



restaurants

Stephen Downes
the food critic
with bite



Thai tucker is entrenched in Australian eating out. But it's often untidily presented and lazily cooked. So let's welcome Charm with more enthusiasm than a Bangkok street protest. Everything I tried from its list was fresh and generous. Flavours were lively and well balanced. A modest shopfront place, Charm was the spiciest and spannest restaurant I've seen recently

eat
12/15

Six savoury specials chalked on a blackboard complemented a printed list of nine true starters, a couple of soups, 16 curries and stir-fries, and five rice and noodle dishes. No shortage of choice, even if dishes are mainly predictable.

It's the cooking that counts, and everything we tried was characterised by brilliant freshness and confident zings of flavour. Moreover, a recurring complaint about Thai food outside Thailand is that it lacks fire. I thought Charm got the temperature about right — for Australian as well as South-East Asian palates. And fat was carefully drained from fried food before it was brought to the table.

Three big spring rolls (\$12.90) contained a prawn tail, chicken mince and veggie shreds and had the most cracking, fine flake-paste wraps I've eaten. They came with a sweet-sour plum dipping sauce.

Lightly battered "seasoned" calamari (\$10) were generous but less successful — just light on flavour. They were lightly showered with tanned fried garlic crumbs and black pepper.

Charm took Thai fish cakes, a standard, to a new level. Seven cakes composed of minced flathead and red curry paste (\$11.50) of about 5cm diameter and a centimetre thick were golden-tanned, had perfect light-rubbery texture and magnificent flavour enhanced by short lengths of snake beans and shreds of kaffir lime leaves. Another sweet-sour dipping sauce containing small Cs of cucumber and peanut bits accompanied.

It was indicative that "roasted chilli paste" preceded the word "pork" (\$18) on the listing of a main we tried. Copious curled tickets of meat were flecked with chilli and came in a wonderful brown juice that was spiced just right for me. (They might be a little hot for some of you.) Bits of red capsicum, short lengths of finger-thick green chilli, onion, quarters of small mushrooms and bok choy leaves were in the mix.

Sliced beef rump in a "panang" curry sauce (\$20) from the specials board also had a terrifically tasty, deep and well-balanced coconut-based juice. For beef-lovers, it's always a pity to see good



Prints charming: petalled lampshades and accents of pink on the wall panels complete Charm's smart decor.

Pictures:
BELINDA O'NEILL

Charm

173 Victoria Ave,
Albert Park

Ph: 9686 8868

Chef: Sawai Mattakit

Open: Noon-2pm Thu-Sat;

6-10pm Tue-Sun

Parking: In street

Cards: AE, DC, MC, Visa

Seats: 32

Liquor status: Licensed and BYO

(corkage \$8 a bottle)

Cost: About \$37 for three courses

Would I go back?

Immediately

meat sliced thinly and cooked through, but that's the custom with Siam steak. At least it was for this dish, which was enlivened by fresh lime and curry leaves.

The ice creams are house-made, but desserts are rudimentary and few. Half a mango partnered exemplary black sticky rice (\$9).

drink
8/10

Charm is yet another sensible eating place with a wholly adequate wine list and the option of bringing your own (\$8 a bottle). Eleven table whites and seven reds are listed, and there is plenty of variety and quality; Scorpio Estate (\$55) and Little Rebel (\$28) give you a choice of cheap pinot noir, for

39
out of 50

example. Three whites, a rosé and three reds come by the glass, and most bottles are listed in the 30s of dollars. Charm offers six beers.

value
9/10

Charm offers great value in both food and wine.

staff
7/10

Uniformed in their khaki aprons and white blouses, the young Asian women serving did a mostly excellent job. It always surprises me that restaurant service slows when the customer wants to pay — my experience anyway. Charm changes plates for main courses, but not often enough as sometimes the stir-fries and curries range from red meat to seafood.

style
3/5

You could literally eat off Charm's concrete aggregate floor, so clean is this place. A narrow shop width, it has two ranks of close tables. I'd prefer them to be more widely separated, such do I love the human race. But Charm is popular and understandably tries to cope with all the business it can get. Napkins match the white fabric of the table cloths.

Gaily coloured petals are a motif on white cylindrical lampshades, and the walls are mainly powder white — there's also lime green and dark maroon. Dark-stained plywood chairs mounted on chrome-steel frames are comfy.



>> eating habits

Nick Sher

Last night's dinner was
Barbecued Sher wagyu rump with friends at the beach.

I could never give up
Supporting St Kilda.

Saturday night tittle
Heathcote Shiraz.

Favourite kitchen gadget
Butcher's block.

Provedore
Wilson's Fruit and Vegetables, Ballarat.

Bread
Red Beard sourdough.

I never eat
Chicken fillets.

Fast food
Fish 'n' chips.

Pub
Greendale Hotel.

Foodie blog or website
www.dmproduce.com.au

Dessert
My wife Vicki's coffee ice-cream.

Cut of meat
Scotch fillet.

Vegemite or peanut butter
Vegemite.

Snack food
Rice crackers.

Indulgence
Lindt 70 per cent.

Secret recipe
Keep it simple.

Dinner-party soundtrack
Jack Johnson.

Ice cream flavour
Coffee.

I last entertained
Last night.

Food discovery
Truffles.

Chocolate or lolly
Chocolate.

Sandwich filling
Meredith feta, tomato and basil.

Celebrity chef
Alia Wolf-Tasker.

Ethnic cuisine
Japanese.

Cocktail
Single-malt scotch on ice.

Neighbourhood eatery
Flying Teapot Café.

Nick Sher will showcase his range of wagyu beef at the Regional Producers' Day on Sunday at the Lake House, Daylesford. Ph: 5348 3329

extrafood

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