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Restaurant review: Indochine

MAR. 5, 2009 2 COMMENTS

By Lori Midson

Indochine

Grade: B+

Address: 19751 E. Main St., Parker

Hours: Lunch Mon.-Sat.; Dinner daily

Food: Thai and Vietnamese

How much: \$3-\$11 starters, soups and salads; \$8.50-\$20 main dishes

Reservations: Suggested on weekends

Noise: A quiet buzz

Information: 720-851-8559; indochine-cuisine.com

Parking: Complimentary street parking and lot behind restaurant

I have a sneaking suspicion that Yume Tran, the chef-owner of Indochine, never forgets a face, especially when it's a customer. Walking briskly through her restaurant during the crush of lunch, she glanced in our direction, suddenly stopped, backed up and with a wide grin that stretched from lobe to lobe, outstretched her arms and said, "You're back! It's so nice to see you again."

We talked for half an hour, about her life as an impoverished young girl in Vietnam, her journey to Denver and the days she spent worrying about her future from the confines of a gritty motel room on Colfax. She talked of her love for cooking, cookbooks and teaching classes from her home kitchen, the admiration she has for her children, her lust for life, the pathetic economy and how she's trying to soften the blow in her own small way with an irreverent stimulus menu aimed at giving diners a break.

"During these uncertain economic times," the menu reads, "we all need a little help pleasing our palates — not to mention our purses and pockets. We strongly believe Indochine's stimulus bill will help everyone immediately, without any red

tape, regulations or government oversight (and the best thing is that the stimulus menu was passed all in one hour by our House of Kitchen and Service Senate.)”

I like Tran’s sense of humor.

More importantly, I’m crazy about her food, a whirlwind of Thai and Vietnamese dishes, beautifully prepared, triumphantly flavored and steeped in tradition.

The lovely dining room — with its twinkling white Christmas lights strewn across the ceiling, walls the color of paprika and sage, tables vased with stems of bright green bamboo, and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the storefronts on Parker’s main street — looks new and fresh, which makes sense, because it is.

Tran and her husband, Jeff Nghiem, opened the space last year after closing their original Indochine location, just down the drag in a forgettable strip mall. Business, says Tran, is much better here, even in dire times.

Perhaps it’s the upscale location that’s attracting a steady crowd of regulars or the fact that Tran is perhaps the happiest person on the planet with her easy smile, gregarious laugh and gift of gab, but I’m more inclined to believe her success stems from the wonderful food coming from her kitchen.

It was easy to empty the plate of **fire crackers** (\$5), shrimp jacketed in deep-fried pastry and served with a vibrant dipping sauce piquant with lime leaves, curry paste and coconut milk. It was just as effortless to succumb to the Vietnamese **summer rolls** (\$5) bundled with rice noodles, Thai basil leaves, shrimp, carrots and cucumber, and sided with a creamy peanut butter sauce.

Tom kha (\$6, small; \$11, large), a creamy, soul-soothing coconut milk soup, with just an edge of sweetness, was like a Chinook wind, its steaming broth bounteous with tender white chicken, Kaffir lime leaves, galangal and lemongrass. Like the wind, it blew me away.

We slurped our way through the bracing **tom yum** (\$6, small; \$11, large), eye-poppingly vivid, both for its desert-red hue and tart grace notes of lime juice and fish sauce. Buoyant with shrimp, fresh mushrooms, onions and cilantro, and impassioned with the intense heat of Thai chilies, I pulled my bowl toward me, stuck my nose deep into the perfume and made the decision to further support Indochine’s stimulus bill by ordering a large vat to go.

We spent an hour suspended in a stupor of pleasure and pain, alternating between bites of the **gingered sea bass** (\$19), its tender flesh puddled in a broth pungent with garlic, red curry paste and lime leaves, and the richly satisfying **panang curry** (\$10.50), laden with ropes of bell peppers, chicken, carrots and roasted peanuts. We ordered it “Thai hot,” and Tran —apparently sensing that we weren’t kidding — happily spiked it with hot flashes of bird’s eye chilies. The **massaman beef curry** (\$10.50), with poached potatoes, crushed peanuts and onions submerged in a soothing base of coconut milk scented with cinnamon, cumin and cloves, was compellingly husky.

Not everything moved me to wax rhapsodic. The combination **Vietnamese noodle bowl** (\$10) with chicken, beef and shrimp was nothing more than routine, and the **pho ga soup** (\$8.50) was equally rudimentary, its broth weak and watery and the requisite accompaniments — Thai basil leaves, bean sprouts, mint leaves, cilantro and lime wedges — entirely absent or sparse.

But mishaps are few and far between at Indochine (you’ll occasionally encounter pokey and forgetful servers, but the staff is faultlessly friendly), and in this economy, that’s more than stimulating.