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Spicing up the town

By Bob Zientara, Staff Writer
03/26/2006

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Thailand native Supote Methiyapun attended Iowa State University in the early 1980s before returning to his homeland.

But he always felt like Ames was his "second home."

Now, the city will be the location of Methiyapun's business, as well. This week, he will open The Spice Restaurant at 402 Main St., right next door to Lucullan's restaurant.

The building, owned by local resident Harold Schnormeier, will now feature a pair of eating establishments.

"Piper Jaffray was here for a long time, and there was another tenant for a short (period) in the meantime," said Schnormeier.

Methiyapun is getting enthusiastic about the restaurant's opening as a roughly seven-month remodeling project winds up (it began last September).

Schnormeier said that about half a dozen room partitions had to be taken out and there was extensive work with new light fixtures and wall coverings. But now, as the kitchen is being finished and new floor coverings are being laid down, Methiyapun said he's started visualizing what the 2,800 square-foot space will look like when it's finished.

The restaurant will further cement the ties between Ames and Methiyapun's family. His oldest daughter, Anita, was born in the U.S. and is attending Iowa State University.

"She is majoring in apparel merchandising, design and production," said Methiyapun. "But after she graduates, she will also come to work and help out here at the restaurant."

Owning a place that serves distinctive Thai cuisine had been an idea running around Methiyapun's mind.

"I had come back to Ames several times over the years, and I thought about going into business here," he said.



Photo Gallery

Thai Cuisine restaurant The Spice will open this week next to Lucullan's.

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"At first, we looked at the Ames (railroad) station, but at the time, I didn't feel that I had enough experience to try it yet."

It was when Methiyapun traveled through Ames after taking his youngest daughter to South Dakota (where she will live while attending school) that his interest level went up again.

He consulted a friend who runs a Thai restaurant in West Des Moines, then heard about the space available in Schnormeier's building. He liked the location, the neighborhood and the presence of a large parking lot behind the building.

And when he found that his daughter could help out after graduation, "everything seemed to fall together at the same time," said Methiyapun.

Advertisement **Spicy and conversational**

Comparing and contrasting Thai and Chinese cooking isn't easy, according to Methiyapun. There are some obvious differences such as the spices used to prepare the food.

"In a tropical climate like Thailand, people enjoy stronger, spicy tastes," he said. "It increases the palatability of the food."

Thai dishes include chili peppers, lemon grass, lime leaves and cilantro (among other spices). But for those with more sensitive palates, it's often a more enjoyable experience to deduct the peppers and then try the rest, he added.

Methiyapun said it's somewhat easier to explain the cooking by talking about the lifestyle that surrounds it.

"It's unique because a typical meal is eaten mostly in combination, from the center of the table," he said. "The nature of our people is to share food at the table, so you might order a combination of hot, spicy, sweet and sour dishes, put them in the middle of the table and eat each of them - one bite at a time."

The practice of eating in that way increases the camaraderie at the table, Methiyapun noted.

His own, personal favorite is stir fry shrimp with curry powder, he added. It will be one of the specialties of the menu.

Thanason Thanapanyarak will be the key individual involved with that menu as the head chef at Spices. He boasts more than 15 years of experience at a world-renowned Thai restaurant in Boulder, Colo., according to Methiyapun. Thanapanyarak's wife has more than a dozen years of experience, including setting up Thai kitchens in Europe and Asia.

The restaurant will seat 70 people, with a bar capacity of 20 more. Beer and wine will be served for starters - a full bar may be added in the future, Methiyapun said.

The business will include about a dozen jobs, including four people in the kitchen.

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