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FOOD

BY TODD SOUTH



Thai Chili serves a Drunken Fried Rice, loaded with tofu, peppers and broccoli.
PHOTO/ALLISON YOUNG

Fit to be Thai'd

Most independent restaurants are

fortunate to survive more than five years, and location famously matters. Defying the odds, and well before south of downtown Virginia Street became “midtown,” Thai Chili opened in what could be considered the seediest part of the neighborhood. Honestly, how is there still a XXX theater anywhere in 2019? Ahem. Lasting 15 years and now a part of what has become the trendiest zone in town, my daughter and I set out to discover the reason for Thai Chili's longevity.

The menu is pretty expansive, taking us a moment or two to peruse. My daughter said she can't do Thai without spring rolls (\$5.95), which were fat with shrimp, cucumber, lettuce, spinach, carrot and rice noodles. The warm peanut sauce was plentiful, chunky and mild, and the rice paper had the right amount of give without being chewy or gummy. Similarly, I can't skip ordering satay (\$6.95)—skewered and grilled chicken breast meat marinated in spices and coconut milk, served with peanut sauce and cucumber salad. Both were a great start.

I've experienced both good and marginal Thai “stuffed chicken wings,” but the angel wings (\$9.95) were aptly named. Golden breaded exterior stuffed with shrimp, chicken, bean thread noodle, carrot, onion, mushroom and cabbage, served with a slightly spicy tamarind marmalade. A bone sticking out of one end was the only thing indicating these loaves of tasty, reconstructed crispiness started out as a wing.

With Thai or Indian, it's common to be asked how spicy you want your food to be, as in “one to five,” but we weren't given the option on this occasion. An order of combo pad Thai (\$14.95) with rice noodles pan-fried with egg, red onion, scallion, bean

sprout, peanut, shrimp, chicken, pork and beef was pretty good, but tamarind sweet and a little bland. To my taste, it was much better punched up with some chili sauce. Drunken fried rice with tofu (\$10.95)—a mix of pan-fried rice, garlic, onion, bell pepper, chili paste, basil, mushroom, baby corn, cabbage, broccoli and firm tofu (or meat of your choice)—was on the other end of the spectrum, full of fire and flavor. I loved the spicy rice and its constituents, but the marinated tofu was tough, flavorless and unappealing. I enjoy firm tofu done well, but this wasn't it.

I'm lucky to have gotten a few bites of the seafood ginger (\$14.95), because my daughter loved it so much. Who can blame her, with a delicious, perfectly cooked mix of shrimp, scallop, mussel, krab, squid, ginger, garlic, onion, bell pepper, scallion, white and straw mushroom in a savory gravy. It had the right amount of fire, excellent ingredients and was an all-around perfectly enjoyable dish for a seafood fanatic.

My “Hail Mary” choice was duck curry with pineapple (\$15.95), because duck can be a real shot in the dark, and I'm infrequently fond of pineapple in savory surroundings. Color me pleasantly surprised. Despite the canned-tasting pineapple, the tender roasted duck had not a hint of gaminess—and the tomato, bell pepper and Thai basil simmered in medium spicy red curry sauce was excellent. Despite myself, I took to dipping chunks of pineapple in the sauce to enjoy on their own. It's perhaps my new favorite use for pineapple, and a flavor combination that would stand on its own as either dessert or breakfast. □

Thai Chili

1030 S. Virginia St., 786-7878

Thai Chili is open Sunday through Thursday from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. and Friday and Saturday from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Learn more at thaichilireno.com.