

Home > Entertainment > Restaurants > Restaurants Headlines

Comments 9 | Recommend 16

Restaurant review: Bambu Thai-Asian Cuisine (4 stars)



Mona Reeder/Staff Photographer

Chef Bounmee Nanthaphak's tripe salad, a special, is laced with lemon grass, mint, cilantro, lime juice



By LESLIE BRENNER

Restaurant Critic

lbrenner@dallasnews.com

Published 01 June 2011 04:25 PM

A Text Size        

Related items

[GuideLive.com: Bambu Thai-Asian Cuisine](#)

[Rating policy: What the stars mean](#)

RICHARDSON — You've probably never heard of Bounmee Nanthaphak, but she is a great cook.

Nanthaphak is the chef at Bambu Thai-Asian Cuisine, a 6-month-old restaurant in a Richardson strip mall that specializes in the cooking of the Isan (also spelled Esan) region of northeast Thailand.

It's almost like an Isan restaurant trapped within a standard Thai restaurant. It's an appealing one, to be sure; owner Shelly Nan, the chef's daughter, runs the place with a graciousness that extends to the look and feel of the dining room. She functions as sort of a headwaiter, and her other servers are every bit as attentive and professional as she is. With walls painted the color of green curry, wood floors and striking Buddha heads and teapots lining shelves behind the bar, it's minimalist, casual and modern.

Bambu's menu includes greatest-hits Thai dishes such as satays and pad Thai and green papaya salad and panang curry. But it's the Isan dishes that set my heart aflutter. A few are indicated on the menu — "Esan" beef jerky (chewy, smoky, delicious finger food you dip in a chile-hot red sauce); spicy "Esan"-style chicken soup laced with lemon grass and thick, udonlike noodles; and "Esan" waterfall beef salad, flavorful, marinated slices served on lettuce leaves. But Nan is happy to point out others to anyone interested in discovering the fresh, bright, herbal — sometimes fiery — cooking of Isan.

Often it's one of the specials, spelled out on a chalkboard over the bar. That's how I luck into Nanthaphak's Isan sausages, which she fashions from pork, dill and lemon grass and kaffir lime leaves. "All the herbs come from my mom's garden," says Nan, who explicates her mother's dishes gleefully. Cut on the bias into thick slices and served warm, the semi-dried sausages have a wonderful porkiness balanced by their unusual herbal flavor. Another recent special was a salad of shredded young bamboo shoots and slivers of red onion, dressed generously with lime, lemon grass, mint and cilantro. Served on lettuce leaves, it also has a devilish touch of dried red chile — a signature spice in Isan cooking.

No luck is required to order crying tiger beef with sticky rice; the Isan dish is always on the menu, and it's a good introduction to the cuisine. Take a bit of sticky rice — go ahead, with your fingers — from its bamboo serving basket. Flatten it out, use it to pick up a medium-rare slice of grilled steak (topped with crushed, toasted rice and finely sliced scallion that cling to it), dip the morsel into a fiery citrus-chile sauce and pop it in your mouth. The flavors and textures play across the palate — smoky, tender beef, chewy rice, a bit of

★★★★★ [Restaurant review: Bistro Watel's](#)

★★★★★ [Restaurant review: Zafaron Grill](#)

What's the best thing you ate at KRLD Restaurant Week?

[Restaurant review: Bonnell's Fine Texas Cuisine](#)
★★★★★

[Dallas-area dining events, Aug. 12 and beyond](#)

[Dallas-area dining events, Aug. 5 and beyond](#)

★★★★★ [Restaurant review: Maguire's](#)

[Table Talk: Cherry tomatoes, liberated](#)

HOT TOPICS >

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| 1 Kim Kardashian | 6 Kelly Clarkson |
| 2 'Glee' | 7 Bono |
| 3 Tim McGraw | 8 Jimmy Fallon |
| 4 D23 Expo | 9 Lil Wayne |
| 5 Paula Deen | 10 'Most Eligible Dallas' |

THINGS TO DO >

Upcoming Events

8/25 8 PM	Steve Martin	BUY	▲
8/27 7 PM	Jill Scott and Anthony Hamilton	BUY	
8/28 10 AM	The 13th Jewish Arts Fest of...		☰
8/28 1 PM	The Identity Festival presented...		
8/31 7 PM	Selena Gomez & The Scene	BUY	
9/02 7 PM	Kid Rock with Sheryl Crow	BUY BUY	▼

Search [Add A Listing](#)

Events	Restaurants	Movies	Venues
What	When		
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>		
Where	Within		
<input type="text" value="Dallas, TX"/>	<input type="text" value="50"/> Miles	<input type="button" value="▶"/>	

From GuideLive.com

it in your mouth. The flavors and textures play across the palate — smoky, tender beef, chewy rice, a bit of crunch; an herbal zing; the complex sauce's chile heat — and it all happens together in each bite. So much fun.

Yum pra duk fu, crisp bites of deep-fried catfish whose batter fries up to a delicate honeycomb texture, comes topped with peanuts, mint, cilantro and sliced red onion; they are terrific dipped into their citrusy garlic sauce.

"Some monks came through this morning," Nan tells me and my husband one evening, "and my mom made them goi goong, an Isan shrimp paste dish. Want to try it?" Of course we do. Nam's excitement about the Isan dishes is completely infectious.

If it turns out there's tuna salad in heaven, it will taste and look something like Bounmee Nanthaphak's goi goong. With a texture not unlike tuna salad but flecked with dill, shallots, red pepper and cilantro, it's made by soaking chopped raw shrimp in lime juice with galangal and makok (Thai olives), then squeezing out the juice, simmering it, and finally mixing it into the tuna and other ingredients. Presented in a simple white bowl, it's served with piles of fresh dill and Vietnamese coriander, beautifully fluted sliced cucumber and sticky rice. Eaten according to Nan's instructions, taking some herbs or cucumber with the tuna and rice in each bite, it's absolutely extraordinary.

It's a good bet that whatever Nanthaphak cooks up will be a winner. She's a rare kind of cook: Just about anything she attempts is delicious. If someone condemned me to a desert island with only three ingredients, I'd ask if we could make it two ingredients and include Bounmee Nanthaphak to cook them.

The third time I stop in, I ask Nan if maybe her mom has something wonderful in the kitchen that isn't mentioned on the specials board. She disappears briefly, then comes back with "Tripe. My mom can make you something with it if you want." Sure, we say, though I'm picturing some challenging, heavy, stewy thing.

After a few minutes, Nan sets on the table a gorgeous salad. That's the tripe? I ask. Indeed it is — lacy and delicate, tender and white, tossed with lots of lemon grass, mint, cilantro, lime juice, red pepper, red chiles and pickled garlic; spicy, but not too. So bright and fresh. I can't stop eating it. This is some of the best Thai cooking in the United States.

But what about the rest of the menu? There are curries — one with tender duck, leg and breast, in a fine-bodied red curry with diced red bell pepper and chunks of pineapple. Another red one called "jungle curry" has string beans, mushrooms, sliced red bell pepper and bamboo; it's flavored with kaffir lime and Thai basil, but it's a bit oily and not terribly interesting. Pad Thai is fine, but not noteworthy; a very saucy green papaya salad fails to come to life, despite the super-flavorful sliced cherry tomatoes that garnish it.

It's with the Isan dishes and other specials (on or off the chalkboard) that Nanthaphak really hits the heights and what makes Bambu a remarkable restaurant; they have extraordinary finesse and verve. Incredible grilled pork with mint. Superb steamed clams, or small mussels from Maine in a spectacular broth shot through with basil and lemon grass.

Even enjoy tuna on rice cakes, a special appetizer similar to one served at Nan's brother and sister-in-law's

[FIND US on Facebook](#)

[FOLLOW US on Twitter](#)

MOBILE

Get [dallasnews.com](#) on your mobile device
Sign up for alerts or coupons sent to your phone

NEWSLETTERS

Subscribe to a variety of newsletters

MOST POPULAR

Most Read
Photos: 10 Dallas Cowboys rookies to watch out for in 2011
Dallas police seek man accused of kidnapping two boys from area near South Dallas elementary school
Fire kills festival worker at Scarborough Faire theme park in Waxahachie
Photos: Cowboys battle Chargers in primetime
Most Commented
Most Recommended

FIND IT

Shop
Autos
Homes
Jobs
Classifieds/Place an Ad
» Place an Ad
» Shop/Buy
» Services/Notices
» Celebrations Browse Place
» Sign Up for Special Offers

Even spicy tuna on rice cake, a special appetizer similar to one served at Nan's brother and sister-in-law's restaurant Sushi Rock. (The couple closed it in September and are looking to reopen in a new location.) In someone else's hands, the dish might flop, but Nanthaphak nails it, setting Japanese-style spicy tuna tartare atop grilled patties of sticky rice, then sprinkling them with sliced scallion and toasted sesame seed and drizzling on eel sauce. The finishing touch is a slice of raw jalapeño. There's no real reason it should be so good, but it works — probably because all the ingredients are in perfect balance. A platter of tiny ones would be brilliant for a cocktail party.

Nan is still waiting for her liquor license (she'll have a full bar, plus wine and beer); in the meantime, you can bring your own, and a server will whisk it away to open it. The proper glasses appear in a flash; the server pours properly and makes sure glasses are filled (not overfilled) throughout dinner. That's a level of service missing in more than a few white-tablecloth joints.

Or go native, and sip the juice from a young coconut, scraping the silky meat from the inside for a fine dessert. But that doesn't mean you should miss the other sweets, especially the terrific warm black rice pudding, topped with a swirl of salty coconut cream. Isan cooking isn't very coconut-driven, explains Nan, and the cuisine isn't very sweet, so the coconut gets tamed by the salt in this dessert. As a result, the black rice's wonderful earthiness really comes through.

And if you're a fan of mango sticky rice, a Thai standard, definitely try Bambu's, with cool slices of perfectly ripe fruit surrounding warm sticky rice doused with coconut cream.

Fortunately, Nan plans to work more of the Isan dishes into the regular menu; she also says she'll be offering special Isan dinners, much like the one she put on recently to celebrate the restaurant's six-month anniversary. She held it on a Sunday when the restaurant is normally closed, posting news of it in advance on Bambu's [Facebook](#) page, printing a full menu of 30 or so Isan dishes and offering 20 percent off everyone's bill to celebrate the anniversary. The place, normally quiet, was packed, and Nanthaphak seemed to have no problem keeping up with the orders.



Which just goes to show you: Offer people something wonderful and different, something cooked from the heart, and they just may come.

Bambu Thai-Asian Cuisine (4 stars)

Price: \$\$ (lunch combos, including rice, spring roll and soup, \$8 to \$12; appetizers, soups and salads \$4 to \$14, noodles and rice dishes \$9 to \$10, main courses \$9 to \$16; desserts \$3 to \$5)

Service: Friendly, attentive, gracious, enthusiastic and not at all obtrusive

Ambience: A pleasant, casual, minimalist dining room with curry green walls, bare tables, tasteful art. Specials are listed on a chalkboard — don't miss them.

Location: 1930 N. Coit Road at Campbell Road (southeast corner), Richardson;  972-480-8880  ; www.bambuasiancuisine.com **Hours:** Monday-Thursday 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 5 to 10 p.m., Friday 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 5 to 11 p.m., Saturday noon to 11 p.m.

Credit cards: AE, D, MC, V

Wheelchair accessible: Yes

Smoking area: None

Alcohol: Liquor license pending; until then, it's BYOB, no corkage fee.