

Yvonne's Column

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Yvonne Lawrence looks at Melbourne's life and style.

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ROYAL OCCASION

■ It was indeed a Royal occasion when a select group of food critics were invited to the 15th anniversary celebrations of The Lemongrass Thai restaurant in Lygon Street Carlton.

Lemongrass was founded by the handsome Michael Mah and I am pleased to say that I was invited to opening night all those years ago.

HOME OF ROYALTY

■ Although Lemongrass has moved a few doors from the original place, little has really changed. The menu might have changed (Michael insists on changing the menu regularly) but the service is still par excellence and the superb presentation of the food and the general ambience has not altered.

All those years ago we ate food cooked by Boonchoo Pholwatana who for over 50 years demonstrated her skills to the Thai royal family. She was world famous.

One of her granddaughters is head chef at Lemongrass, the home of Thai Royal Cuisine. Together she and Michael planned our menu.

PERFECT HOST

■ Michael was the perfect host at the dinner and it was a pleasure to listen to him as he told us of his future plans and objectives for the restaurant, and how he strives to constantly improve his high standard of service, food and beverage.

His eyes were everywhere at the dinner ensuring that everyone was enjoying themselves. Michael is a young man who is so full of enthusiasm I imagine he never sits still, his mind always working. The perfect restaurateur.

YEARS OF STUDY

■ To prove my point you'll understand when I say he is ambitious.

He arrived in Australia to further his studies - at Melbourne High and Melbourne university - completed an engineering degree and took a job as a drink waiter. He told me that because of his curiosity and to avoid embarrassment due to his lack of knowledge, he read everything on the subject and within a week he was barman.

He became interested in cocktails and eventually owned his own cocktail bar-Zanies - in Lonsdale Street. That explains our interesting cocktails!

Michael was born in the northern state of Kedah in Malaysia which is not far from the Thai border. From an early age he was fascinated with the flavours and presentation of Thai cooking.

FIRST TO VOLUNTEER

■ He learnt to appreciate the difference and subtleties of Thai and Malaysian cuisines. Michael told us that he was always the first to volunteer to extract the coconut milk which was hard yakka, and it is still done by hand in the villages.

■ I recall that when the Lemongrass opened all those years ago I invited Michael Mah into 3AW to talk about his restaurant. He brought into the studio a tray of canapés and after I raved about the presentation: who else but Thai chefs could intricately carve food so exquisitely?

I popped a delicacy into my mouth, went to a commercial break and when I came back on air the chilli had anaesthetised my throat and I couldn't speak. Poor Michael.

I indicated that he keeps talking. I called for water whilst I tried to stop the tears flowing. I've been very wary of chilli ever since. I reminded him about this at the dinner and he couldn't believe I still recalled the incident. Neither has my throat.

SMELL THE SPICES

■ It was a cold night and it was pleasant to walk into a restaurant that was warm, inviting and the wonderful smell of spices setting our gastric juices working.

We enjoyed cocktails and waiters moved around with trays of delicacies like Tod Mun Khao Pod which are the most marvellous sweet corn patties with chicken. Poached prawn shooters in kaffir lime went down very well.

So well in fact I had to tell myself to leave room for the mains.

10 OUT OF 10

■ If you want to serve something different when you next have a dinner party serve them Lychee Vodkatini (shaken not stirred which is very James Bond) or a Siamese Princess (Lychee Champagne cocktail)

During dinner we enjoyed 1998 Arras Chardonnay Pinot Noir from Tasmania and a selection of Tasmanian wines: 2003 Tigress Pinot Gris and 2002 Bay of Fires Pinot Noir.

I was sorry that my husband was still on the sick list and couldn't partner me, but Mekonnen, our Ethiopian friend was my escort, and the chillis were entirely to his taste.

We moved into a room just off the main dining area. The table decoration was stunning and it was 10 out of 10 for the large linen napkins and table cloths.

TASTE SENSATIONS

■ There were about 12 courses so each new dish was an adventure. Tom Yum Goong which is a broth of scampi with lemongrass, galangal, lime leaves mushroom, lime and chilli.

The Lemongrass salad with green apple, young coconut and chicken, and the Panang Ped which is gtilled duck breast fillet with a light panang sauce and lychees.

Another taste sensation was Gaeng Taypo Moopa: red curry of

wild boar cooked with morning glory and okra and flavoured with cumin and kaffir lime.

Each dish was more interesting than the last and provided a topic for lively conversation with the foodies.

EVERYTHING PERFECT

■ Michael regularly invites guest chefs from Bangkok. Recently their guest was Michael's long time friend Charlie Amatyakul.

Charlie was the Food and Beverage director at the famous Oriental Hotel in Bangkok - of Somerset Maugham fame - and founder of the famous cooking school.

Charlie has visited Lemongrass twice in the last two years and put his stamp on their menu.

So is it any wonder that diners flock to Lemongrass to taste authentic Royal Thai cuisine.

It was a wonderful night. Everything was perfect.

I highly recommend the Lemongrass Restaurant, 176 Lygon Street Carlton. Prices are reasonable. Open 7 nights from 5.30pm and lunches from 12 noon Mon to Friday. Phone 9662 2244

Parking kerbside or in one of the side streets.

*We'll talk again next week. Keep well, and if you are going to read Bernard King's biography, wear asbestos gloves.
Good Karma
Yvonne.*