

‘Taste of Thailand’ has the cure for the flu and the cure for flat palates

They were giving away irises at ‘Taste of Thailand’ the other day – free to a good home, free to anyone who wanted to take away a little beauty. Free to European taste buds that had been imprisoned for years.

I was too late to take one; the raffia basket that held the plants was empty. But the restaurant was full – of customers and other items for sale. There were more flowers, handmade paper, little trinkets, gift-shop baubles and croaking frogs made from wood. The tiny lobby-slash-souvenir store was packed with presents and papers, with takeout orders lined up along the low counter; crowded with security guards coming off shift and an ambulance crew about to go on, but wanting a good meal first; with waiters sorting through the knot of people waiting for seats in the small dining room next door, servers moving quickly, coming and going through the doorway between the lobby and the floor, the floor and the kitchen. The air was heavy with the smell of hot woks, oil, peanuts and garlic. It was prime time at ‘Taste of Thailand’.

‘Taste of Thailand’ has been crowded since the day it opened in 2004, when Su and Mae Kwan decided to see what Dublin thought about eating real Thai food. They had moved to Dublin from Thailand, where she was born and was taught to cook and love food. She was an English teacher in Thailand, however when she moved to Dublin she was to make something out of a small tea shop which was left to her by her Auntie, Lei Su. It was food that kept her in touch with her roots and her people, holding the smells and flavours of her youth close even from thousands of miles away.

I’d read about them before eating here, about the kitchen they’ve been running for six years and the garden they’ve been tending for nearly as long. I’d read blogs about how produce from that garden makes Taste of Thailand’s cuisine so unique (in Dublin, at least) and about the cooking classes, the lessons on how Thai people deal with the battalions of herbs and fresh ingredients that form the backbone of the rustic end of the canon. I’d read about the flu shot soup that, over the years, has become a tradition at this restaurant. From October through March, it is one of the most popular dishes on the Taste of Thailand menu: a rich broth, packed with chicken and fresh vegetables often taken from the ground just hours, occasionally

minutes before. There are people in town who swear by this stuff, who attribute to it near-mystical powers. It's hot!

This year and the last, because of the demand, because of the flu (swine or otherwise) being so much in the news, they decided to rush their soup onto the menu. There was no reason not to; the garden was certainly cooperating, so they taped a small blue sign to the front of the window announcing that flu shot soup was being served early this year.

The response to the sign was huge. On a Saturday night, pressed close against the lobby wall, stuck waiting because I'd unwisely showed up forty five minutes after opening as opposed to, say, 45 before. I looked into the dining room and saw that almost all the tables had bowls of flu shot soup on them, little bowls and big bowls, as an appetizer or as a main.

While so many restaurants boast about their seasonal, organic, local and market-driven menus, Taste of Thailand is not just seasonal, not just market-driven, but Garden-driven. They decide on some of the compositions of some of the dishes in the morning, while poking around the higgledy-piggledy mess of plants. (According to Mae, they don't plant in rows, they don't organize or separate their stock, and they just grow a little bit of everything wherever they feel like putting it.) Mint looks good? There's going to be a lot of mint on the plates today. How about basil or garlic? It's an interesting way to make a menu. No dish tastes the same from week to week, sometimes day to day. All those chefs out there who brag about going to the farmer's markets and pulling their supplies straight from the fields? Taste of Thailand, with its ever-changing specials and tight menu, its tiny dining room and waiters at the door, is what they are really reaching for.

At dinner Saturday, I skipped the 'flu shot' soup because I was hungry for something more substantial and less ... medicinal. So I asked for satay, the satay came with a handmade spicy peanut sauce that was merely okay, and a bright and vinegary cucumber sauce that was fantastic. After that, I had chicken dumplings, stuffed with ground chicken, two kinds of garlic and little jewels of cooked carrot. They were small enough to eat whole, and I did, not even bothering to use chopsticks.

The masaman curry was thin as water and almost tasteless at first, poured over rice served out of the big silver bowl but it seemed to disappear between the grains, the curls of simmered beef remaining behind as though

they'd been sieved. Expecting the thicker, sweeter, more punch-in-the-face directness of the curries to which I have become accustomed to over the years, I was disappointed. But after a few bites, my opinion changed. The curry had a subtle background sweetness, which allowed the bright spikes of red chilli and curry paste to creep through, the flavours of soft onions and fresh carrots added their own savory notes. It was unusual, yes, but after finishing the first plate, I decided that I kind of liked it.

So I had another, just to make sure.

The Mae and Su focus primarily on Thai comfort food, on traditional family-kitchen preparations of dishes; pad Thai, drunken noodles, larb salads. But I skipped all that and went for a whole fried fish (a specialty of the house) and garlic squid, spring rolls made with pork and bean thread noodles and fresh herbs. Taste of Thailand's had a beautiful and fragrant jumble of fried rice stuffed with egg and broccoli florets, garlic and basil from the garden, sautéed chopped onions, chillies, cabbage, carrots and small prawns, roughly shelled, tossed in with their tails still attached. It was delicious.

I was back for lunch on Tuesday and joined the people waiting on the sidewalk out front, craning their necks to see inside, wondering how long it might be before they could eat. I was finally seated at a back corner table, where — in imitation of the tables all around me, the two doctors by the window, the three nurses next to me, the small family sitting across the room — I at last ordered a bowl of flu shot soup.

The broth was fragrant, heavily spiced with fresh garlic and diced ginger root, with tiny flakes of red Thai chillies and bits and pieces of other plants that I couldn't name and which they won't name for strangers. This its their secret recipe; after all, a Thailand home remedy that she states can cure both the flu (if given a few days) and prevent it altogether. The soup was a heavenly juxtaposition of aromas touched with a softness that contrasted with the sharpness or the tactile bite of chilli peppers. The garlic was powerful and savory, the ginger, the planks of carrot that had retained their vegetable sweetness even after cooking in the spice-heavy broth. And the dumplings — similar to the dumplings I had on Saturday night but smaller, their thin skins filled with ground chicken — had soaked up all the flavors of the two dozen or more ingredients, secret and otherwise, and seemed to burst in the mouth like tiny chicken-and-garlic-flavored bombs.

It was a great soup — both rustic and controlled at the same time, skillfully balanced and deeply comforting, a perfect showcase for the backyard garden that informs so much of the food. And as for those health claims? Well, I haven't sniffled yet.

But should the worst happen and I come down with some kind of flu. Taste of Thailand's garden will be the first place I go looking for relief. I may not get cured, but I know I'll get great food.

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