



Culinary Corner

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REVIEW



Bobby Cochran/CW photos

Bangkok Ocha prepares *mee krob* two ways: mixed with a traditional sweet-and-sour sauce or in a more modern brown sauce served with fried rice noodles on the side.

Thai one on

Winning recipes, fresh flavor produce big Bangkok taste

by Heidi Billotto
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For all of the growth on the Charlotte culinary scene, some of my favorite Queen City restaurants are the little unassuming places tucked away in remote locales. Bangkok Ocha is such a find.

Thai dishes are marked by a quartet of flavors: hot, sweet, salty and sour. Ingredients like lemongrass, kaffir lime, coconut, red and green Asian chilies and Thai fish and soy sauces all play a part. A talented chef, like Bangkok's Pat Polasit, knows how to make them all work together for plate after plate full of flavor.

With 20 years of culinary experience under her belt, Polasit partnered with Steven Chin to open Bangkok Ocha eight years ago. At the time, the Carmel Commons Shopping Center was relatively new; growth in Charlotte's south perimeter was but a gleam in some developer's eye; and the Ballantyne area was just beginning to take shape. Now the area is booming, and although Carmel Commons has had its share of revolving tenants, Bangkok Ocha has held tight, enjoying a loyal band of customers who appreciate made-from-scratch Thai cuisine.

Sunny, Chin's wife, and a couple of employees who have been with the restaurant since the beginning, join Chin in the front of the house, while Polasit and several of her sons command the kitchen. The result is fast, friendly, personable service combined with great food.

Specialties of the house

Over the course of several dinners and lunches, I found little on the Bangkok Ocha menu I didn't like. Some dishes I've enjoyed more than others, but everything was well done and prepared from scratch.

"Of course, dishes are stir-fried right before we serve," explained Chin, "but our chef takes the time to make every sauce for every dish and every bowl of soup to order. That is what sets us apart."

While there may be a bit of a wait for "from-scratch" cuisine, customers benefit in getting things exactly as they like.

Polasit's specialty is seafood, and house noodle is her signature dish. Although customers may order the noodles with their choice of pork, beef, chicken or vegetarian options, the Chins and Polasit like it best with shrimp and scallops. Here thick, wide, fresh noodles, large shrimp and tender scallops are cooked in a light, savory Thai soy sauce for a mild but most flavorful repast. Egg, onion, bean sprouts and ground peanuts add texture and taste. The Thai soy used in the recipe (and served as a condiment at the table) is not overwhelmingly salty like many Americanized versions and thus serves as a solid building block for the start of Polasit's exquisite sauce.

Curry, curry - read all about it

The curry dishes at Bangkok Ocha make up a separate section on the menu and run the gamut of flavorful concoctions from classic red Thai curry sauce to a more sedate yellow curry with potatoes. The green curry is the hottest but still quite flavorful. "We can make anything real hot," Chin said with a laugh. "We just throw in another chili if someone wants it that

BANGKOK OCHA

★★★★ out of 5

Location: 7629 Pineville-Matthews Road in Carmel Commons Shopping Center, next to The Fresh Market.

Phone: 704-544-7770

Price range: Lunch specials, \$6.50-\$7.95; dinner entrées, \$9.50-\$15.95; seafood specials are market priced.

Hours: Lunch served Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m.-2:15 p.m.; dinner served Monday through Saturday, 5-9:30 p.m.; closed Sunday.

Details: The restaurant will be closed July 3-9 and will reopen Monday, July 10. Dine in or take out. Seating for large parties of up to 15. Reservations not accepted.

way." But Chin suggests ordering dishes at a medium heat level so the flavor of the other ingredients comes through. The red curry, called *gaeng dang*, is served with a coconut cream sauce, green peas, string beans, bamboo shoots, chicken and basil leaves. Bangkok Ocha also offers *gaeng panang*, a yellow curry in coconut gravy with kaffir lime leaves and sweet basil; *gaeng massaman*, a yellow curry with potatoes, peanuts, onion and coconut milk; and *gaeng keow wan*, a spicy green curry with coconut cream, bamboo, green beans and basil leaves. One of Bangkok's frequent dinner specials is harbor shrimp, a curry dish featuring large stir-fried shrimp bathed in yellow curry with minced garlic and ginger - spicy enough to get your attention, with a



Crispy duck with garlic sauce and stir-fried vegetables (foreground) and Siam shrimp and scallops (background) are two favorite entrées at Bangkok Ocha.

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zest and zip that rolls wonderfully around your tongue.

More on the menu

Other favorites include the fresh rolls, golden triangles, Thai fish cakes and *mee krob*, all from the appetizer section of the menu. The fresh rolls are stuffed with boiled shrimp, rice noodles and raw vegetables and herbs all wrapped in a soft rice paper and served with a special brown sauce. The rolls are light and good for you too. A couple of orders will make a meal, and if you're looking for fun tailgate fare, order a dozen or so to go.

Tofu tod is the Thai name for the golden triangles. In this dish, bite-sized triangles of firm tofu are deep-fried to a crispy crunch. Dip the tofu in the accompanying sweet chili peanut sauce for a taste that will whet your appetite for more. The Thai fish cakes or *tod mun pla* may be one of my favorite appetizers on Bangkok's menu. Like a crab cake of sorts, the small and crispy fried patties come four to an order and are made from minced fish with a mix of Thai spices and herbs. Crispy on the outside and tender on the inside, the cakes are served with a cucumber chili sauce for dipping.

Like the noodle entrée *pad* or *pud thai*, *mee krob* is a favorite Thai starter or snack. Bangkok serves *mee krob* two ways: in a sweet-and-sour sauce in which the

finely minced meat or vegetables are tossed with the rice noodles, or in a rich brown sauce served separately from the rice noodles. According to the Chins and Polasit, the sweet-and-sour version is the more traditional recipe, whereas the brown sauce is a more modern version of the same, resulting from the culinary influences of the Canton region of China. In both cases the noodles and meat mix are placed inside a leaf of iceberg lettuce and then rolled up and eaten like a burrito.

The lemongrass soup or *tom yum* is far and away my favorite soup at Bangkok Ocha. This hot-and-sour soup has a clear broth studded with a choice of chicken, seafood or vegetables. The addition of lemongrass gives it an unpredictable zing.

Because every meal at Bangkok Ocha is cooked to order, the dinner entrée menu lists sauces and preparation styles and allows patrons to select the meat to be included. All entrées are served with aromatic sides of steaming-hot jasmine rice. At dinner look for entrée selections with fried rice, noodles and many house specialties as well.


The lunch menu is short, sweet and easy on the wallet. All items come with jasmine rice, a bowl of house soup, a fried spring roll and iced tea. Five different preparations are offered each day and

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What's cookin'

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Burrito lovers, practice up. Contestants get a chance to gorge their way to a lifetime of free weekly burritos through **Moe's Southwest Grill's Burritos for Life** burrito-eating contest. Those interested in participating must sign up at any Moe's restaurant by Monday, July 10. A random drawing will select 30 contestants from each Moe's who will compete in one of three 10-person preliminary rounds. The three preliminary winners will then compete Aug. 5 to become the local restaurant champion. Local champs then compete in regional burrito-eating contests, from which five finalists will emerge to compete in Moe's national finals. The five finalists will receive a three-day, two-night trip for two to Atlanta to compete in the finals, to be held on the campus of Georgia Tech prior to the Georgia Tech-Notre Dame football game Sept. 2. The national champion will win a custom Bourget chopper and 2,860 Moe's burrito vouchers, which is enough for one burrito a week for the next 55 years.

For those who like to enjoy burritos at a more leisurely pace, Moe's also sponsors a Burritos for Life sweepstakes, with the winner of the random drawing also receiving burritos for life. Enter the sweepstakes by completing the entry form by Aug. 6 at any Moe's location or at www.moes.com/burritosforlife. The Burritos for Life contest and sweepstakes are open only to people 18 years or older; no purchase is necessary.




Patou Bistro and the **Charlotte Tango Society** pair footwork with food and drink during Monday evening tango instruction at the Dilworth restaurant. Learn the tango each week at 7 p.m. under the supervision of instructor Daniel Arredondo, and improve your tango skills with additional practice time at 8 p.m. The informal dance instruction is free. Throughout the evening, Patou, at 1315 East Blvd., will offer a selection of tapas and drink specials. For details, call Patou at 704-376-2233 or visit www.passionfortango.com or www.patoubistro.com.


Bangkok Ocha

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customers can once again select from pork, beef, chicken, seafood and a vegetarian version. *Pud Thai*, house noodle and another noodle dish called *pud see ew* made from soft flat noodles, pan-fried with egg, broccoli and a special dark soy sauce, are offered daily. My favorite lunch item is offered on Fridays. *Pra ram long song* consists of a special peanut chili sauce stir-fried with your choice of meat or seafood atop a bed of steamed spinach.



Wine tasting with a Spanish flair is the theme Tuesday, July 10, in the Artichoke room at **Providence Café**, located at 110 Perrin Place in Charlotte's Eastover neighborhood. The tasting of six Spanish wines takes place from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Light hors d'oeuvres will accompany the tasting. The cost is \$10 per person, and reservations are suggested. Call 704-376-2008 for more information.



"Dine Out for Kids," the annual fund-raising event for Charlotte's Communities in Schools program, raised more than \$50,000 this year. The event, held June 20, offered area restaurants and their patrons the opportunity to demonstrate their support for children in need in our community. To raise the funds, nearly 40 participating restaurants donated a portion of the day's sales to CIS.

To combat student dropout rates (approximately 1,500 students drop out of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools each year), CIS connects community resources and schools to help students graduate and prepare for life. CIS provides services to 2,000 students annually in 23 CMS schools, and 99 percent of students who were enrolled in the CIS program last year remained in school.

Currently, 225 CIS graduates are enrolled in 42 colleges and universities on more than \$500,000 in scholarships. The majority of these students are the first in their families to attend college.

For a complete list of restaurants that participated in this year's Dine Out for Kids program and more details on how to support CIS, visit www.cischarlotte.org. □

Correction

The recently opened Brio Tuscan Grille is located in the SouthPark area at the Piedmont Town Center at the intersection of Fairview Road and Park South Drive. It is not at SouthPark mall, as was mentioned in last week's What's Cookin'. Brio is open Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m.-10 p.m., and Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Brio also offers a home and office catering menu; for details, visit www.BrioItalian.com.

It's truly one of the best Thai dishes I have had in years. In the evenings, Polasit prepares a dinner entrée version with seafood called Siam shrimp and scallops.

While the restaurant's name may conjure up visions of a Thai-Mexican fusion establishment, the word *ocha* in Thai means delicious. It is an ancient word used as an honorable title. Lunch or dinner, taking out or eating in, Bangkok Ocha certainly lives up to its name.

Please note that Bangkok Ocha will be closed the week of July 4. The restaurant reopens Monday, July 10. □