

Richmond Times-Dispatch

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DINING OUT • DANA CRAIG

Thai Gourmet of Hanover sets itself apart with menu, service

"Hey, good! I've got a great deal. Let's leave downtown, pass a couple viable ethnic restaurants, and drive all the way to Hanover County to check out a Thai place in a nondescript shopping center?"

"Who's with me?" No surprise I was met by blank stares from my city-dwelling friends, a valid reaction considering there are four Thai restaurants in Carytown alone, not to mention a handful of similarly good finds within a few miles.

So why drive all the way to Hanover? Because it's not often I get the uncited and enthusiastic recommendations from multiple sources that I did with Thai Gourmet.

From the looks of it, Thai Gourmet isn't much different from whatever Thai restaurant is close to your house. You'd also be right in guessing that its menu isn't that monumentally distinct, either. Regardless, my recent meal stood out.

If it wasn't because of this copy spot's friendly service, it was definitely because

of its cashy tailored menu, completely customizable to a variety of palates — something many ethnic restaurants claim to do. More often than not, spice levels wind up being indistinguishable.

When two friends and I hit Thai Gourmet about 8 p.m. on a recent Friday, a few tables were filled. Throughout our meal, a steady stream of people propped in for takeout, many passing to chat familiarly with the owner.

We grabbed a table against one of the black-colored walls. Cobalt-blue drop lights and white tabaccothra added a touch of panache to the dining space's conservative decorations and checkered linoleum floors.

Within moments, an amiable waiter arrived to take our drink orders. Thai Gourmet serves a few varieties of basic wine as well as beer, such as Singha and Chang, both light Thai beers.

Appetizers include everything from hoy ohb (\$6.95), masses steamed with basil and lemongrass, and shrimp tempura (\$6.95) to french fries and chicken nuggets (\$3.95).

We started with shrimp spring rolls (\$4.45 for two) and a squid salad (\$7.95). The spring rolls were fresh, chock-full of bean sprouts, green onion, lettuce and vermicelli noodles and served with a sweet and vinegary dipping sauce, but they were pretty typical.

The squid salad, a mountainous pile of steamed squid accented with lime juice, red onions and carrots, was presented atop a bed of crisp lettuce. Ordered spicy, the squid's slow burn was nicely

balanced by the touch of citrus. A total hit with our table.

Entrees include noodle dishes, fried rice, curries and stir-fries, all easily customized with everything from tofu and pork to roasted duck and soft-shell crab. We tried pad Thai with chicken (\$9.95), stir-fried basil leaves with shrimp (\$10.95) and crispy fish (\$15.95), a house specialty.

The pad Thai, the traditional Thai dish composed of stir-fried rice noodles, eggs, bean sprouts, onions and peanuts, was one of the better versions I've tried. Not too greasy yet not too dry, its sauce had a slightly sweet tang nicely complemented by lime wedges. I was disappointed that we didn't have more for leftovers.

The shrimp-and-basil stir-dry was loaded with vividly fresh veggies — onions, red and green bell peppers, carrots, cauliflower and snap peas accented with just enough additions — but it wasn't as spirited as the pad Thai.

The fish was excellent. The whole founder's crispy skin was glazed with a delicious sweet-and-sour sauce that enhanced the fish's naturally delicate flavor without overpowering it. A mountain of fresh carrots, broccoli, onions and red peppers heaped on top drove it home.

Unfortunately, we didn't save room for dessert, which includes deep-fried bananas with ice cream and Thai custard (both \$3.95), so I'll have to save that for next time.

Although there are numerous Thai restaurants between my house downtown and Thai Gourmet, I'll be back. To those of you in the area who recommended it? I hope you like seeing me . . . a lot.

• **Feedback** writer and graphic designer Dana Craig considers dessert the most important food group. The fried custard pays for the meal on her unannounced visits to restaurants. Contact her at dcraig@timesdispatch.com.



Owner Boun Niamnam holds Crispy Fish, a house specialty, at the Thai Gourmet.



Critic Dana Craig says she plans to visit here a lot.

Thai Gourmet

Rating: ★★

Where: 5555-F Kings Charter Drive, Hanover County

Phone: (541) 955-0556

Web site:

www.thaigourmetkitchen.com

Kids level: average

Vegetarian options: all entrees available as vegetarian

Seating: smoke-free

Hours: Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday; Dinner 4:30 p.m. daily

Prices: \$5.95-\$14.95

Check for two: \$55 (including two appetizers, two entrees and tax)

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Keywords: dining



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