

## Finding Enlightenment Between Sweet and Sour

By Carol M. Newman

**To please the Western palate, many Thai restaurants have modified their ancient cuisine, slashing hallmark ingredients, ignoring the five basic 'laws' of Thai cooking (salty, bitter, hot, sweet and sour) and showcasing popular street vendor fare as the only bill of fare.**

One restaurant hasn't: Dublin's gutsy Sri Thai. This unassuming eatery has thrown down the gauntlet, challenging guests with a gamut of authentic and less conventional dishes.

A native of Bangkok, Thailand, chef/owner Sopida Sorroche and her husband, John, specialize in regional dishes from Central Thailand.

Don't expect décor with

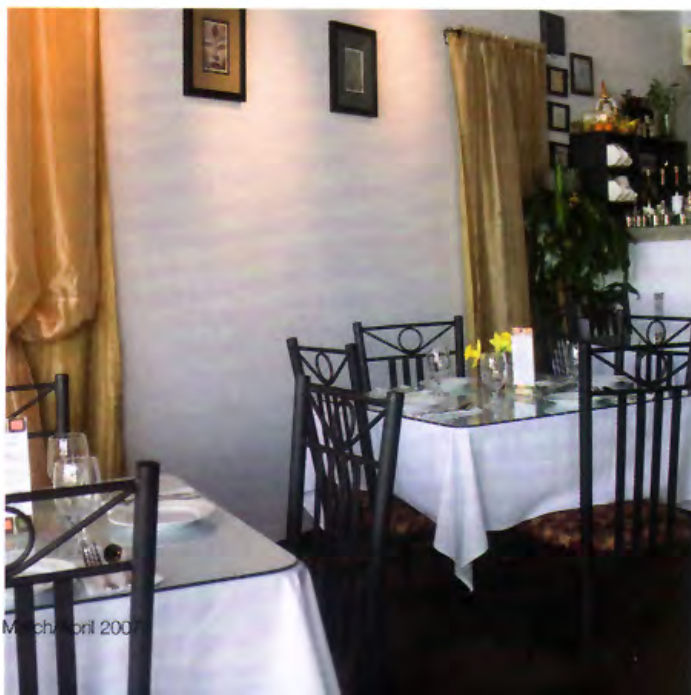
panache; the real artwork is saved for the plate. You won't find glittering gilding, sugar palm fronds, sultry lighting and lounge tunes of exotic contemporaries. Instead, white walls leave little to gaze at, barring the four faces of Buddha watching over diners. The distinctive pop sound of Irish music star Enya echoes through the cavernous space. During lunch there's a steady hum of the Oracle and Sybase business crowd.

Stop in for lunch, and a steaming cup of Tum Yum soup

appears (\$3.75 for a bowl at dinner) before you have even ordered. A spice-sour interplay swirls in lemon grass, with velvety mushrooms, lemon juice and cilantro accents. A good Thai soup shows off the intricate flavors, yet balances the delicate and spicy inherent in Thai cuisine—and this one truly does.

Forgo a lackluster Satay Chicken (\$7.95) and opt for a lustier appetizer choice, one that husband and co-owner John proudly demes a "Sopida original." Savory Salmon Sticks (\$7.95) are cut pieces of salmon dusted in yellow curry powder and quickly deep-fried so the outside layer crisps and the inside flesh stays moist. Dip one in the intended sweet and sour sauce, but if you must assuage your yen for peanut sauce, it's available as a side (\$4.00).

Retreat from the familiar again. Hailing from the eastern



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region of Thailand, Som-Tum (\$7.95) doubles as a fire extinguisher, its thread-like, pale green papaya strands cooling the blistering Thai chile. Instead, explore a Northern specialty that offers similar precautionary measures, Mieng Kum (\$7.95). This roll-your-own appetizer embodies all that Thai food should be: raw and cooked, spicy and aromatic, colorful and flavorful. Toasted coconut, red onions, lime, ginger, cashew nuts and shrimp play games in the texture, leaving your tongue tingling for more.

An all-Thai cooking staff turns out the restaurant owners' vision, but to directly taste Sopida's versions, visit the restaurant on a Monday or Tuesday night when she works the stoves. Her experience reincarnates a bowl of mild, yellow curry; her deft touch takes coconut milk soup to a new level. A graduate of Wandee Thai Culinary School in Bangkok, Sopida has also cooked at her sister's Bangkok restaurant and the unassuming, but extolled Thai Café in San Francisco. To keep her hands on the pulse of Thai cooking, Sopida makes regular pilgrimages to Thailand.

On one of these sojourns, Sopida watched as her dinner plates were made, fired in clay ovens, then packed for shipping to Dublin. The fire inspired her to create a new signature dish, Seafood in a Clay Pot (\$12.95), an arranged marriage between steamed silver noodles and seafood. Served in a scorching clay pot, the meal inspires what Sopida calls "a fire ball in your mouth."

The special Steamed Fillet Tilapia (\$8.95 lunch; \$12.95 dinner) may raise your eyebrows. How could this predator from brackish waters, its flavor nothing short of bland, be made over? Give it a try because the results will stun you. Bright green bok choy (white stalked, green leaf cabbage) cloaks the fish that swims with nuances of ginger, burnished with sweetness.

Plan ahead for a visit to Sri Thai and bag a bottle. You'll want to resist the \$8 corkage charge, and with a thin wine list, options are few. Then do as the enlightened do: cleanse your Western palate with the unconventional and let your taste buds be your guide. **TM**



