

Dining out

Bob Hart



NOW, I am quite prepared to accept

Thai food is the product of an ancient and noble gastronomic tradition.

But there are times when it all seems just a bit too good to be true.

I mean, if a bunch of our most brilliant chefs joined forces to develop a new cuisine with which to dazzle and seduce the Great Australian Tastebud, surely they would come up with something pretty close to what we know as Thai tucker.

Think about it. The stuff thrives on

Australian ingredients and is interesting but never alarming, adventurous but hardly reckless, and spicy without being hot enough to have you whimpering like a whipped dog some time the morning after.

Makes you wonder, doesn't it?

Of course, there is Thai food and Thai food. And if you would like to consider my theory as you tangle with some of the very best Melbourne has to offer, then look no further than the excellent Lemongrass restaurant in Lygon St.

This is an elegant little establishment with raw brick walls lined with curved alcoves, each containing a statue – possibly of a minor god, each with an arm upraised as if trying to attract attention. The Thai god of restaurant patrons, perhaps?

Attentive staff glide around in traditional Thai dress, and the only odd note struck is by the light fittings which are those glass, truncated-sausage affairs with nobbled ends.

They look not unlike giant, discarded condoms – a reminder for would-be sex tourists, perhaps.

These days, Lemongrass offers not only the opulent Thai Royal Cuisine on which it built its reputation, but also a range of regional creations – in particular, the Laotian-influenced Isaan dishes from Thailand's rugged north-east.

It was on these dishes that we concentrated. We began with soup – not the inevitable tom yum goong, but a dish called pla plesak isaan, which consisted of a fragrant

Digest: Lemongrass

Where: 189 Lygon St, Carlton.

Tel: 347-5204.

Wine List: A fair selection, including a few aromatics, but a cold beer works just as well in my view.

Bill: About \$70 for two.

Hours: Lunch: Mon-Fri; dinner: daily.

Special Features: Elegant and comfortable with expert, attentive serving staff and a well-explained menu.

The Not-So-Good: Not much parking, but little else to complain about.

Score: 7/10

Verdict: *Thai food is marvellous stuff if well executed, and not so marvellous when it is the spicy sludge awash in tinned coconut cream offered by some suburban hell-holes. To discover the way it tastes at its best, try this place.*

broth served in a metal dish and over a table burner that kept it bubbling around a small, deep-fried fish which, in turn, further enriched the broth. A marvellous first course.

Next came neur tang isaan – astonishingly tender and extravagantly flavored strips of rarish beef, draped over fresh vegetables and served with a delicious dipping sauce.

We very nearly ordered a second helping of this one.

But then we tangled with pla daet diew – a Thai salad that made me suspect Thai food was

invented not by a committee of chefs after all, but by a dope-crazed but inspired mango farmer from somewhere just north of Port Douglas.

A fillet of reef fish in a crisp, golden batter was all but buried under a layer of shredded green mango in a dazzling dressing, and each mouthful married the curiously exotic salad to the crunch of the batter and the moist, snow-white flesh of the fish.

And naturally, we had a curry.

There must be a curry in a Thai meal, so we opted for the restaurant's silky smooth gaeng kari gai hang with its tender nuggets of chicken breast and potatoes. And lashings of steamed jasmine rice, of course.

Thai puddings are superior to most on offer in Asian restaurants, and Lemongrass has several interesting ones, including ice-cream "gratee sod" which I had no intention of ordering for fear of copping a backhand from our waiter.

So I had the coconut creme caramel instead and it was sturdy, tasty and quite safe.

But to return to my theory about the origins of Thai food just for a moment.

Has anybody ever seen an ancient Thai recipe book? Or a picture of an ancient Thai foodie? Or even bowls of tom yum goong or pud Thai etched on the walls of ancient Thai temples?

Nope, me neither. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?