

The View review

Rosemary Staal *finds the Thai experience is a visual feast*



Thai Orchid • 58a Fisherton Street • Salisbury • Wiltshire • SP2 7RB • 01722 414778

Thai food rarely seems to come into my orbit. On our way to Salisbury, D and I try and recall when and where we last ate it and decide it was probably about nine years ago in Romsey. And before that? For me, at least, it was circa 1980 in Singapore, of all places, when a friend invited me to supper but forgot she had to go out so left me in the company of her Thai cook. I didn't take it (entirely) personally and in fact enjoyed a terrific meal – a simple fish soup brought stunningly to life with lemon grass – albeit eaten in extraordinary circumstances.

Thereafter I made a point of buying lemon grass whenever I saw it, and not always to cook with but just for the pleasure of its smell evoking that simple, delicious meal and that slightly surreal evening.

In due course, lemon grass sprang up everywhere, readily available from the corner shop to the hypermarket. Its ubiquity has meant it now occurs in many styles of cooking but for me it has and always will symbolise Thai cookery.

Now, as we approach Salisbury, I wonder how much, if at all, this evening's dining experience will bring back those heady lemon grass days.

Parking is not a problem, which is a phrase one rarely uses in connection with poor

Salisbury. The restaurant is only a minute or two's walk from the large Central car park and we quickly identify our destination tucked down a lane close to the city's main centres of entertainment, the Playhouse and the City Hall. An ideal location, then, for an eating place.

Noting the funky purple exterior I imagine that inside we'll find an equally individual decor, perhaps even minimalist. But I'm immediately proved wrong as we walk up the carpeted staircase with richly patterned wood carvings on the walls and, halfway up, a water feature that trickles perilously close to our elbows.

The restaurant is in two sections so you turn either left or right at the top of the stairs. We turn right, to be greeted with smiles as warm as an embrace by two impeccably turned out Thai ladies. Just for a moment I have the impression I am entering 'The Thailand Room' at a 1950s exhibition with these two waitresses in their silky cheongsams frozen in time among a veritable explosion of full-on furnishing in traditional Thai style. The word 'ornate' hardly does it justice. Anything that doesn't move has been carved, painted, gilded, set behind glass or otherwise tricked out to contribute to the overall effect of gloriously over-the-top opulence.

Chan, the chef, may well have had a hand in this as everything that comes out of the kitchen and on to our comfortable corner table is also elaborately embellished. My starter of mixed Thai vegetables (half a dozen chunky deep-fried duvets wrapped round little pieces of crunchy veg) is served on what I can only describe as a gilded miniature podium. It's a visual feast, deserving of a round of applause, especially for the skilled hands which carved the delicate flower out of what I think must have started life as a humble turnip. A good use for a turnip, I'd say, and probably the best it could hope for.

And so the theme of opulence and excess continues. From an extremely large menu – in dimension, weight and content – I choose Phad Phed Talay for my main course, not only because I like the name but also because I fancy some mixed seafood stir-fried with bamboo shoots, chilli, garlic, basil and Thai aubergines. The latter, I learn from the menu's helpful page on Thai herbs and spices, are like peas only bigger. So even the peas are super-sized.

D enjoys a tasty meal of deep-fried ground seafood (think un-crumbed, pink fishcakes) with Thai spices, followed by marinated and sliced sirloin steak with a spicy tamarind sauce. We have helpings of noodles too which, naturally, are both fried and large. Nowhere, though, do I get the slightest whiff or taste of lemon grass.

Nevertheless, this is a good place to come if you're hungry because there's no way you could possibly leave without feeling you'd more than had your fill.

Our two-course meal for two, excluding drinks, cost £42 V

