

Thai 'diet' not one for wimps

TO THOSE of us constantly in search of the truth, here was a saying wrapped in the enigmatic philosophy of the Orient.

The scripture read: "The more you eat the skinnier you get."

The logic behind such wisdom is that if you (certainly not me) eat food laced with incendiary spices, your body (definitely not mine) will burn up lots of unnecessary calories.

It may be true or it may not be true, but there it was written in the menu of Lemongrass restaurant, a strange bedfellow tucked into the spaghetti strip of Lygon St.

Lemongrass has already laid claim to being the best Thai restaurant in town. And it is easy to see why.

EATING OUT

By ERIC PAGE

Owner Michael Mah did his homework thoroughly before opening the doors late last year.

A lover of Thai food and not too impressed with the quality in Melbourne, he made arrangements with Boonchoo Pholwatana, a high priestess of culinary affairs in Bangkok, to send her protegee niece to cook for him in Australia.

The niece, Chanya Nugool, brought with her another chef, Boon-aeek Awbouwong, and together they make wonderful music in the kitchen.

What they create has the hallmark of authenticity ... light, flavorsome, adventurous and truly traditional food apart from slight adjustments to the amounts of pungent prawn paste.

It is food for the chilli lover and eaten with brass fork and spoon, not chopsticks.

IT DOES not really matter in what order it is chosen but to repeat the meal we ate, I would certainly give preference to eating the goong norn hae before all the other dishes.

This mammoth prawn is the size of a small crayfish and is farmed in Thailand. The meat is stir-fried in garlic and pepper, placed back in the shell and then the prawn

is wrapped in a soft egg net (like a lacy crepe).

The flavor is so good that it should be tasted before the palate feels the heat of spicier dishes, such as the lemon grass flavored soups, one made with chicken and ginger, and the other full of prawns with an added taste of kaffir lime.

Between courses — if there is such a definition in Thai feasting — we enjoyed a communal plate of very crunchy vegetables for dunking into a bowl of minced pork dip, which was very savory indeed.

Highlight of this dish was the crispy pork crackling, so totally different from the Anglo-Saxon delicacy.

In Thai cuisine the skin is air dried and then plunged in searing hot oil, which expands it like a

Dutch wafer biscuit. Terribly more-ish.

Our gaeng panang was made to order, with slices of beef fillet cooked with red chillies and crushed peanuts. A good fresh curry with the gravy just coated the meat. Of course, there was an altar bowl of rice to be spooned out with each dish.

If the crunchy pork crackling was exceptional then the fluffy fish was an absolutely ethereal.

The preparation is a long process. First the fish is steamed then baked, teased out into fibres and finally plunged into hot oil.

It emerges looking like a breakfast cereal and is served immediately before losing its crispness.

Much of the essential splendor of this dish, however, is in the lime-garlic-

coriander sauce that is dribbling over the fish and its garnish of lemon grass and shredded green mango.

Good desserts are seldom found so far east of the Balkans, but you can amuse yourself with such unexpurgated exotica as taro (sweet potato) cooked in coconut milk or the "Thai treats" of jellies and jackfruit mixed with crushed ice in coconut milk.

Actually, the sweet-corn cakes fried in batter and served with a plum-based sauce make quite a reasonable sort of sweet. You will find these listed under the appetisers at the front of the menu

● Lemongrass, 189 Lygon St, Carlton. \$66 for two. Dinner every night. Lunch Monday to Friday. BYO. All major cards. 347 5204.