

Bangkok's Disposable Restaurants

BY THE WANDERING GOURMET

"HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW" is an apt, but lamentable, description for Bangkok's restaurants. There are a few places – usually humble spots frequented primarily by Thais – that have been around for awhile, but they are exceptions. Go to virtually any other major city in the world and you will find a handful of icons that have been in business for decades, and in some instances centuries. Not so in our city where everything seems to be disposable and where Dunkin' Donuts and Swensens are grizzled veterans of the culinary scene.

The Wandering Gourmet longs for the warmth and comfort provided by restaurants serving traditional dishes in well-used surroundings. He's had his fill of trendy establishments with names like B'Kool and stark, culture-free minimalist interiors serving fusion dishes prepared by chefs who know little of what they are fusing. Spare him the horrors of Tom Yum Pizza, Martinis made with rum, and spaghetti doused with pineapple salsa. Bring on dishes that ring bells from the past and restaurant interiors that don't require me to wear sunglasses.

Is the Wandering One a lone voice bleating in the wilderness? He thinks not. Look at the evidence. Pubs using the centuries old model found in Ireland and the UK are having a field day in Bangkok in spite of the over-priced, nasty food found in some of them. Places with names like the Dubliner, O'Reillys, the Bull's Head and Molly Malone's play to packed houses every night of the week. None of these establishments, mind you, is actually old; they are simply made to look that way. When you think about it, this is sad. No, not sad, it's a ghastly charade. We don't have old places, so we take new ones and make them look old – and then pretend we are reveling in the traditions of the past.

The popularity of restaurants in converted houses and villas is another indication that Bangkokians long for the good old days. When people want charm and romance, they head for restaurants like the Blue Elephant, Le Café Siam or Le Dalat Indochine, all located in impeccably preserved buildings that are filled with antiques. Why? They make us feel warm and tingly all over, a condition we invariably equate with charm and romantic feelings.

Restaurants filled with memorabilia are another sign we seek connections with the past. Americans are known for ripping up the old to make way for the new so it is fitting many of their restaurants are choc-a-bloc with reminders of days of yore. Charley Brown's, a Tex-Mex place just off Sukhumvit Soi 11 is packed with aging knick knacks; the Hard Rock Café, the well-known international leviathan, is famous for its mementoes from the world of music. Many up market Thai restaurants get into the retro act by sprinkling their interiors with antiques and *objets d'art*, most of which, by the way, are usually for sale. Another poignant example is the Kingdom's many Isaarn restaurants. Somehow food

from the Northeast seems to taste better when you are sitting on furniture hewn from old ox carts.

But, if we are so obsessed with the past, why does Bangkok have so few old restaurants? Why do restaurateurs persist in ripping out the old and replacing it with something new? The answers, I'm afraid, reflect two of humankind's baser qualities: ambition and greed.

Many of Bangkok's leading restaurants are found in hotels; the hotel business is extremely competitive and subject to frequent changes of ownership and management; every time there is a change, the new management seeks to increase profits and make a name for themselves (read impress their bosses). Restaurants are replaced with new models the managers believe will make more money. Unfortunately, these people are usually unfamiliar with the history of the restaurant or of the city of Bangkok. They could care less about tradition and the past; their sole motivation is to increase profits.

This lamentable situation is amplified by the celebrity status surrounding many chefs. They arrive on the scene not to carry out the traditions of a restaurant or to preserve the heritage of a particular cuisine, but to put their individual stamp on the menu and restaurant. This means that every time the head chef changes so does the restaurant. Some chefs are indeed celebrities and deserve the cult status they have attained, but this is a status that must be earned by a firm grasp of fundamentals and a long-term display of unique talents.

If the turnover rate in hotel restaurants is high, it is nothing compared to what happens with the city's independent restaurants. These places come and go with mind-boggling regularity. The restaurant business is always risky, but what happens in Bangkok is so extreme it would be laughable if it weren't for the fact people were losing enormous sums of money. Under-capitalization, inexperience, and lack of management skills are often cited as reasons for restaurant failures. These factors certainly play a role in the City of Angels, but Bangkok has quirks that make it stand from the crowd. I call the most prevalent of these the 'copycat syndrome'.

The success of a restaurant in Bangkok inevitably results in the appearance of copycats. A striking recent example is the 99 baht barbecue buffets that have opened all over the place. They appeared overnight and some are already starting to fold. The city's burgeoning number of Italian restaurants is another good example and evidence that the copycat syndrome doesn't afflict only Thais. Coffee shops (ones that actually sell coffee, that is), a rarity in Bangkok five years ago, now blanket the city, but only time will tell if they are a fad or an enduring part of the local scene.

Fuelled by a desire to make easy money (greed), copycat restaurants are often created by the destruction of an existing, and often successful, restaurant. Under-funding, lack of technical knowledge and a customer base that quickly diminishes because of the large number of copycats ensures most of these places will fail shortly after opening. The Wandering Gourmet is always amazed someone will open a restaurant precisely

like a neighboring establishment and expect it to be a success. Whatever happened to the concept of supply and demand?

Will the situation change? Probably not. The Oriental Bangkok appears to be the only hotel in town to recognize the virtues of stability. Its famous French restaurant, Le Normandie, has been around since 1958. Among standalone restaurants, the only places that seem to endure are a few family owned Thai restaurants like Chote Chitr near Democracy Monument that are more concerned with serving fine food than making truckloads of money.

Bangkok's hotel and independent restaurants need to realize that dining out is a cultural experience. Yes, we often want something new and exciting, but we also seek bridges with the past and the chance to enjoy the rich culinary heritage of those who have gone before us. Until restaurateurs recognize this fact, the Wandering Gourmet believes Bangkok will remain a city of disposable restaurants.