

TASTE OF THAILAND

HERE THE FOOD IS JUST WHAT THE NAME IMPLIES, WITH FAITHFUL ADHERENCE TO THE CULINARY TRADITIONS OF THAILAND.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH



Photos: B. Gustafson

Ten years ago, a story about great Thai restaurants in Birmingham would have been the shortest article in history. That's because, prior to 1995, there were no Thai restaurants in Birmingham. That year, Thailand native and Montgomery restaurateur Atinon "Neng" Tiemkongkarn bought the struggling Saute House Chinese restaurant, turning it into Taste of Thailand, the Magic City's first Thai establishment.

Born in Karat, a small village located 200 miles northeast of Bangkok, Neng was one of nine children in a family that revered its nation's culinary history and traditions. His parents, who owned a restaurant in their town, taught Neng and his brothers and sisters about food and its role in the family.

"My mom and my dad had a little restaurant in Thailand, and they could cook so fast that they could make four or five different and wonderful dishes at the same time," Neng

says. "At night we would sit and gather together and have a feast. They taught us everything they know and gave such a tremendous education about cooking and how to run a restaurant."

Neng arrived in the United States in 1980 at the age of 26, settling in Montgomery where several of his brothers and sisters had emigrated. Intending to study business at Auburn University of Montgomery, Neng worked for four years before saving enough money for tuition, even though he had a partial scholarship to play soccer for AUM.

"My main goal was to come here, go to college, finish college and go home, but it didn't work that way," Neng says. "College was difficult for me. I didn't know any English when I came here. I worked for four years before I could go to college and I had to work full time to go to school."

Undaunted, Neng learned enough English to get by from watching tele-

vision and taking conversational English classes at a church in Montgomery. His work ethic was also tested as he took a series of jobs lasting from early in the morning until late at night in order to get his education. Neng threw papers for *The Montgomery Advertiser*, beginning his route before 5 a.m., worked in AUM's computer center between classes and did janitorial work after school

until midnight. "It was extremely hard to work full time and go to college," Neng says. "Those were some long days for a couple of years."

Despite the obstacles, Neng graduated from AUM in 1989 in business management and immediately put into action his plan to start a business showcasing the art of traditional Thai cooking. Neng and his brothers opened their first restaurant, Neng's Taste of Thailand, in Montgomery in the late 1980s.

"I had my goal the whole time and I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to have my own business," Neng says. "One of my brothers worked for a Chinese restaurant and my other brother worked for a Mexican restaurant and we all worked hard to save money in order to open up our own restaurant."

Neng and his brothers had built the first Taste of Thailand into a successful business over its first seven

years, when the opportunity came to purchase the Saté House in Hoover. Located in the corner of the Food World Shopping Center on Lorna Road, Neng transformed the former Chinese restaurant into a uniquely Thai experience. It took Neng and his wife, Chaomjaia, a month and a half before Taste of Thailand opened for business in July of 1995.

"We had to fix up everything. It had green ceilings and red walls," Neng recalls.

Today, portraits of Thailand's king and queen are a focal point as you enter the restaurant. The walls of the dining room are adorned with photos and artwork from Thailand, and the upper dining room is separated from the lower dining area by a large glass case full of statues and figurines depicting Thailand's religious history and folklore.

"We tried to give it an atmosphere where when you walk in here you feel like family in our home," Neng says. "We are very, very different from everybody else. We wanted people to know as soon as they walk in that this is a Thai restaurant."

Taste of Thailand's décor also reflects the philosophy behind Neng's cooking. His dishes come directly from the food his family prepared in Thailand and he strives to strictly adhere to the culinary traditions of his native land.

"We prepare traditional and authentic Thai cuisine. There is no American-fusion here," Neng says. "I make sure that the ingredients are right and the food comes out consistently. I'm really particular about how our food comes out of the kitchen."

Perhaps a credit to his parents' ability to cook several different dishes at once for a variety of different appetites and tastes, Neng developed his menu to offer something for everyone. Whether you're newly initiated or a Thai expert, Neng's menu is a comprehensive illustration of the myriad of flavors and techniques that



make up Thai cuisine.

From the light and crisp flavors of his spring rolls—cigar shaped with a crunchy texture served with a house honey peanut sauce—to the musmun prawn—jumbo shrimp cooked in a sweet peanut-based curry sauce, accompanied with potatoes, avocado and topped with cashew nuts—the possibilities seem endless.

Despite the variety, there are a few things that are constants when it

comes to Thai cooking. First, it tends to be light, with most dishes prepared in just enough oil to help preserve the freshness of the vegetables. "Thai cooking is really healthy," Neng says. "We don't use a lot of alcohol in our cooking, and we use fresh vegetables and fresh ingredients."

Secondly, the ingredients to many Thai dishes are prepared separately and only combined for a short time before presentation. In some cases,



meat and vegetables are cooked together for as little as 15 seconds in order to complete a dish.

Also important to the character of Thai cooking is the peanut. Its influence is everywhere, as a base ingredient in many dishes and in Taste of Thailand's signature honey peanut sauce. Neng's palette also relies heavily on coconut, pineapple, curry and the Thai chili, a pepper with as much heat as the North American habanero pepper, but with a little more flavor than many spicy chili peppers.

Some of Taste of Thailand's specialties include duck curry, which is roasted in a coconut and red basil curry sauce and topped with peppers and pineapple; nao-num tok, a dish featuring sliced char-grilled steak tossed with roasted chili peppers and Thai herbs and served with lettuce, red onions and tomatoes; and salmon pineapple, fried in a wok and topped with green and red peppers and spring onions with a sweet pineapple sauce. But, perhaps the most interesting dish on the menu is the pineapple stir-fry, as Taste of Thailand manager and head bartender Veara Palani explains. "We use fresh pineapple, asparagus, almonds, raisins, chicken and shrimp and we cook it in a yellow curry powder and serve it in half a pineapple," Palani says. "It's very tropical and we put an

umbrella on it so you feel like you're at the beach."

Palani, a native of Malaysia, has been with Neng since 1997 and has seen the business and the public's appetite and understanding of Thai cooking grow. But, when new diners come in to experience authentic Thai, Palani says they try hard to educate them about this style of cooking.

"When new customers come in here they have no knowledge of Thai food whatsoever. So we have trained staff who can explain things and recommend something that they may like," Palani explains. "Ninety-eight percent of the time the customers love it. They get interested and want to know more about Thai cooking."

Palani recently added a martini bar in the restaurant, which, despite flavors and styles that aren't necessarily native to Thailand, seems at home among the diners eager to try something new. "We're doing what I call new-age martinis," Palani says. "We do chocolate martinis, lemon drops and French martinis. A lot of people ask me, 'What is a French martini doing in a Thai restaurant?'"

Palani also developed Taste of Thailand's wine selection, complete with wines from all over the world. Naturally, the emphasis is on choosing wines to complement Thai cooking. "We always try to accompany

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good food with good wine, but a lot of people say you must have red wine with hot, spicy food," Palani notes. "In my opinion, white wine, dry and sweet, goes well with any spicy food."

Another recent innovation is the addition of a full sushi bar, in which Neng adds a Thai perspective to this Japanese culinary style. Using spices and seasonings from traditional Thai cuisine, Neng has brought to Birmingham a style of sushi that has taken root in Thailand, influenced by Japanese immigrants to the nation.

Much has changed in our culinary landscape over the seven years since Taste of Thailand opened in Hoover, and Neng has enjoyed seeing the growing interest in the cuisine his family has been preparing for generations. "I think people are starting to know more and more about Thai cooking," he says. "If you go to almost any city now, like Montgomery, Birmingham and Atlanta, you are starting to see a lot of Thai restaurants. Atlanta has about 30 or 40 Thai restaurants.

Neng and his brothers have opened a second Montgomery location, bringing their Thai empire up to three restaurants. There are preliminary plans to open another location on Highway 280. ☐