



By Kristen Fogle

*Everything down to the asymmetric plates and gentle ambient beats in the background enhance Chang Thai Bistro's atmosphere.*

**H**aving never before ventured to Monrovia, I was pleasantly greeted by a thriving downtown. Myrtle Avenue is impressively adorable - its charm exuded through old town touches such as brick buildings boasting large awnings on either side, old fashioned lampposts, ample benches, and mature pines all tucked in close on the north by the massive mountains.

Chang Thai Bistro finds itself right in the middle of the action, with a façade that feels very modern and chic, yet blends itself nicely to its new neighborhood. The inside is smallish, but breath taking. Owners Tiya and Gof own another restaurant in Pasadena, and explain that they wanted to expand this one in a different direction. Though they chose the colors and theme ("elephant in the bamboo forest"), it was designer Rick Crane of the Pasadena Art Center who made it a reality. Bamboo rods greet you as you step inside and shiny, strategically placed bamboo over the tables create modern light fixtures, which Tiya made herself (proving that this dynamic woman needs her own show on HGTV). Exposed woodwork beams and piping with rich wood floors give the feel of a trendy inner city loft. The bar has a countertop resembling the bottom of a river, ("because after all, that's where the elephant's drink," Tiya reminds,) with coconut mosaic tiles lining the sides.

I was sold on the décor, obviously, but what about the food? The first dish I sampled was the Tom Kai Gai soup. This aromatic craftily concocted creation delivered on its trademark spiced coconut milk, with tender chicken, lemongrass, lime leaves, mushrooms, and carrots. The extra spice made it extremely flavorful (and hard to put the spoon down). Like most dishes at Chang Thai, it can also be ordered with shrimp, vegan shrimp, veggie, or tofu.

I also tried their Crispy Avocado Rolls, four of the tastiest little treasures you can get your hands on. A light, flaky crispy wonton wrap on the outside, but the real selling point is the avocado baked right into the doughy interior. The spiced sesame dipping

sauce was the best I've ever had, thick and gooey with what tasted like a touch of maple. Definitely worth indulging in with a friend, but you might want to order a second batch of them as the rolls are somewhat on the small side.

Next, I had a sample of their Yum Neau, or Spicy Beef Salad. The beef wasn't very warm, but was seasoned so precisely, I was in love. All on a bed of greens, with a delightfully light lime salad dressing, it included tomatoes, peanuts, string beans, and fresh chili. Definite date food, at under \$8, it's plenty to split if you're into a light meal. And it is spicy, but, just as with any of the other dishes, you can tone down (or bump up!) the spiciness on a 1-5 scale. I also had a chance to try their marinated and grilled tofu steak. Not very flavorful, but when paired with their Thai glazed peanut sauce- look out! That sauce is perfection.

I also tried the Pad Kee Now (or Drunken Noodle) which is a pan fried flat noodle packed with punch- carefully cooked shrimp sat on top with red bell peppers, basil, and crispy wontons, under delicate greens. This dish is great to have with a traditional Thai iced tea or a green Thai iced tea, a Chang Thai Bistro invention.

Completely stuffed, for dessert I opted for the mango and sticky rice, a sweet, yet not overpowering, healthy alternative. I also tasted the mango homemade sorbet, which has a heavenly glaze at the bottom and also comes in watermelon, strawberry, and lychee. Chang is in the process of obtaining its liquor license, but by mid-July the bar will be in full swing producing lychee martinis, fresh mojitos with mint and sugar cane, and spike tea, (Thai iced tea with Asian vodka).

When I visited, Chang was a mere nine days old, but Tiya tells me they already have some steady clientele. "I've had a man who's come in four out of the nine nights." And I can completely see why. With professional staff, an absolutely gorgeous atmosphere, and food that is of the best quality and taste, no wonder. Make your reservations now, for one of the best, most inspired restaurants I've had the pleasure of dining at all year.