

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Curry & CoCo's a go-go

By RYAN HUME
FOR COAST WEEKEND

There seems to be something of a Thai food boom on the North Coast. From a second-chance venture like Portland-transplant Thai Me Up or a new location from Manzanita's A Mighty Thai in the former BJ's Pizzeria's 101 location (both restaurants opening in Seaside), plus local stalwart Nisa's Thai Kitchen in Warrenton and Astoria's beloved food truck Mai Tong, one has to wonder if Thai cooking will become as common in the area as New American cuisine.

Enter Curry & CoCo Thai Eatery in Astoria, from seasoned restaurateurs Nalinrat Sahunala and Brian Fernandez. Opening in the former location of the Mexican-menued Rio Café on Ninth Street, which was most recently occupied by the Smokehouse Butcher Block, the space has been rejuvenated by a few spats of renovation. It is now bright and open, with kitschy décor nodding to both Sahunala's and Fernandez's respective heritages (Thai/Cuban), around a few industrial splashes, like exposed wall vents.

One way Curry & CoCo is separating from the pack is with the inclusion of a Cuban menu offered on Thursday nights to be called Havana Nights. This is what originally piqued my interest, as it's a most welcome anomaly in our regional dining scene.

So on a first visit, I headed down on a Thursday and no Cuban food. There was not yet booze behind the handsome, aluminum-saddled bar. Sahunala told me these were still on the way, with Havana Nights beginning in earnest this June.

Admittedly, it is premature to review a restaurant shortly after they open. Launching a restaurant is a very hard thing to do, and rolling things out slowly is a very sane move. With three other restaurants under her belt (including Yellow Curry Cozy Thai in Seaside), Sahunala and Fernandez know what they are doing. It is a testament to their expertise that the service is warm and welcoming and that everything already coming out of the kitchen is gracefully plated and delicious.

Good dishes

I was especially impressed by their handling of seafood. The Angry Catfish (\$18) didn't seem angry at all, but was crispy and firm under a cool cloud of green curry cream. Fisherman Madness (\$18) offered up a battered or dusted fillet of salmon that flaked, still moist, into a sea of potent red curry. The eggplant slices accompanying this dish were also somehow nearly toothy as apples, not even near mushy, which is in itself a feat.

Various appetizers did their job to open up the palette. Deep-fried chicken "Astoria Stickers" dumplings (\$8) and Crispy Tofu (\$6) were both at home dunked into a saccharine-y Thai sweet and sour. The Rock'n Rolls (\$7), a take on the common Thai salad roll, adds heft with the addition of lemon-

grass chicken and could serve as a light lunch all on their own.

As they also offer takeout, I figured I should try that too, though I'm not sure I would order the same dish to-go again. The Spicy Basil (\$12 or \$14) is a stir fry of ground meat and a ménage of vegetables served over rice and topped with a fried egg. I chose pork off of Sahunala's recommendation. The over-easy egg meant to spill and velvet up the thin, soy-based sauce had risen to over-medium on a car ride across town. This seemed less of an issue of kitchen prep and more an issue of physics. There are plenty of menu items that would travel better.

Thai staples like Pad Thai (\$11-\$14 depending on protein) and Tom Yum Soup

Curry & CoCo's

Rating: ★★☆☆ (and rising?)

125 9th St., Astoria
503-741-3499

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday-Tuesday. Closed Wednesday.

Price: \$\$ – Entrées range from \$11–\$18.

Service: Dine in, takeout

Vegetarian / Vegan Options: With few exceptions, most menu items can be made vegetarian or vegan.

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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



Curry
Pad Thai at
Curry & CoCo
Ryan Hume

(\$13) weren't just placeholders, but great expressions of these well-known dishes. The Tom Yum comes with a sunken vessel of pure flame rising from the middle of the bowl which not only keeps the hot and sour broth warm, but also reminded me of the creation of volcanic islands.

If I have one caveat, it would be controlling the spice level. Wandering through the menu, it's a bit hard to distinguish what will give off heat. As something of a capicum-head, I would have loved the opportunity to find

more crushed bird's eye chilies in my Spicy Basil sauce, while I know others might be inflamed by the subtle, growing spice in the Tom Yum broth.

But these are first impressions on a kitchen in its infancy. What they have already accomplished is well plotted and thoughtful. I am excited to see what they will put out from their Cuban side and what drinks they will sling from that bar. Curry & CoCo deserves another visit, and maybe another after that. **CW**

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