

Title:

Seek out Thai Bamboo Bistro

Word Count:

574

Summary:

Out-of-the-way Irvine Thai spot is well worth the visit.

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The Orange County Register

Originally published Oct. 7, 2005

Keywords:

dining, restaurants, Irvine, Horan

Article Body:

A couple months passed between our visits to Thai Bamboo Bistro, and this time, on our third stop, we knew a little more.

Sometimes, a little more information is dangerous and just enough to convince you not to return to a restaurant.

Not this time.

Our first visit was on a summer Monday. We were a little ahead of the lunch rush, our 2-year-old was a little subdued, and so we took a chance on a place we'd noticed in the new Quail Hill Village shopping center in Irvine, not far from where the San Diego (I-405) and Santa Ana (I-5) Freeways converge in central Orange County, California.

The center sprang up in the shadow of the Shady Canyon estates seemingly overnight. It's out of the way -- you don't just happen by.

It's in one of those new-generation neighborhood centers that has an all-too-familiar feel about it: anchor supermarket on one end, Starbucks on the other, generic fast-food and fast-casual restaurants between. This one was a little different -- some of the franchise names were not quite so ubiquitous, and it appeared that the Irvine Co. took a chance and leased to some non-franchise operators, too.

We ventured into the bistro, and within 10 minutes, the intimate place was

packed. So packed, we quickly changed our sit-down order to to-go, hustled our now not-so-subdued little guy out and headed home to the most sumptuous take-out we'd had in months.

Jungle curry with chicken (\$12) was mellow and smooth (we ordered the milder green curry; yellow and red are available). Spicy lemon grass chicken (\$12) was zesty and fresh. Traditional pad thai (\$11) -- my wife's standard -- aromatic and generously portioned with shrimp, egg, tofu and noodles.

So, we went back, this time for dinner, without the boy.

Again, the restaurant was full, though minus the maddening lunch crush. Again, our dinner was delicious: more green curry and pad thai -- we're creatures of habit.

We were struck by the cool, contemporary room, with its handful of bamboo decorative touches. By the briskly efficient service (though the meals can arrive at a more languid pace, testimony to the fresh cooked-to-order kitchen). And by the incredibly fresh ingredients, rendered in light sauces.

The chef markets almost daily, co-manager Jade Tam told me. Sometimes the grocery, sometimes a specialty store, sometimes a farmers market.

Then, well, life kept us away for a few months, until I spoke with manager Amy Lam.

As we chatted about the restaurant's expansion plans and presentation themes, Amy asked, ``Do you know Julie and Pat?''

Well, yes, I said, we're going to their wedding in a day.

``We haven't seen them in a while,'' Amy said, laughing. Julie warned they'd be absent for a while, something about pre-wedding fasting.

I know Julie's taste in food and restaurants just well enough that this little nugget of information -- that she and Pat are regulars enough to be on a first-name basis -- told me to get back in there, pronto.

We were again wowed by fresh flavors. We started with the Thai bamboo sampler appetizer (\$14), a mix of four from the menu (spring rolls, summer rolls, chicken and beef satay, and gold bags -- crispy wontons tied up like little Gold Rush-era treasures).

Our shrimp in spicy mango sauce (\$16) was sweet, but subtle. We upgraded from

the standard pad thai, ordering the ``new edition'' version (egg noodles instead of rice noodles. \$11).

It won't be such a long wait for our next meal here.