



SUM TOM SALAD

FROM THAILAND, WITH LOVE

Rare dishes from the land of pad Thai BY DANTE ZUÑIGA-WEST

When it comes to the economics of supply and demand, Thai food isn't a cuisine lacking in Eugene. But the folks over at Som Tum Thai Bistro are bringing something new to the equation.

"A lot of Thai food here isn't as bold," says Som Tum owner Avieta Kaokept. "People just want the usual things like pad Thai with peanut sauce and things like that."

A Eugenean by way of Bangkok, Kaokept is no newcomer to world of Thai restaurants. Her family has been feeding Eugene their nation's cuisine for years. In fact, if you love Thai food, it's more than likely you've dined at an establishment run by Avieta's kin. Her brother, who goes by B, owns Ta Ra Rin, and her parents, Vic and Bangon, operate Chao Pra Ya. Each of these restaurants offers tasty Thai delicacies, but the magic coming out of the kitchen at Som Tum is an exciting addition to the family's legacy.

"What she (Avieta) has done here is make the stuff you'd find in food carts over in Thailand," says waiter Michael Fitzgerald. He notes that Som Tum offers the traditional fare — everything from your killer pad Thai to a delicious bubble tea — but then points out the rare gems for which this place is becoming known.

For the adventurous there's the oxtail soup, consisting of slow-cooked oxtail boiled in tomatoes, celery, fried scallions and onions. Tempting appetizers include the tod man, fried fishcakes made from talapia, red curry paste, green beans, kaffir and basil. These scrumptious patties are even more of a treat when dipped in the accompanying sauce of onion, cucumber and sweet chili.

"I wanted to make the things people don't usually know about when they go to eat Thai food," Kaokept says.

One of the most impressive looking and mouth-watering plates on the menu has the restaurant's name all over it, literally. The som tum is a salad that combines four different flavors of lime, as well as fish sauce, Thai chili and palm sugar. Shredded green papaya, cherry tomatoes, carrots, green beans and peanuts are all up in the mix as well — this is the dream dish to push on your vegetarian friends.

It's a stroke of *chokdee* (good luck) to have access to such great Thai food in Eugene, and one of the more attractive aspects of Som Tum is prices that won't break your pocketbook. Short of hitting up the food carts of the country once known to Westerners as Siam, this might be the closest one can get to a true immersion in hard-to-find Thai cuisine. We suggest going all out, washing down your meal with a bottle of Singha — just to make it official. ■



TOD MAN

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