

“Bright lemongrass, fragrant curries and Nahm’s unforgettable coconut cake make this Alpharetta gem worth the trip.”

The best of Thai

Table Talk

JOAN CARROLL

Yearning for exotic flavors, we headed to an Alpharetta shopping center on Windward Parkway, not far from GA 400, known for its selection of international cuisine. The six restaurants in the 5310 block more than met our expectations. Chinese, Japanese, Greek, Thai, Indian and Turkish restaurants are all represented there, offering a welcome escape from burgers and fries.

Nahm Fine Thai Cuisine lived up to its reputation and then some, far exceeding all I had read about the 4-star restaurant. Bright light poured in through the windows lining one side of the dining room, where fresh flowers burst from large vases prominently displayed at its center. The white-clothed tables held flowers as well. Along one wall, a long bar with an impressive wine display added elegance, while a bright painting of galloping horses nodded to the Alpharetta setting. With its refined atmosphere, the restaurant is well suited for a special occasion. Even at lunch, the crowd was sizable, and we were glad we had made a reservation.

The extensive menu required more than a few moments of study. Starters, soups, salads and Nahm’s specials all promised the authentic flavors of Thailand. Curries, chili sauces, lime dressings and coconut milk appeared throughout the offerings, along with red, yellow and green curries and a range of fresh vegetables and proteins, including tofu, chicken, shrimp, scallops and mussels. Salmon, sea bass, red-fish, lamb, jumbo prawns, short ribs, duck and Tiger Cry, a marinated steak, could be stir-fried, curried or served with rice noodles or an assortment of rice preparations.

We chose an assortment of starters and soups, saving the restaurant’s famous coconut cake for dessert. The tom yum with shrimp was both spicy and sour, its clear broth brightened with citrusy lemongrass. The larb gai salad, made with minced chicken, shallots and ground roasted rice and served with lettuce leaves, cucumbers and tomatoes, was exceptionally flavorful and spicy enough to make my eyes water. The roti chicken curry was equally enticing, with tender chicken in a fragrant yellow curry accompanied by crisp, tasty triangles of roti for dipping. Knowing we would have to return for the mussels in red curry coconut broth and the papaya salad, we accepted that one visit simply would not be enough.

With a crisp glass of Chardonnay in hand, we sampled as much as we could. The lemongrass in the tom yum was bright and citrusy, balanced by a pleasantly sour note, and the three, plump shrimp made the soup a meal in itself. As I write, I am still craving the delicious sauce that accompanied the larb salad. I even made a note to find a recipe for roti so I could dip it into my curries from now on. Nahm’s famous coconut cake surpassed any I had tasted before. Every dish was beautifully presented, often garnished with fresh flowers. The full bar is also known for its distinctive cocktails inspired by travels to Thailand.

Nahm Stromm and her sister grew up in Thailand, watching their grandmother, mother and aunt in the kitchen. From them, they learned to love the food and culture of their homeland. Nahm later studied art and fashion while also learning the hospitality business at the Four Seasons in Thailand. She eventually moved to America to pursue her dreams and, when she recognized the lack of authentic Thai food in the Atlanta area, she and her sister, Ti, decided to open their own restaurant. That was 20 years ago.



Nahm Fine Thai Cuisine in Alpharetta has been named by Wine Spectator for three consecutive years as one of the world’s top 100 restaurants. A PHOTOS BY JOAN CARROLL



Tom yum is a popular Thai hot-and-sour soup known for its bold, aromatic flavors.



Roti chicken curry is served with tender chicken in a rich curry sauce and flaky roti.

It was a smart move. The restaurant has been recognized by Wine Spectator magazine three years in a row as one of the top 100 restaurants in the nation. Chef Nahm still works in the kitchen while her sister manages the dining room.

Thai cuisine is known for its balance of sweet, salty, spicy, bitter and sour flavors. Fresh herbs, lemongrass, lime leaves, galangal, cilantro and basil create its distinctive character, while fish sauce or shrimp paste adds saltiness. Coconut milk and jasmine rice are staples, and proteins range from tofu and chicken to shrimp, scallops, fish and beef. Hot chilies, lime juice and tamarind contribute sour notes, while garlic and ginger supply aromatic depth. Beautiful presentation rounds out the sensory experience. Served most often with rice, many dishes are meant to be shared, creating a communal dining experience.

In 2011, seven Thai dishes, more than those of any other country, were included in CNN Travel’s “World’s 50 Best Dishes,” based on a poll of 35,000 people. They included tom yum kung, pad thai, som tam, massaman curry, green curry, Thai fried rice and nam tok mu. Several of those dishes are still unfamiliar to me, which gives me yet another reason to return to Nahm and see whether I agree. Thank you, Nahm, for the opportunity to enjoy your wonderful cuisine.

Nahm Fine Thai Cuisine, 5310 Windward Parkway W., Alpharetta, GA 30004; 678-762-1818; nahmfinethaicuisine.com.

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