

Restaurant Review

Top Thai in a cottage garden

MARGARET LILLY at the authentic Sangthai, Escrick

ONE often finds a little local Chinese or Indian restaurant in a village but a full-blown up-market Thai restaurant? Now that is unusual, especially one elegantly housed in a 19th century cottage within beautiful grounds.

The Sangthai Restaurant is in Escrick, a pleasant village on the A19, midway between York and Selby, and is at Church Cottage, next to, believe it or not, the church. This is floodlit at night, which gives an extra ambience to the courtyard and outdoor eating area.

This has been designed as a Thai garden — an exotic contrast to the Englishness of the sweeping lawns beyond. The 1850s-house has been sympathetically extended and had latterly been a B&B before Robert Malpas and his Thai-born wife, Saengthai, took it on five years ago. Now they live 'above the shop' and their all-Thai staff live in.

"We bring staff over on work permits," Robert explained, "so that the restaurant is as authentic as we can make it. I keep a low profile because my face doesn't fit!"

The authenticity starts with the lovely purple silk dresses and wooden sandals worn by the smiling, solicitous waitresses, the Eastern pictures and music.

As for the authenticity of the food, I couldn't fault it. I have eaten in several quality Thai restaurants in London and this brings a Yorkshire one into the same league. No wonder it won 'Best Eating Place' in the York Tourism awards two years ago. Perhaps it's in the running for another because the menu offers a



terrific choice, tweaked once a year: ten terrific starters, all at £5.25, interesting soups — mostly seafood-based at £4-5, salads but not as we know them, curries, stir-fries, fish — lots of prawns, of course, plus squid and sea bass.

Besides pork and chicken there are ten duck dishes, and good vegetarian options — four starters and several mains, some with tofu, and around £8. Main dishes average £10.25 and desserts, mainly banana and coconut-based — the only disappointing section for me — are £3.95.

One of the starters sounded familiar — sausages; evidently a speciality of northern Thailand, but we chose tiger prawns with sweet chilli and minced pork on deep-fried toasts with a sweet sauce. These were delicious, not tasting in the least 'fatty-fried', to dip in a tamarind-type relish, and my fellow-diner loved the prawns on a bed of innocuous bean sprouts.

Ah, but there was a trap: delve beneath and that sweet chilli sauce bit you, as I found to my cost whilst having a swap taste. Thank goodness the iced water had come with the Pinot Grigio

rose. We had chosen that from a good selection of roses which suit this type of food very well. Robert gets his wine from several local suppliers but always chooses those which complement this style of cuisine.

For our main courses, FD chose a favourite of mine, Thai Green Curry, chicken in a pale aromatic sauce with green beans, to spoon over a neat mound of plain rice — as mine was, to receive slices of duck breast in a spicy sauce, with chillies, lime leaves, Spring onions and beans.

Green beans feature largely in dishes and the other staples like chillies, lemongrass, Thai basil and tamarind are flown from Saengthai's homeland once a week, as are two kilos of the delicate orchids which grace every table and the elegant reception area.

There are several three-course set menus: for a minimum of two people, prices at £20-25. I can think of nothing nicer than sharing one with a loved one in the Thai Garden on a summer's night. We certainly enjoyed the experience — food and ambience; the Malpases have got it just right.