the cook had forgotten the filling. But they were faking. They're actually full of a savory pork/mushroom/onion blend that reminds me of the best piroshkis from the Downtown Market, and only looked deflated because they were buried under such a generous pile of crispy, dried onion shreds.

With the Lisa-won't-eat-pigs-because-they're-noble hurdle successfully demolished, I recruited a lunch date—let's call her Traveling Foodie—to round out my "Thai food fanatic" checklist: She's been to Thailand, she has a running mental checklist of which Thai restaurant in town does what best, and she has a borderline unhealthy obsession with Anthony Bourdain, lord of all things culture plus cuisine.

"Ever notice that Thai people never eat with forks?" she asked, explaining that it's because the food is either already cut up or soft enough to cut with your spoon. No, I hadn't—but it made sense as we dug into the day's appetizer specials: A combo plate of fresh spring rolls and Thai egg rolls (\$9.95, hands only) and stuffed rolls filled with chicken instead of pork (\$9.95, no fork needed).

"These are good because they're good everywhere," Traveling Foodie said, pointing first at the fresh rolls and then the egg rolls, petite and surprisingly meaty versions of their Chinese cousins. They come paired with two sauces: rice wine and vinegar, or a sweet and sour blend that reminds me very much of the sweet-tart blend of a Vietnamese fish

sauce. "But this ..." she said, abandoning her half of the combo plate to dig back into the stuffed rolls.

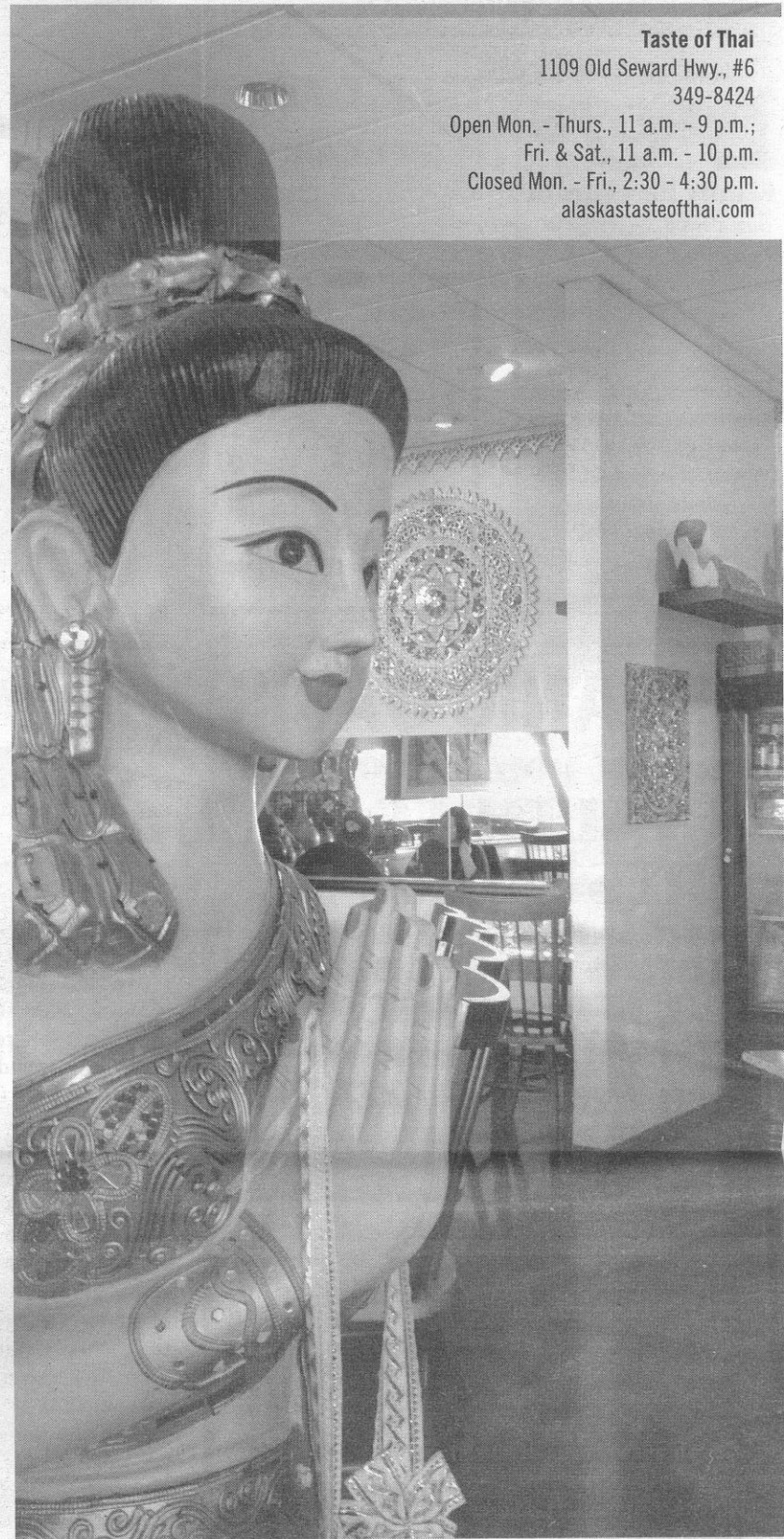
When she came back up for air, we agreed that of all the Thai restaurants in town, Taste of Thai has the best ambience. It's full of so many glittering mandalas, Buddha statues and permanently blooming fabric orchids that, despite a couple years of sitting on their doorway bench and waiting (very briefly) for takeout, I'm still taking in the details.

On our last visit, I noticed that even the blades on the ceiling fans are fashioned into giant fronds. (Don't hate—I'm short, so it hurts my neck to look up that high.) The car wash and gas station just outside negate a little bit of that feeling, but we decided that if you don't look at them, they don't count. Meanwhile, the inside of the restaurant is blissfully quiet, except for the gentle waterfall of Thai music in the background.

Thanks to my standing history of takeout orders, I already knew that the staff at Taste of Thai are speedy and consistent with food. I show up later than promised, and my food is still hot; I show up early and the hostess still produces my food almost instantly. That applies to table service, too; it wasn't long before we had our main courses: For Traveling Foodie, the pumpkin curry in a red curry base with shrimp (\$15.95), quickly deemed to have good flavor but be a little thin for her taste. That soupiness is part of what I love about Taste of Thai's red curry, my go-to takeout dish; but with Traveling Foodie's support I forewent my usual comfort food and its jumble of tender bamboo shoots, eggplant and bell peppers. Instead, I went for the spicy noodle with chicken (\$12.95). There isn't much heat there, but the spiciness comes across as a rich, flavorful warmth in the broccoli, bean sprouts and basil leaves, all piled in with the thick, meaty rice noodles that are the real star of the dish.

I went back once more—again, dodging the temptation of the red curry—to sample the pad Thai. Just like homemade noodles, you can tell a lot about a Thai restaurant by its pad Thai, and this was another win. Its flavor is smooth and subtle, the peanuts nearly invisible, and the leftovers just as good as fresh. In other words, everything fresh restaurant food should be. Score.

It's been a few years since we last reviewed this restaurant, but not much has changed. The ingredients are still fresh, the service friendly and efficient, and the food consistently delicious. It is, in fact, that consistency that makes this the perfect match for comfort food. Just keep in mind that they're closed from 2:30 to 4:30pm during the week, so if you're into late lunches, you'll have to get your fix elsewhere. ■



Taste of Thai

1109 Old Seward Hwy., #6

349-8424

Open Mon. - Thurs., 11 a.m. - 9 p.m.;

Fri. & Sat., 11 a.m. - 10 p.m.

Closed Mon. - Fri., 2:30 - 4:30 p.m.

alaskastasteofthai.com