

RESTAURANT

# Charmed, I'm sure



**John Lethlean**

**S**IGNS of a good restaurant? You walk through the front door into an arty, colourful and cliché-free space to be met by a smiling, positive welcome. You're directed to a comfortable, modern chair at a table dressed with crisp white linen, decent glassware and cutlery.

A waiter is at your table pouring chilled water from a handsome, stoppered glass bottle before you have had a chance to notice a bit of Miles Davis subtly drifting through the air, a not-so-blue note that works well with the pinks and raw timbers and floral prints of the quirky decor.

More signs of a good restaurant?

Your waiter is back almost as soon as he has gone with two menus for each guest. One with a badge pinned to it says "Eat"; the other "Drink". More than one wine list per table? Now there's a radical idea.

(And when you open it and find things like the outstanding Frankland Estate Isolation Ridge Riesling at \$32 — it retails around the \$26 mark — everyone can have a go at ordering a bottle.)

More signs?

Before you have started glancing at the food list with its mix of the familiar and the new, you glance at a big specials list scrawled in chalk across the back wall to see not only the kitchen's additions for the day but a wine special too, a French sauvignon blanc at \$32.

Without knowing much at all about Charm, I liked the place enormously from the moment I sat down. Mind you, my expectations of suburban Thai restaurants are pathetically low. Charm exceeded them in multiples: a place with a sense of humour, warm and friendly hospitality and not a stupidly folded salmon pink napkin, or powder-coated metal "bentwood" chair to be seen.

No Buddhas, no elephants, no overwrought Thai iconography, just a clean, modern interior that reflects quite clearly one of the owners' pursuits as an artist and graphic designer. It also says, to me anyway, that food and wine matter.



PICTURES: EDDIE JIM

At which point that crestfallen feeling usually kicks in. The one that accompanies gloopy, overly sweetened and overly coconut-milked curries, salads with harsh dressings and without balance; stir-fries with sauces suggesting commercial pastes and way too much filler material. No dimension. Soggy noodles, dull herbs, heavy-handed everything . . .

Is Melbourne cursed with some of the most ordinary Thai restaurant food in the world?

Almost certainly, which is why Charm shines like a diamond in a coalpit. Thai food, and given the aforementioned state of affairs you will be forgiven for having forgotten the fact, is among the world's most extraordinary. Charm's is excellent. The produce is of quality, the sauces clean and balanced with natural textures, no thickeners and minimal use of sugar and coconut cream except where appropriate.

All the proverbial dimensions of salt, sweet, sour and heat are there, in harmony, producing pungent, smoky aromas and layers of flavour that suggest to me plenty of time-consuming labour out back in the production of pastes and dressings and not a lot of corner-cutting. And the prices are really fair.

A word of advice: if authenticity is your goal, several visits have taught me it's best to explain that you want dishes "Thai style", not Albert Park style. It will mean a little more fresh red chilli, but still, I'd suggest, far less than you might get off the tourist trail in Thailand.

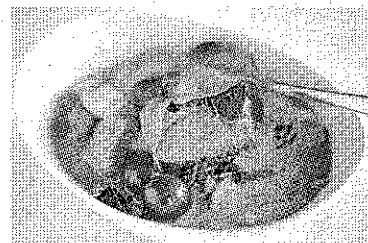
Yum ta lai (\$13.90) is a familiar warm seafood salad done exceptionally: scored, knobbly, and therefore texturally interesting calamari is tossed with small, translucent prawns in a salad of celery leaf and stalk, red onion and pepper, coriander and fresh red chilli with a simple lemon-lime dressing refreshingly free of sugar. Everything about it works (except, perhaps, for a few salad leaves thrown in at the side) from the spring of the protein to the freshness of the vegetables and herbs to

the clean finish of that dressing.

Pla pad prix thai (\$26) is a superb jumble of lightly floured and fried barramundi pieces — surprisingly firm and appropriate in this application — tossed with spring onion, red pepper, a little fresh chilli and few other benign green vegetables in a light, almost transparent brown sauce based on chicken stock with bean and oyster sauces for bolstering and a serious dose of coarse black pepper. It's not for chilli heads but the flavours are marvellous and how the chef stops the fish "batter" going mushy is a feat.

Moo prix pao (\$18) is a stir fry of thin pork slices with a sticky, complex roasted chilli paste sauce fortified by dried shrimp; you get the meat, some red pepper, bok choy, spring onion and mushroom — in sensible, spare quantities — but the real star is this tangy, hot, smoky, shrimp red sauce. My goodness, it's good (although I'd really liked to see the food served in bowls rather than flattish plates).

Thankfully, a smart, modern white bowl is exactly what is used for the gang ped yang (\$26), a really fine version of the ubiquitous red curry of duck: a bowl of none-too-sweet, and not overly coconut thickened liquid



The dish: Gang ped yang

## Charm Thai Albert Park

Delightfully non-commercial Thai food in a smart dining room.

**14.5/20**

**Where:** 173 Victoria Avenue, Albert Park, 9686 8868.

**Web:** charmthairestaurant.com.au

**Food:** Thai

**Typical prices:** E \$12, M \$22, D \$9.

**Wine list:** Brief but interesting, with several European choices and appropriate locals, seriously well-priced.

**Corkage:** \$8 a bottle.

**We drank:** Frankland Estate Isolation Ridge Riesling 2008 (Frankland River, WA) \$32.

**Service:** Charming and professional.

**Owners:** Tanawat Futtasoonporn, Arparmas Nuantawee, Kanthon Thambhuwadol.

**Chef:** Sawai Mattakit.

**Restaurant manager:** Arparmas Nuantawee.

**Vegetarian:** Many entrees, many mains.

**Outdoors:** Footpath.

**Wheelchairs:** Not really.

**Parking:** Street.

**Cards:** AE, MC, V, DC, Eftpos.

**Hours:** Lunch Thur-Sat, noon-2pm, dinner Tue-Sun, 6-10pm.

**Score:** **1-9:** Unacceptable. **10-11:** Just OK, some shortcomings. **12:** Fair. **13:** Getting there. **14:** Recommended. **15:** Good. **16:** Really good. **17:** Truly excellent. **18:** Outstanding. **19-20:** Approaching perfection, Victoria's best.

with a penetrating flavour, filled with duck breast pieces, cherry tomatoes, pineapple — giving a pleasing sweetness against the sour heat of the curry — plenty of kafir lime and Thai basil.

Even a seemingly commercial dessert such as "black sticky rice with mango" (\$9) is rendered fresh, instead of that dark, sugary, coconut-creamed mush that usually passes for this Thai staple. At Charm, you get a generous scoop of barely sweetened, lightly salted hot aubergine-coloured pudding based on a combination of nutty, firm black rice grains and glutinous rice, the colour having leached from the black rice. Toasted coconut is grated over the top and half a perfect mango, cut into six sections, sits alongside.

It is just as it should be.

Indeed the same can be said for the restaurant as whole. Why the place isn't packed is a mystery. I do hope they will handle the pressure when and if it comes; at Charm there are many, many signs of a good restaurant.