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Thai touch lures diners

The Spice restaurant, open only four weeks, gives Ames a new flavor

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REGISTER STAFF WRITER

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Ames, Ia. — At 5 o'clock last Thursday night, The Spice restaurant opened its doors for dinner. Main Street in downtown Ames was nearly deserted.

Just 45 minutes later, every table was occupied and a few restless customers at the bar were hopefully waiting for seats.

Open only four weeks, The Spice is a Thai restaurant of uncommon authenticity and style that seems to be paving the way toward a broader ethnic reach in this college town. The crush is so intense on weekends that reservations are strongly advised.

The Spice menu is built on a foundation of traditional Thai dishes — spring rolls, red and green curries, tamarind shrimp, pad thai. But the owner and an innovative chef from Bangkok are altering the dishes in fresh and inspired ways.

They also are pushing into adventurous territory, using unlikely ingredients such as linguine, peppers, broccoli and apples in inventive combinations.

A mango salad, for example, has chunks of the soft, sweet fruit alongside Granny Smith apples, red onion, bell pepper and cilantro. It comes drenched in a subtle honey-lime sauce.

The massaman, a smooth and fragrant curry with meat, potatoes, onions, curry paste and coconut milk, is more about flavor than heat.

In fact, The Spice is gently re-educating customers about Thai food. The restaurant is more about an even balance of herbs and spices than mouth-burning curries.

"We depend on lemongrass, garlic, onion, ginger, coriander and cilantro to flavor the food," explains

The Spice

ADDRESS: 402 Main St., Ames
PHONE: (515) 232-0200
HOURS: Lunch 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m. daily except Sundays; dinner 5-9 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays and 5-10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.
MENU: Thai cuisine
TYPICAL DISHES:
• Massaman - mild, slightly sweet curry with potato, onion, curry paste and coconut milk, topped with peanuts and a choice of chicken or beef; $10
• Tamarind shrimp - shrimp in a special sweet-and-sour tamarind sauce, topped with cilantro and Thai-style fried shallot; $13.50
• Bangkok duck - Crispy duck in a stock-based sauce with spinach and mushrooms; $13.50

Dining the Thai way

The cuisine of Thailand has become familiar to the Western world, but the way it is prepared and eaten is distinct.

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First of all, Thai food has a reputation of being hot and spicy, but there is a contrast. Spicy food does not have to be hot food.

The hot nature of the food is related to the amount of chili pepper put into the dish. Many Thai dishes can be spicy, but not hot, if little or no chili is added.

Ideally, a Thai meal offers a combination of flavors – sweet, sour, salty, hot and bitter. A well-planned meal will provide a variety of dishes to balance these flavors and textures.

There may be a soup or curry dish, a stir fry, salad, accompanying sauces or dips and rice.

Rice, always present in a Thai meal, is considered a staple, not an accompaniment. The best kind to use in Thai cooking is jasmine rice, which has a delicate fragrance.

All of the dishes in the meal will be placed together on the table at the same time and eaten in no particular order.

The best way to enjoy Thai food is to have a number of people joining together so each dish can be shared.
Diners at the table serve themselves only one or two mouthfuls of a dish at a time, allowing everyone to sample.

A table setting consists of a spoon and fork. Unlike Western style, the spoon is used primarily, while the fork acts only as a helper to move food around on the plate.
Use the fork to help push a little meat, vegetables and rice onto the spoon, then drop the fork on the plate.

A knife is almost never provided on a Thai table because the meat in most dishes is cut into bite-sized pieces.

Chopsticks are normally used only when a Chinese-type noodle is served.
— Supote Methiyapun, owner, The Spice

owner Supote Methiyapun.

"Chili provides the heat, but it can be ordered as something extra. Most people can handle Thai food."

The tall and engaging Methiyapun had never been in the restaurant business before deciding to settle in Ames and look for a promising career change. A native of Bangkok, he spent nearly five years at Iowa State University in the 1980s.

After studying for a master's degree and doctorate in veterinary pathology, Methiyapun went back to Thailand to practice for 20 years. Then his oldest daughter, Tanita, decided to enroll at ISU.

With two other daughters to educate, he resolved to send them to Iowa State and live where they lived. Last October, he returned to find his niche.

Establishing himself as a veterinarian would mean extensive re-examination, so he turned to a service profession.

"A restaurant seemed the most likely possibility," he said. Thai food had become widely accepted since he left, and Ames offered little competition.

Methiyapun met, befriended and persuaded a former executive chef at the world-class Oriental Hotel in Bangkok to run the kitchen.

The Spice chef, Thanason Thanapanyarak, is a cheerful, accommodating man with a shy smile and a gracious manner. He and Methiyapun have streamlined the typical Thai restaurant menu into a list of updated favorites.

Their version of pad thai, for instance, eliminates the shredded cabbage and simplifies the dish into a stir fry of noodles, meat, tofu, chives, bean sprouts, egg and roasted peanuts.

"We have authentic dishes, modified to contemporary tastes," said Methiyapun.

Much of the restaurant's charm lies in its understated but elegant design, reflecting the considerable skills of Methiyapun's oldest daughter. Tanita Methiyapun, 21, graduates this week with a degree in apparel design and works as the restaurant manager.

She restrained the restaurant's color scheme — eight black tables and chairs, carved black booths along both sides of the dining room, white tablecloths and deep red napkins. Stylish red light fixtures provide the only other elements of color.

The bar is framed with cherry cabinets, a sleek granite counter and chrome stools with black leather seats.

Methiyapun is frankly surprised at his early success.

His growing staff already includes three daughters, several other servers and bartender Sutee Eamkajornsiri, a Ph.D. candidate in industrial engineering.

Now, he's looking for someone to help take some of the pressure off his chef.

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