

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review

## Mai Tong fills Thai gap in Astoria cuisine

Review by  
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**W**hen the Mai Tong Thai Food truck opened at the end of October, Astoria's two and a half years without Thai cuisine came to a merciful end.

I'm surprised it took so long. Since Astoria's Blue Ocean Thai Cuisine shut in mid-2015, Thai joints have popped up across the region. Malai Thai arrived in Long Beach in 2015. A Mighty Thai launched in Manzanita in early 2016 and was followed by Seaside's Yellow Curry shortly thereafter.

Neighborhood diners arrived eagerly, longing for creamy coconut curries, ginger-flecked stir-fry, noodles, sweet peanut sauce, Thai coffees and the like. Meanwhile, Astorians with those cravings had to travel to Warrenton, to the well-regarded Nisa's Thai Kitchen.

That's where Sopa Burns worked before setting out with her husband, Robert, to set up the Mai Tong truck. (Hailing from northeastern Thailand, the name pays tribute to Sopa's family.)

The gleaming, custom-built truck is parked at Duane and 13th streets, in the burgeoning Astoria Station pod. Anchored by the ir-repressible Reach Break Brewing and alongside the irresistible Hot Box BBQ and Reveille Ciderworks, Astoria Station stakes claim as the first worthwhile modern pod on the coast. The cluster of businesses are simpatico, each staking out individual lanes. Here



Beef salad

THE MOUTH

is a rising tide that lifts all boats. It's no small thing that in inclement weather Mai Tong customers can find refuge inside Reach Break.

I began with a glass of ESB and the Lemongrass Chicken Wings (\$6). Long-marinated, the wings have deep, subtly developed flavors; they don't shout, but still speak volumes. Supple and wildly juicy, they're cooked gingerly, a reminder of how regularly chicken is overcooked. The skin, quivering and slippery, having soaked up the most of the marinade, might be the best part.

The sight or scent of the wings led a nearby couple to order their own. And, 10 or 15 minutes later, they, too, were sucking their fingers in ecstasy.

The couple also ordered the Drunken Noodles (\$8), ranked at two-stars on the spice scale. In short order, both were blubbering, ordering more water at the bar, dabbing sweat from their cheeks. The spice had thrown them for a loop. Some modicum of manners prevented me from asking for a taste to gauge the heat. I'd have to return and order my own.



EDWARD STRATTON PHOTO

Sopa and Robert Burns opened Mai Tong Thai Food at the corner of 13th and Duane streets last fall.

More than the heat — which at two stars I found resolutely mild-medium — I was taken by the texture of the flat, wide Drunken Noodles — not rubbery, enjoyably chewy, just right.

But anyway, back to the spice. Like many Thai restaurants that begin with red chili flakes before graduating to Thai Chilis, Mai Tong obliges, delights even, in cranking up the heat. But a little clarification may be in order.

Mai Tong's scale of one-to-three stars (printed as large chilis) on the cart, was an early design choice. Talking with Robert, who takes orders while Sopa cooks, I was a little confused where things stand now ... Had they moved on to a different system? He certainly said they can go above three stars. Regardless, a three-star scale doesn't leave much wiggle room. A five-star scale would help keep unsuspecting folks like the couple I met from blowing their ears out.

I had the Thai Ginger stir-fry (\$8) at three-stars and found a throaty, peppery medium. The vegetables, particularly the bell peppers and onion and finely sliced ginger, made clear their freshness. They weren't frozen from a bag but vibrant.

And so it made sense, then, when I asked Robert one night what surprised him most about opening the cart. Answering without hesitation, he said, "The prep! Every day we're cutting so many vegetables."

There are meats, too, of course, which Robert said come from Reed & Hertig. Most dishes come with a choice of chicken, beef, pork, tofu or shrimp. The tofu was totally adequate, the chicken a bit dull (especially compared to the supple, juicy wings). Generally I preferred the beef, at least where it's appropriate. (For whatever reason, beef feels awkward to me in a curry.)

### MAI TONG THAI FOOD

Rating: ★★★

400-498 13th Street  
Astoria, Ore.  
97103

971-320-0849

Hours: 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday through Monday

Price: \$ – Entrées from \$8 to \$10

Service: Take-out only, well-packaged

Vegetarian / Vegan Options: Plentiful

Drinks: Bottled water, soda

#### KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Poor
- ★★ Below average
- ★★★ Worth returning
- ★★★★ Very good
- ★★★★★ Excellent, best in region

The Curries (\$8) come in Red and Yellow, and they certainly do the trick, extending the depth of rich coconut milk into something enveloping.

Of the two soups, I had the Creamy Tom Yum (\$10), and it yearned for maturation. The Beef Salad (\$10), with iceberg, tomatoes, cucumber, onion, celery and a tangy lime juice dressing, was thin and dainty. Both lacked the multifaceted flavors of their peers. Both were also on the small side. (That said, nothing at Mai Tong is huge. Leftovers are not guaranteed.)

The Tom Yum and Beef Salad were the only dishes I had at Mai Tong that I wouldn't order again — rare outliers. At the top are the Lemongrass Wings. The majority of Mai Tong's dishes — noodles, curries, stir-frys — are clustered toward the center, pushed above average by the fresh-cut veggies and neat, involving balances.

Qualms aside, let it be known that Mai Tong is more than capable of filling Astoria's Thai food gap, delivering us from this painful and prolonged state of want. **CW**