



Sunipa and Pallop Dhalawong say Thai dining is meant to be shared.

Spice is the variety of life at Ruby of Siam Thai restaurant

By Barbara Revsine
Photo by Leslie Adkins

Given the quality of food served at Ruby of Siam in Bannockburn, dishes like Pad Thai and Som Tum may soon be as familiar to Lake County residents as burgers and fries.

Veteran restaurateurs Sunipa and Pallop Dhalawong opened the restaurant in early September, followed by a second spot in Glenview a few weeks later. Because everything is cooked to order, the spice level can be easily adjusted. Ask for "medium" or "mild" unless you really have an asbestos palate. Thai food tends to be quite flavorful, and cutting down on the "heat" won't render it tasteless.

Leading off the menu are a variety of appetizers, including satay made with pork or chicken and served with cucumber salad and a wonderful, made-on-site peanut sauce. A soup course also makes a nice starter. Tom Yum has a pleasantly sour taste, courtesy of the lemon grass, fresh lime juice and kaffir leaf (a member of the lime family) used to season it. Straw mushrooms, chicken broth, chili paste and a choice of beef, chicken or pork complete the list

of ingredients.

Other dishes sampled on a recent visit include Pad Khing (a meat and vegetable stir-fry), Pad Thai (rice noodles, bean sprouts, shrimp, tofu, ground peanuts and green onion) and Som Tum, a salad of shredded green papaya, green beans, tomatoes and finely chopped peanuts tossed with a delicate sweet and sour dressing.

Pallop's house-made coconut ice cream contains bite-size chunks of jackfruit, an inclusion that adds a great deal of textural interest.

Sunipa advises diners to follow a few basic guidelines when ordering. She observes, "Western meals are generally built around a main entree and several side dishes. In a restaurant, everyone is served separately, and sharing is the exception rather than the rule. A Thai meal is very different. All of the dishes are of equal importance, and everything is meant to be shared."

Ruby of Siam, 2553 Waukegan Rd., Bannockburn Green Shopping Center, Bannockburn, is open 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 4 to 9 p.m. Sunday. There is a special lunch buffet (\$5.95) from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday. Phone 940-8292.



Dining out

H. James Solomon, M.D.

Ruby of Siam is among best Thai restaurants

Americans must be getting used to spicy foods and liking it. Although most ask for "mild," the progression to "hot" is just a matter of time. Thus, we see droves of diners making a path to Mexican, Szechwan Chinese, and Indian restaurants.

Now, Thai cuisine probably offers the most fiery, spicy food available — witness the rapid increase in new Thai restaurants to accommodate this new, adventurous crowd. I regret to say that most Thai restaurants play down to the timid and serve only mild to moderately hot dishes, disappointing those hardy souls who have acquired a liking for more authentic fare.

This is not the case of a newcomer in Bannockburn, Ruby of Siam, which provides a choice of "mild, medium, hot or very hot." Located in Bannockburn Green, 2553 Waukegan Road (940-8292 or 940-8293), it is readily reached from Routes 22 or 43. Less than two months of age, it is already attracting a significant clientele.

The medium-sized dining room is simply decorated with a light (ivory) think patterned wall covering that is decorated with simple (mostly carved wood) Thai artifacts. Service is unhurried but not slow — considering that all dishes are made-to-order. Servers are still disorganized but take great pains to satisfy the tastes of the diners; if desired, they will make suggestions for those unfamiliar with the dining options (which include 120 items on the menu). The menu clearly describes the contents of each order, but it is not possible to explain tastes with words; the best method of becoming knowledgeable about flavors and aromas is to experiment.

We tried our usual favorite Thai dishes for a fair comparison and a few new dishes. From the list of 17 regular appetizers and four specialty appetizers (\$3 to \$7), we started with pork satay, "marinated fresh tender pork or white chicken breast barbecued and served with (mildly spicy) peanut sauce and cucumber salad," that was very good. The fresh spring rolls, a soft "fresh spring roll skin with sliced scrambled eggs, cucumbers, bean sprouts, tofu and Chinese sausage topped with sweet and (slightly) sour sauce," were a bit thick and heavy but they were excellent. We experimented with one of the specialty appetizers, nua sadet, to test the accuracy of the description: "very hot and spicy chili sauce and garlic topped onto tender charbroiled beef (or chicken)." The description was accurate! The beef was quite tender, cut in strips and topped with a fabulous "very hot sauce," and it was delicious. Those with iron stomachs will truly enjoy this.

We omitted all of the 10 soups (\$6 to \$11; enough for four servings), the 12 salads (hot and spicy upon request), the 13 noodle dishes, and the 14 rice dishes — how many of the 120 items can five people eat at one sitting? The 12 regular entrees ran about \$8 and could be prepared with beef, pork or chicken, but seafood or shrimp could be substituted for an additional \$2. The totally bland pad num mun hoi, "stir-fried chicken with oyster sauce," was delightful. The curries were mostly \$9 with the same additional cost for seafood or shrimp.

Specialty entrees and seafood were served with steamed jasmine rice. Those who ordered regular dinners had to pay from 90 cents for one serving up to \$2.50 for four servings. The rice had no flavor or aroma of jasmine, but was a good-quality "sticky rice." Of the roughly 12 Thai restaurants I have been to, none has ever charged extra for rice or for cucumber salad.

Kaoman Somtumkaiyang, another excellent totally bland dish, consisted of steamed rice with coconut milk served with char-broiled chicken. My favorite Thai dish, pla dang rad prik, "crispy whole red snapper topped with peppers, onions, and garlic with sweet and sour sauce," ("market price" at about \$15 for a small fish and \$19 for a large one, somewhat high in price than elsewhere) was a little too crispy, but I was at fault for not ordering it less so. I did request very hot sauce and received a far-too-bland portion. This was soon rectified by the waiter, and the final product was first-rate.

Ruby of Siam has three notable virtues. It is located nearby; at \$15 to \$25 per person including beverages and taxes for a filling meal, it is in the moderate price category; and, finally, its food is among the best of the Thai restaurants.

FOOD: ***½ (Excellent); ATMOSPHERE: *** (Good); SERVICE: ***½



Geoff Scheerer/Pioneer Press

Paul and Sunipa Dhalawong were the first to bring Thai cooking to the North Shore. Now they are back in Evanston, and chef Witthaya Ramwatthanakul, center, is with them.

Evanston's Ruby a jewel

By VIRGINIA GERST
RESTAURANT CRITIC

If you didn't know to look for it, you could pass right by the Ruby of Siam in Evanston. The four-month-old Thai restaurant is tucked into a strip shopping center. But the food stands out.

Sunipa and Paul Dhalawong ought to know how to make Thai cooking shine. It was they who first brought the complex,

REVIEW

spicy Southeast Asian cuisine to the North Shore when they moved their Siam Square from Chicago's North Western Avenue to Evanston in 1985.

The Dhalawongs have long since sold that restaurant. They now run Mawdin in Glencoe and another Ruby of Siam in Bannockburn.

The menus in Bannockburn and Evanston are identical, though prices are a bit lower in the latter because, Paul Dhalawong admits frankly, there is more competition in the suburb to the south.

Appetizers, plenty for two or three to share, cost from \$3 to \$6; entrees are priced from \$5 to \$13. An all-you-can-eat lunch buffet is a particular bargain at \$6.

In some respects, the casual storefront is similar to thousands of other restaurants in strip shopping centers from coast to coast. The exterior has the charm of day-old bread while, inside, lights are bright and the ceiling is low.

But comparisons end there. Ruby's decor is far more cheerful than most, with Thai fans, paintings and carvings on the walls, green carpets on the floors and colorful fabric cloths on the tables. And it's menu is far more ambitious. You could work up an appetite just reading it.

The long, laminated affair lists no less than 117 options, ranging from Thai standbys including *satay* and *pad thai*, to dishes with such confounding names as *pad prik gang* and *rad kao*. Diners in a stew can ask for help: our server tipped us off to the excellent *kang masam* when we asked her advice on a curry dish. But given the quality of the food we sampled, throwing a dart would work, too.

With the exception of a greasy deep-fried egg dish named *kai song krung*, everything was first rate.

Beginning with the One-Bite Noodles, an unusual appetizer consisting of lightly curried ground pork, squares of soft rice noodles and spicy sauce. All arrive on a porcelain trail to be layered onto lettuce leaves. The result is a a finger food that resembles a Thailand taco.

Also worth trying were the *chicken satay* — unusually large and moist chunks of breast meat laced on a skewer and served

“You could work up an appetite just reading the menu.”

with the peanut sauce and cucumber salad — and spring rolls that included pork along with tofu, cucumber and scrambled egg.

Crying Tiger had a name that made us smile, and so did the dish itself. More finger food, the slices of lean grilled beef were to be eaten on lettuce with a fiery sauce.

Among the main dishes, *pad thai*, a signature Thai noodle dish served with bean sprouts and ground peanuts, was well above the average; while the pretty *pad khing*, consisting of a choice of chicken or pork with dried mushrooms, green onions, hot peppers, was particularly good because of a gentle flavoring of ginger.

Dishes are cooked to order, and everything during our meal arrived looking and tasting very fresh. It also arrived stoked with precisely the degree of fire we requested.

Thai food can be as mild as a May day, or many degrees warmer. Don't ask for your food hot unless you mean it.

And don't go to Ruby of Siam unless you want to be well fed.

Ruby of Siam, 1125 Emerson St., Evanston, is open from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. weekdays; Fridays and Saturdays until 11 p.m. Sunday hours are 4 to 10 p.m. No liquor, but customers can bring their own. Wheelchair access. No-smoking section. Reservations and major credit cards accepted. Call 492-1008.

GOOD EATING

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Ruby of Siam

9420 Skokie Blvd.
Skokie Fashion Square Mall
Skokie
847-675-7008

Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Mon.-

Thurs.; 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Fri.-Sun.

11 p.m. Sat.; noon-10 p.m.

Credit Cards: A, D, DC, M, V

Noise factor: Conversation friendly

First impressions

The Skokie Fashion Square Mall isn't exactly a hub of commercial activity around dinner time, but its location across the street from the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts makes it a good bet for pre- or post-theater dining. At Ruby, soft music plays overhead, colorful Thai artwork graces the walls and servers are traditionally dressed, all encouraging signs, fortified by seeing a few Thais heartily enjoying their meals.

On the plate

Traditional, labor-intensive Thai fare at reasonable prices; of the 120 or so dishes on the menu, only six exceed the Cheap Eats guidelines by \$3. Usual suspects like *pad Thai* and satay are executed flawlessly, but the real attraction here is the range of authentic, regional Thai dishes.

At your service

Servers are fluent in English, a big plus when you have to navigate a dozen salads and just as many curries. Substitutions are made seamlessly, and diners are asked to confirm their spice tolerance.

Second helpings

Fish cakes, *tod mun*, are hand-formed, quarter-size nuggets of soft, steamed fish, flecked with aromatic lime leaves. "One-bite noodles" offer do-it-yourself snacking: You place minced curried chicken in a square, homemade rice noodle set on a lettuce leaf, drizzle it with a sweet-hot sauce before popping into your mouth. *Som tom*—papaya salad—contains crisp green papaya, crunchy peanut, green beans and wedges of tomato for a perfect balance of sweet, sour, salt and spice. *Khao soy*, a northern Thai soup (listed under noodle dishes) combines chicken coconut curry soup with boiled and fried egg noodles, topped with raw slivers of red onion and bits of green onion. A roasted duck curry combines tender strips of skin-on duck with sweet pineapple in an addictive



Photos for the Tribune by Erik Unger

Pallop Dhalawong and his wife, Sunipa, provide a wide range of Thai dishes such as this duck curry and a green papaya salad.



red curry, though we were disappointed by finding broccoli rather than Thai eggplants or sweet basil.

Take a pass

The three giant chive dumplings come in a too-thick rice-flour package. Sauteed catfish spent too much time in the fryer, and the accompanying red curry was thin and weak.

Thirst quenchers

It's strictly BYOB at the Skokie location. There are soft drinks, iced tea or Thai iced coffee or tea.

Extras

Desserts are limited to Thai custard and ice cream, but the owners say they'll make traditional sweet sticky rice with fresh mango or pumpkin custard in season.

Price range

Appetizers, \$2.95-\$7.95; soups and salads, \$3.25-\$11.95; noodle and rice dishes, \$6.95-\$10.95; lunch buffet, \$7.75-\$8.95; entrees and curries, \$7.95-\$15.95.

—Steve Dolinsky

Reviews are based on anonymous visits by Tribune staff members. All meals are paid for by the Chicago Tribune.

Ratings key:

4 forks, don't miss it; 3 forks, one of the best; 2 forks, very good; 1 fork, good

Ruby of Siam provides a mix of old and new

CHRISTA ROOKS
Contributing Editor

At Ruby of Siam, the food is worth the wait.

Owner Iris Dhalawong admits that during busy times, the wait time for food can climb, but there's a good reason for that — everything is made separately, to order.

That means customers with food allergies, who are gluten intolerant or diabetic can order food that will be specially made that is safe for them to eat. Additionally, different types of dishes are prepared by different chefs.

"All our food is made by a special chef," Dhalawong said. "I have a noodle chef, a rice chef, a curry chef and an entree chef."

"Our speciality here is just the customization of food."

And despite the wait, he said that customers always leave satisfied.

"At the end of the day, after eating our food, all smiling, they say, 'I'll be back,'" he said.

Ruby of Siam, whose first location opened in Skokie in the 1980s, opened their Highland Park location July 4 after closing a Chicago location.

They chose Highland Park for several reasons, one being demand from their city customers to come to Highland Park.

"They tell us, there's not good Thai food in this area," Dhalawong said.

Dhalawong, who owns the restaurant with his parents, lives in Wilmette, another reason to move the restaurant.

"We know this area very well, [and] the people here," he said.

Dhalawong's parents are from Thailand — his mother from northern Thailand and his father from central Thailand — and they try to combine the two styles of dishes.

"We like to have items

RUBY OF SIAM

1849 2nd St., Highland Park

(847) 433-9332

www.rubyofsiamthai.com

10:30 a.m.-8:45 p.m., Monday-Thursday

10:30 a.m.-9:45 p.m., Friday

Noon-9:45 p.m., Saturday

Noon-8 p.m., Sunday



The khao soy (\$11.99) is a traditional northern Thai dish made of coconut milk mixed with curry powder and served with egg noodles, fried egg noodle on top and red onions.

people don't normally get to see so they can try it," Dhalawong said.

"For example, the khao soy is a very traditional northern Thai dish. It's very good, but people don't really know about it, and my dad's speciality comes in the noodle section, the different types of noodles that people don't normally see."

While the restaurant gets many of its ingredients from a Thai grocer in Chicago, some of the ingredients are more home grown.

"My dad has a garden in his backyard, so a lot of our herbs, our basil, mint, stuff like that, he grows himself," Dhalawong said. "[It has] just a little bit of an extra hint of freshness to it."

The restaurant provides different services, including sit-down dining, delivery, takeout and catering. They also have a bar stocked with ingredients for cocktails, as well as a good wine selection.

"I would say the clientele

here likes their liquor and they know how to drink it," Dhalawong said. "They want it exactly done right, with the right type of ice, with the right kind of garnish ... everything has to be just so and professional and that's why I had to hire the expensive bartenders to keep up."

"People are just pleasantly surprised."

Ruby of Siam has been busy since its opening, and Dhalawong credits the fusion of new and old with the restaurant's success. While his parents still come in to manage different aspects of the restaurant, including the chefs, Dhalawong brings in the modern touches, including modern music, decor, computers and alcohol.

"I kind of set that up and it's become a pretty melange of stuff," he said. "There's a pretty good combination and people are surprised by it."

Last week, *The Northbrook Tower* editor Matt Yan, assistant editor Kirsten



The lime chicken (\$8.99), which is lightly breaded chicken breast on a bed of collard greens, is a special recipe invented by owner Iris Dhalawong's mother, at Ruby of Siam, 1849 2nd St., Highland Park. PHOTOS BY KIRSTEN KELLER/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

Keller and I gave Ruby of Siam's food a try for ourselves.

First up was the lime chicken, a recipe Dhalawong's mother made up when he was a kid and wanted a Thai alternative to the Chinese orange chicken.

The chicken is lightly breaded and presented on a bed of collard greens with a special "secret" lime sauce and topped with chunks of lime.

Yan said that the chicken was "delightfully crunchy," and the sweet lime sauce provided a good contrast with the flavorful breading.

Next up was the khao soy, which is made of coconut milk mixed with curry powder and served with egg noodles, fried egg noodle on top and red onions.

The consensus among the editors was that this was a favorite of the day, and we finished it off completely. The dish can be made less or more spicy, and while we



The kao pad wiang ping (\$12.99) consists of green curry paste and fried rice, topped with sauteed garlic chicken.

opted for the mild option, it still had a nice zing to it and was very filling.

The last dish was the kao pad wiang ping, which is green curry paste, fried rice with sauteed garlic chicken on top.

This dish was another winner: while it was the spiciest offering, the spice didn't overwhelm the flavor.

Keller commented that while the items we were served weren't ones she would have chosen origi-

nally, she was happy to try something new — which is the point of the menu, as Dhalawong pointed out, allowing customers to try family favorites that they perhaps had not heard of before.

Dhalawong added that at the end of the day, Ruby of Siam is just a family business.

"I think our place is very transparent," he said. "We're just a family trying to do a good business, an honest business."



Homemade masks. Catering drives. Roses on cars. Lake County residents show support for health care workers fighting coronavirus in different ways

“We made kits for 1,300 masks, and they were all gone (within three days),” Game said. “It’s incredible.”

By JAMES T. NORMAN
APR 13, 2020

Donations have been pouring into hospitals as organizations, businesses and residents throughout Lake County rally to support the needs of health care workers and first responders who are battling the coronavirus pandemic.

The pandemic has strained area hospitals, such as Advocate Condell in Libertyville, Lake Forest Hospital and Highland Park Hospital, as they deal with an influx of COVID-19-related cases and their needs only are expected to increase, local officials have said.

In response, individuals across the county have been donating food and medical supplies and seeking to volunteer. Some residents have showed their solidarity in the form of creative projects, such as letters and signs. With the need for protective masks in great demand, the Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods in Riverwoods recently launched the “Face Mask Project.”

Artists and volunteers create homemade masks from kits provided by the center. The masks are sanitized and then delivered by volunteers to first responders and health care providers, according to Executive Director Catherine Game. The center tells artists through email when they can pick up the kits, which have been stocked with donated fabrics, she said. Several artists also have the materials at home, so the center has posted instructions online for those interested in using their own supplies.

Brushwood Center has every intention of continuing the project during the pandemic, Game said, adding how they’ve recently placed orders for supplies to make additional kits. While the masks are not as effective as the N95 respirator mask, which is one of the recommended types for health care workers to use, the need for any type of mask remains critical during the pandemic, she said.

While area businesses grapple with Illinois’ stay-at-home order that has kept customers inside their homes, some have been taking on donation projects. Windy City Novelities in Vernon Hills has changed its focus to selling, shipping and donating masks to those in need as the state order has caused the party supply store to dramatically shift its business model, according to owner Jeff

Schrimmer. At the start of the coronavirus pandemic, the company had several masks already in its inventory, he said. As business slowed, staff decided to donate the ones they had.

“When we saw the need was greater than just what we had in our own stock, we started finding more masks at supply companies and started bringing them in to distribute,” Schrimmer said. The store has donated supplies to the Vernon Hills Police Department and NorthShore University HealthSystem, which serves northern Cook and Lake counties, as well as a hospital system in New York, which has been called the epicenter of the American coronavirus pandemic.

Robert Burack, co-owner of Freedom Home Care and Medical Staffing in Lake Forest and Highland Park, said that while his company remains busy with its normal operations — taking care of elderly residents and helping staff medical facilities — employees have been involved with mask distribution and donations. As the outbreak began in China, the company began ordering more supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) that health care workers rely on, he said.

When the virus started spreading through the United States, Burack said Freedom Home Care had enough equipment to protect his staff and also donate to area police departments, first responders and essential workers. “I can’t believe how people don’t have masks,” he said. “They should have masks, especially people who are serving the community. Those are the people I wanted to give the PPE equipment to.” Food drives also have cropped up since the start of the pandemic, becoming a community-wide effort in many parts of Lake County.

Mundelein High School District 120 and Mundelein Elementary School District 75 have been accepting donations to provide remote lunches and breakfasts to families in need. Officials in both districts said they are looking for more donations for their next delivery on April 18 and are working on preparing food boxes for families.

The Green Oaks, Libertyville, Mundelein, Vernon Hills (GLMV) Chamber of Commerce has been mobilizing in a similar fashion, organizing food deliveries to first responders. Chamber representatives said they started a GoFundMe to help feed frontline teams with individually packed meals.



Pam Sathaphorn prepares meals at the Ruby of Siam restaurant in Highland Park. The restaurant has donating meals to health care workers during the coronavirus pandemic. (Brian O'Mahoney / Pioneer Press)



Jeff Schrimmer, president of Windy City Novelities in Vernon Hills, holds up protective personal equipment. The company has been donating hundreds of N95 masks to area hospitals during the coronavirus pandemic. (Brian O'Mahoney / Pioneer Press)



Iris Dhalawong, who owns the Ruby of Siam restaurant in Highland Park, poses for a photo. The restaurant has donating meals to health care workers during the coronavirus pandemic. (Brian O'Mahoney / Pioneer Press)

In 10 days, the fund raised almost \$5,000.

Libertyville residents also have set up a “Give InKind” page for food donations to support nurses and physicians at Advocate Condell Medical Center. Other Libertyville businesses, such as retailer Sports 11, are selling clothes sporting the tagline of “LibertyVILLEstrong” and donating funds to Advocate, as well. Iris Dhalawong, who owns Ruby of Siam, a Thai restaurant in Highland Park, said his business has been donating food to area hospital workers.

He said his efforts started after he became part of a bigger donation drive within Highland Park. Several residents were organizing a donation fund to pay restaurants to cater to first responders and health care workers, he said. “I kind of connected those dots and contacted a bunch of other restaurants in Highland Park,” Dhalawong said.

While restaurants cater or provide individual meals to first responders, crowdsourcing from the community has allowed businesses like Ruby of Siam to

keep up with the added expenses, such as groceries, he said. Jill Edgeworth, spokeswoman for Northwestern Medicine Lake Forest Hospital, said the community’s support and different donation drives for the hospital during the pandemic has been substantial.

In a recent meeting with Highland Park City Council members, Gabrielle Cummings, president of NorthShore University’s Highland Park Hospital, said the hospital also has been grateful for the community’s support. Hospital workers have found roses on their cars and seen supportive signs outside the hospital, she said. Residents also have written letters to workers and provided food.

“I can tell you that the warmth and the love and the compassion we’ve received at the hospital has been overwhelming,” Cummings said. “We’re trying to keep up with all the food donations that are coming... The community has been so beautiful to us.”

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RESTAURANT REVIEW

Ruby of Siam offers Thai cuisine

BY DONALD LIEBENSON

Deerfield resident John Bender is a regular at Ruby of Siam in Highland Park. It's not just the authentic Thai food that brings him back — "That's a given," he said — but it's the ambiance and the unhurried pace of the place. The acoustical tiles allow for conversation, he said, and the couch-style seating at the tables against the walls is very comfortable.

Hospitality is key at Ruby of Siam, a family-owned restaurant that opened in Highland Park in 2015. The family has been in the restaurant business on the North Shore and in Chicago for 35 years. Previous restaurants include The Clay Pot in Glencoe and Siam Square in Evanston. A ledge-top traditional Thai spirit house greets patrons, as does a female statue of greeting when they walk in the door. The spirit house is a sign of respect for the spirit that protects a dwelling, explains Iris Dhalawong, who helps run Ruby of Siam with his father Pallop and his mother, Sunipa or Suni. Serving authentic Thai dishes, Iris said, allows his family to share their culture and heritage.

About the owners: Pallop Dhalawong came to the United States when he was 18 (he's 65). He attended Southern Illinois University in Carbondale where he met and married Sunipa. After graduating, they returned to Thailand where he worked in advertising. That proved to be too stressful and frustrating, he said, so the couple opened a steak house there. But isn't running a restaurant stressful and frustrating? Sunipa said, "It's not stressful if you're doing something you love." Pallop learned to cook from his grandmother and helped out



DONALD LIEBENSON/NEWS-SUN

Hospitality is at the heart of Ruby of Siam in Highland Park, a family-owned restaurant that prides itself on its authentic Thai dishes.

in the restaurant she opened in Thailand. "Everything from scratch and authentic," he said of her credo. "I like cooking and I like to see people happy from eating my dishes," he said.

Philosophy: "We're neighbors," Iris said. "I grew up on the North Shore and we like to get to know the people of the community. We encourage them to share with us what they like so we will know their preferences when they ask what is on the menu that we think they will like. We have always been a North Shore destination for Thai food. We start forming a relationship and they keep coming back because they trust us to make a dish they will like."

On the menu: Strictly Thai cuisine, roughly 120 dishes in all. Thai cuisine, Pallop said, carries the influences of Thailand's neighboring countries, India and China. It's a flavorful blend of the sweet, sour and spicy, but be-

cause all dishes are made-to-order, those levels can be calibrated to the patron's taste. The dishes are Pallop's recipes or his grandmother's, cooked in authentic Thai traditions. He trained all of the chefs, who themselves are Thai.

The menu contains 28 appetizer choices, 10 soups, 13 salads, 13 different noodle dishes, 13 rice dishes, 21 entrees, 10 curries and 12 seafood dishes. The basil chicken served with a sunny side up fried egg over rice and pad Thai are signature dishes. All are made from scratch with authentic ingredients — Thai chili peppers rather than jalapenos — and to order. This is the unhurried pace to which Bender was referring. The menu also contains gluten-free and vegan options. "These are not trends," Iris said. "These are someone's way of life and we don't want to exclude anyone." Pallop said, "We never use MSG."

Local Flavors: To foster a sense

of community, the Dhalawong family has instituted a Local Flavors menu comprised of dishes inspired by their customers. "Our regular customers started combining dishes," Iris said. "If we think it is a good idea, we ask if we could put their name on the menu. Current offerings include Kriser Beef, chargrilled marinated beef sauteed in tangy tiger sauce over lettuce leaves; Adam's Salad, fried Chinese sausage served with lettuce, onions and tomatoes in a tangy lime dressing; and Jen's crispy panang noodle, reduced Panang curry stir-fried with crispy flat noodles and choice of protein.

Decor: The furnishings emulate the experience of eating at a restaurant in Thailand. Many of the wall-mounted furnishings are from that country. The backings of the seating that line the walls are made of colorful loom-made Thai weave. A bar seats five on white leather-backed chairs.

Pricing: Appetizers start at \$5.99 and top off at \$17.99. Noodle dishes range from \$10.99-\$13.99 and rice dishes from \$10.99-\$14.99. More than half of the entrees are \$12.99. Curries, too, are mostly \$12.99. Seafood ranges from \$14.99-\$20.99. The most expensive local flavor dish is \$15.99; most are in the \$9.99-\$12.99 range.

Logistics: Ruby of Siam is at 1849 Second St., Highland Park. Hours are 11:45 a.m.-9:30 p.m. Mondays-Fridays; noon-10:30 p.m. Saturdays; noon-9:30 p.m. Sundays. Call 847-433-9332 or go to rubyofsiam.com.

Donald Liebenson is a freelance reporter for the News-Sun.

Chicago Tribune

Downtown Highland Park organization launches online marketplace for local businesses: 'This is really a safe option to shop from one place'

By: J. LES T. NORMAN
November 10, 2020

'Tis the season to shop online.

The Downtown Highland Park Business Alliance launched an online marketplace Sunday that is geared toward helping local businesses, with the introductory theme being a one-stop shop for gifts to help prepare for the upcoming holiday season.

The marketplace is accessible through the Downtown Highland Park website. Each participating business has its own e-commerce website where owners can update inventory. The platform will cater to retail shops, restaurants, spa, wellness and fitness services, a release from the business alliance states, according to marketplace officials.

Business alliance spokeswoman Ilyse Strongin said the goal of the online platform is to create an alternative to Ama-

zon, DoorDash and other online delivery or shopping services. The e-commerce site comes at no cost to the businesses, Strongin said, and Downtown Highland Park will not receive money for the virtual shopping site.

"We wanted to help support our small businesses that don't want to be charged all these fees (from other platforms)," she said. "Or they can't afford to set up and manage their own e-commerce website. So let's do it for them."

The impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic has also created a need for this type of business support, Strongin said. Traditionally, these local businesses make a bulk of their profits during the holiday season, she said.

But COVID-19 has made those prospects uncertain. Enter the online marketplace, which Strongin said provides a safe alternative to patronizing stores in person.

"They really had to rely on the holiday shopping season. ... Well, people aren't necessarily coming in the door to shop,"



Iris Dhalawong, pictured, owns the Ruby of Siam restaurant in Highland Park. His business is one of several that will be participating in the new Downtown Highland Park online marketplace, which launched Nov. 8, 2020. (Brian O'Mahoney / Pioneer Press)

Strongin said. "So this is really a safe option to shop from one place."

Strongin also commented on the ease of shopping on the site. For example, she said as people shop multiple stores online in the portal, they will only have to check-out once. For delivery options, pick-up, curbside and the U.S. Postal Service are all viable, according to a news release announcing the program.

Strongin also talked about the importance of what she called, "cross-customization," which is the principle of using businesses to bring in customers to other businesses in the area. Essentially, the success of one enterprise helps market neighboring ones, she said.

Sherry Levin, co-owner of Style Shack, located in downtown Highland Park, said she "absolutely" thinks the program will help local businesses who are participating.

"I think it could be a really powerful tool," she said. "I think that people genuinely want to shop local, but there are a number of people who are just not ready to be out-and-about yet."

Levin added that in the wake of the pandemic, many of the local businesses began creating and enhancing their

own websites. Because of this, she said many at first were asking what exactly another online marketplace could help with. Levin echoed similar thoughts as Strongin in terms of the importance for a community-based effort.

"If we can establish our reputation as more of a hub of interesting, independent retail, she said, then those high tides will raise all the boats, as they say."

Restaurant owners will have the ability to sell gift certificates on the platform. As a result, Iris Dhalawong, owner of Ruby of Siam, said he is looking to use it as a future investment and with side-marketing. He also talked about the fees associated with businesses such as DoorDash or Grubhub, which he said for some can eat away 30% or more of the final bill for an order.

"When restaurants only focus on food, that's a really bad decision," he said. "You want to engage customers with much more than just food. I'm looking at it as long-term customer engagement."

Strongin said she hopes to continue growing the platform and adding businesses. She said the holiday gift theme at launch will be just the beginning, as she expects seasonal themes to be ongoing.

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Serene Nails
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Summer Classics Home
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Therapeutic Kneads, Ltd.
Twinkle Twinkle Little One

A flyer announces the launch of new online marketplace started Nov. 8, 2020 by the Downtown Highland Park Business Alliance to support local businesses. (HANDOUT)

LIFESTYLE & ARTS

NORTH SHORE FOODIE

New flavors & family ties at Ruby of Siam

Highland Park
Thai restaurant
offers Christmas
& New Year's
Eve specials

BY JULIE KEMP PICK
DAILYNORTHSHORE.COM

The word special comes to mind when describing Ruby of Siam. The food is cooked special order, on Christmas the menu will feature specials from Thailand and movie fans will receive a special 10 percent discount with a ticket stub from nearby Renaissance Place Cinema. But what's most special about Ruby of Siam is the family bond.

"Everyone bows down to my dad and has their game face on when he's in the kitchen," said owner Iris Dhalawong about his dad Pallop Dhalawong, who runs the Skokie Ruby of Siam restaurant with his wife Sunipa Dhalawong, and often helps out in Highland Park. "He's an artist who's all about looks as well as taste. My dad does it so fast and effortlessly. He's trained all of our chefs and whenever I need help he drives right over from his home in Wilmette."

The senior Dhalawong helped his grandmother cook as a child in Thailand, and brought her recipes with him to the states.

It's a family affair, as Dhalawong's wife Sana Khan also helped out in the restaurant, before she gave birth to their five-month-old son, Bilal, who was born with a naturally spiked hairdo.



The Ruby of Siam family, from left: Pallop Dhalawong, Sunipa Dhalawong, baby Bilal Khan Dhalawong, Sanan Khan and Iris Dhalawong.
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOEL LERNER.

Khan said Bilal means "a leader on a good path" in Arabic.

"And he also brings people together," said Dhalawong. "We're a mixed culture family and to bring two families together is a very hard task to do. When he was born our families melded quickly together, and that's why we thought the name was so fitting for him."

Bilal's colorful monogrammed sweater was a gift from a loyal customer, said his proud parents who are grateful for the wonderful toys and gifts they've received from their generous customers.

The couple recently moved to Highland Park, because Dhalawong wanted to be close to work and wants Bilal to have a community.

The Highland Park community has been "very kind to Ruby of Siam," he said, though it wasn't apparent when they first opened the restaurant on July 4, 2015. He added that everything changed once the customers became "more vocal about what they want and they come back, because they know we'll remember exactly how they like their food cooked," said Dhalawong.

"It's a really old-fashioned restaurant-style concept and I want to thank the community for understanding and working with us."

In addition to their menu that features 120 Thai items, Ruby of Siam will offer a special Christmas menu with new recipes that Dhalawong's parents discovered on a recent trip to Thailand. The

specials will include: Jumbo Shrimp Green Curry, Massaman Curry Steak, Traditional Basil Chicken with Fried Egg over rice, and Chilean Sea Bass on Skewers with peanut sauce.

The Sirloin Steak Massaman Curry is a peanut-based curry, which was ranked number one on CNN's Worlds 50 Best Foods List. "The meat is steeped in peanut coconut oil for a long time until it gets very soft, and it's served with potatoes and peanuts," said Dhalawong.

Dhalawong described the difference between green curry and massaman curry: "Green curry is based off of the basil leaf. It's all herbal, and massaman is a peanut-based curry, so the sweetness of the peanuts offset the spice. We

took the two least spicy curries, so that people could try them," he said.

The most frequently ordered dish in Thailand is Basil Chicken served over white or brown rice topped off with a twice-fried egg, fish sauce and chili. "The natives eat this special basil chicken dish for breakfast lunch and dinner and I wanted to share it with our customers," he said.

Dhalawong revealed their secret to success: "Every dish is made special order, which is the biggest reason people come to us. We make everything with fresh organic vegetables, and make it a point to help people with allergies." They also offer gluten-free options, and are vegetarian and vegan friendly.

Other popular menu staples include: Crispy Roasted Duck with Broccoli and Fried Rice; Ruby Crab Legs (Crab Rangoon) that look like crispy hand rolled cigars filled with cream cheese; imitation crabmeat and celery; and the Lime (Chicken, Tofu or Shrimp) that is served over crispy collard greens and lime sauce. There's also a variety of noodle rice, soups, salads and meat dishes.

Dhalawong explained that because Christmas is their busiest day of the year, Ruby of Siam will only accept reservations for parties of eight or more. "It will be first come, first serve, as even with reservations people were still lining up outside last year," he said. "People can always call in and see what the wait is."

For a holiday treat with a kick, Dhalawong created the Christmas martini with a sriracha candy cane that he crushes into a fine powder to coat the rim of the martini glass. The drink is made with Fireball cinnamon whiskey and white rum. "It comes out reddish with a spicy peppermint flavor and a candy cane inside," he said.

To celebrate the New Year, Ruby of Siam will offer a New Year's Eve special: customers who order two entrees and an appetizer will receive a free bottle of champagne. Last year they didn't have their liquor license in time for New Year's Eve, said Dhalawong, who is trying to accommodate people that eat dinner at the restaurant on their way downtown by train before the clock strikes 12.

Ruby of Siam is located at 184 Second Street in Highland Park. For reservations or to place carryout orders call 847-433-9332.



North Shorts

Takes by the Lake by
Bill McLean

"Yule ride"

You're driving with the radio on, turned down. Ding! It's your cell phone, riding shotgun. It's an email.

Ding a ling! It's your phone again, this time signaling a text message.

You look straight ahead. You'll

read the words later, when you're out of your car.

The sequence of the ding and the ding a ling, separated by a few seconds, reminds you of a Christmas song. A pop song starts to play on the radio. You don't like it. You've heard it 834 times in four days. You push a button.

A better song, an old song, fills your car and lifts your spirits. Paul McCartney is singing "Wonderful Christmastime".

You turn the volume up slightly. Sim-ple hav-ing a wonderful Christmastime...

Your day brightens, instantly. Your head nods. Music is a powerful art.

Ding ... There's that sound again. But it is NOT your phone. It's Paul, still singing.

Ding dong, ding dong

The party's on

The spirits up

We're here tonight

And that's enough ...

A different genre of music starts to play outside of your car.

It's loud and intrusive. It's the sound of a one-man horn orchestra. The driver right behind you is mad that you're in the left lane. Your speed is a tad faster than the speed limit, too slow for Mr. Impatient, but you're in the left lane because you have to turn left soon. The honking behind you continues, the honker's rage

heightening. You think about responding in kind, which wouldn't be so kind. You stop thinking. You're still in a festive mood. That catchy song, audio in your mind, is still playing.

You're not upset in the least. You're still joyful.

Thanks, Paul.