

Secret Thai Garden, Otahuhu

By [Peter Calder](#)

12:00 PM Monday Apr 18, 2011

People called Clark often get called Nobby for reasons that are much guessed-at. The front-runner in my book is that clerks – pronounced "clarks" – were at the top end of the working class, from where they looked down disdainfully on the public and looked up longingly at the "nobs", whom they ached to join. In revenge, the proletariat sneeringly dubbed the upwardly mobile pen-pushers "nobby" – or posh.

The last Nobby I met is not a clerk, but he is a Clark. He is a restaurateur and, undaunted by his name, his specialty is Thai.

You will find this Nobby presiding nightly at the evocatively named eatery he established with his Thai wife Aranya about 10 years ago.

The couple, who had long dreamed of establishing a little bit of Thailand in the improbable surroundings of central Otahuhu, spent 18 months clearing their large suburban backyard and building the place (there's a visual diary of the work inside the menu).

You walk through a grand entrance – relax, those tusks are not ivory – into a version of Thailand that many New Zealanders would instantly recognise: it looks just like the restaurant in any three-star Thai beach resort.

I mean nothing critical by that remark. Nobby and Aranya promise "an authentic Thai dining experience" and their restaurant certainly delivers that, but it's an experience that a tourist, rather than a Thai, would recognise as authentic.

I'd been meaning to go to this place all summer and, as it happened, we turned up on the very night when autumn delivered its first snarling, blustery warning of winter ahead. No problem: the interconnected dining areas are effectively outdoor, but they were nicely shielded from the elements by roll-down clear plastic screens, and patio heaters created a tropical impression.

The place is elaborately kitted out with furniture and statuary sourced from Chiang Mai, and there are some lovely touches such as guttering, suspended on string, that delivers rainwater to indoor plants (is there an expression in Thai equivalent to "No8 wire"?).

The Professor and I had hauled along a wine writer and her partner, which in hindsight seems like an odd decision. A French or Italian place might have been better, so we could have heard what "terroir" and "bouquet" sound like in her Middlesbrough accent. As it was, the modestly priced wine list didn't seem to attract her attention at all. Maybe she was just too polite to say that my selection of a bottle of Saints gewurztraminer (\$32) was a solecism.



Secret Thai Garden offers good value for money and a delightful ambience. Photo / Babiche Martens

The restaurant has a set menu for \$35 a head, which is absurdly good value but I make a habit of avoiding appetisers (spring rolls, money bags) in Thai joints because they usually taste like they've gone from freezer to bain marie with a short stop at the deep fryer. To be fair, the ones on the menu here look like they have had more imagination applied but we ordered two soups and five main dishes and the food bill was \$32.50 a head. (They don't do that penny-pinching couple of bucks per person for rice here).

Getting the piquancy just right in an Asian restaurant can be a challenge. The phrase "Kiwi hot" seems to work well at Indian restaurants but it quite flummoxed our Thai waitress. So I took a punt and ordered a beef green curry to be spiced hot and a red curry of duck of medium ferocity. Both were unchallenging and the rest were mild indeed; I recommend that battle-hardened eaters of Thai food ask for the heat treatment.

But in terms of fragrance and taste, the chefs here deliver the goods.

The soups were lovely, as were sweet prawns and a salad of marinated beef (yum nua). I was slightly disappointed that the larb, the minced-meat that is an Isaan (northeastern) specialty came only in a chicken version; if menus don't say free-range, we all know what that means.

Anyone uninterested in those authentic Thai treats known as banana split and icecream sundae will have to settle for a fresh fruit platter for dessert. We passed. But we were most impressed with an excellent-value mid-range Thai meal – and a fun night out.

Ambience: Oodles **Vegetarians:** Get an entire menu **Watch out for:** Big groups **Bottom line:** Good value and good fun

THE BILL \$169 for four Starters: \$8-\$12 **Soups:** \$9-\$9.50 **Mains:** \$18-\$23

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mixie (New Zealand) | 09:17AM Tuesday, 19 Apr 2011

I've been here several times and the food is delicious, and value for money. Fairly good service, though I went once and the table was very wobbly so my friend put his business cards under it to stabilise it, when I went back a couple weeks later we were seated at the same table, the business cards were still there and spread out a bit more, and the table once again wobbly.

tigereye (Onehunga) | 10:24AM Tuesday, 19 Apr 2011

Its a great place, I had my hens night there and it was fab, the girls loved it the food and setting where great and the staff made one of my friends her own little dish as she has an allergy to peanuts at no fus and no extra charge. A great night and I have been back again. Would highly recommend it.

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