

At Bangkok Garden in Hackensack

By **RUTH BAYARD SMITH**

Restaurant Reviewer

Shortly after I moved to the area seven years ago, I discovered Bangkok Garden, which had just opened its doors as Bergen County's first Thai restaurant. I had eaten Thai food in several cities around the country (including the one across the Hudson), but nowhere had I had as good a meal as I did at Bangkok Garden, where almost every dish had its own distinctive flavor. Countless meals later, I'm as enthusiastic as I first was.

For the record, I'm known here as a regular, but not as a restaurant reviewer. In fact, I've been loath to review Bangkok Garden or to divulge my identity even slightly. I've been afraid that a rave from me would change the nature of the place (or at least my experience) and make it difficult to get in. I've decided that I would take the chance. This place is just that good.

To begin, some wonderful choices from the appetizer and soup menus: steamed Thai dumplings (\$4.95) are first-rate; a well-blended mixture of ground chicken breast, onions, ground peanuts, and turnips is wrapped with a soft rice flour casing. Mee grob crispy noodles (\$5.95) are served with a tamarind sauce and include

CASUAL DINING

minced chicken and shrimp and fried tofu and fried egg.

The peanut satay sauce is delicious and textured with real peanuts; it comes with chicken, beef, or pork (\$5.95). Our only disappointment on the appetizer menu is with the more heavily fried selections. The Bangkok Combination (\$11.95) includes spring rolls, Thai egg rolls, fried wonton, and Bangkok seafood nuggets — all of which are available separately; in each case, the flavors are overpowered by the batter and a decidedly oily taste. Two delicious soups (\$3.50 small, \$11.95 large): tom yum goong (or gai), a chicken broth with either chicken or shrimp is a very spicy, traditional Thai soup, heavily flavored with lemongrass, chili, and lime juice. Tom kah gai is a sweeter blend composed of coconut milk, chicken breast, and the ginger-like galanga.

The menu features a wide range of entrees, in a variety of categories. Many dishes are starred, indicating that they can be ordered mild, medium, or hot. Be warned: Some dishes — particularly red curries really can't be prepared with a mild taste. It's a lesson we learned the hard way with the Bangkok seafood (\$14.95); it was clear that the shrimps, scallops, squid, and

crab meat were fresh and looked delicious, but the spicy quotient was just too high. There are plenty of fine light, non-spicy choices, such as the standard Pad Thai (\$8.95), which at Bangkok Garden has an understated flavor and is prepared with shrimp, eggs, bean curd, and just the right amount of ground peanuts.

There are many superb selections. Among my favorites are kha-nom jeen narm-prik (\$12.95) and Thai soft-shell crabs (\$12.95). Kha-nom jeen narm-prik is a perfectly prepared dish of pan-fried marinated chicken breasts served with vegetables and very thin rice noodles and topped with a peanut sauce. The soft-shell crabs — available in season — are battered, fried, and served on spinach with one of three savory sauces, red curry, herb garlic, or chili.

Several fish dishes are also exceptional. Pla nung (\$18.95), steamed whole striped bass, is flavored with lots of fresh ginger and served with Thai brown bean sauce, peppers, corn, and assorted vegetables. Salmon

(\$12.95) can be broiled with a mild garlic sauce, with a pungent green curry, or with a spicier red curry; each is topped with sliced shrimp and served on top of spinach. To our liking, the green curry version is splendid, adding just the right amount of kick. But the truly outstanding fish dish here is the pla rard prig (\$18.95), a crispy, yet light, fried striped bass with chili pepper garlic sauce that enhances the fish without overpowering it.

The food alone does not make Bangkok Garden such a special place to visit. It's a family-owned restaurant with strict attention to detail. The owner, Sammy Suwanarusk, is on the premises seven days a week, while his sister-in-law Prapai Chada serves as the chef, and his niece and nephew wait tables.

Despite the downtown Hackensack storefront location, Bangkok Garden is peaceful and relaxing, replete with Thai artifacts and portraits of the royal family. (My only complaint is that the no-smoking section is too limited and removed from the mesmerizing fish tank at the center of the restaurant.) No one is rushed out the door here; no

UNDER \$25

Bangkok Garden Thai Restaurant



261 Main St.
Hackensack
(201) 487-2620

Fare: Thai.

Prices: Appetizers and soups \$3.50 to \$11.95; entrees \$8.95 to \$18.95; desserts \$2 to \$3.95.

Credit cards: AE, MC, V.

Reservations: Accepted.

Days closed: None.

Liquor, wine: Yes.

Facilities for the disabled: Yes.

Non-smoking area: Yes.

Accommodations for children: Children's portions available.

Atmosphere: Relaxing, friendly, family-owned restaurant.

Dress: Casual.

Rated by The Record:

May 8, 1998



Poor
Fair
Good
Excellent
Outstanding

one is handed the check before asking.

Often, reviewers are criticized for being too harsh on restaurants. We're told it's unrealistic to expect great food, reasonable prices, and respectful, friendly service. And then we stumble upon a find like Bangkok Garden and we know what we were looking for all along.