

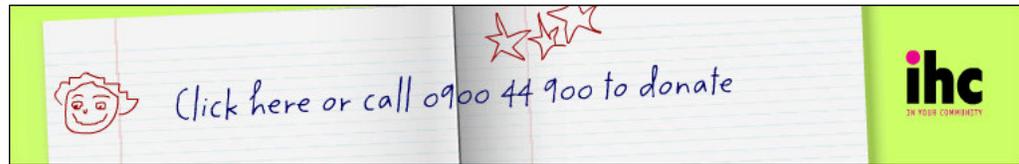
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Roam Dining

Magical garden setting for authentic Thai dining

Thursday, 06 March 2008

By HELEN PERRY

• Howick and Pakuranga Times

25 Station Road, Otahuhu. Ph: 276 3093.

If you're planning a group dinner or celebration I know just the place – Secret Thai Garden in Otahuhu.

A magical venue secluded behind high walls and wooden gates, it seldom fails to surprise and newcomers are generally delighted at what lies beyond the suburban footpath of Station Rd.



Personally, I don't think there's another place quite like it in Auckland or possibly elsewhere in the country. The tropical garden setting, accessed via a winding pathway lined with Thai treasures, is complemented by solid, teak furniture, water features, palm trees and pergolas.

Providing a leafy indoor/outdoor seating, much of the furniture and accessories were hand-picked in Chang Mai by owners Nobby and wife Aranya (known to most people as Tommy) Clark. I understand they have recently revisited Thailand and returned with many more items and plans for something of a revamp.

Nobby spent 10 years living in Thailand and on returning to New Zealand with his family in 2002, he was determined to provide an authentic Thai dining experience the like of which Auckland had never seen before.

Once settled on a location, the couple spent 15 months creating this traditional and romantic Thai garden, which is perfect for birthday and anniversary celebrations, promotional launches, social club gatherings and corporate entertaining. It is also entirely suitable for individual diners who want ambience, beauty and cuisine authenticity.

I dined there recently with my family on a coolish night. We sat "inside" which was more like relaxing in a covered summer house or gazebo. We were also urged to ask for heating if we felt in the slightest bit cold. As the evening wore on our host lit some of the huge gas burners around this sanctum but we didn't need one – our nook was very cosy indeed. What's more as daylight faded, the twinkle of fairy lights added an ethereal glow throughout.

Because we were six we decided to go with the set menu, superb value at \$35 per head. It included a tray of mixed starters such as angel wings (chicken thighs stuffed with pork mince and vermicelli), mini spring rolls, Thai fish cakes and Thai mini toast spread with shrimp paste with a hint of coriander. Then came the hugely popular Tom Yum Gai, a hot and sour soup which is a personal favourite. Secret Thai Garden's version had just enough bite for me.

The four main dishes, which came with rice, were Thai prawns with soya bean and chilli paste, fresh vegetables and cashew nuts; a delicious green pork curry; Pad Thai Gai – traditional flat noodles tossed with chicken; and finally, baby bok choy with shitake mushrooms sautéed in oyster sauce. The meal concluded with a beautifully presented platter of fresh fruits.

We relished everything that was dished up although given my way I would probably have swapped the bok choy for something else. A bit bland for me. On the other hand everyone praised the prawn dish, which came loaded with prawns and was lip-smacking good.

With a different exotic dish arriving every few minutes and the wine flowing, we enjoyed such a happy evening, the conversation as diverse as the dishes that came our way. A tossed salad couldn't have provided more variety and before we knew it an hour or two had whizzed by.

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While Nobby himself was on hand to greet and serve, we were also attended by a young Kiwi waitress who was knowledgeable, composed and helpful. It is somewhat unusual to find Caucasian staff in Thai restaurants and we were impressed to find this young woman so well informed with the same graciousness we nearly always experience from Thai wait staff.

By the time our evening came to an end we were well satisfied and inclined to return. Secret Thai Garden is the kind of place you want to share with others and it is well set up to cater for both small and large gatherings. For those who haven't visited before – then mark it as a "must" on your dining calendar and take advantage of these summer evenings to enjoy the garden at its best.



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