

Exotic Charmer

The small but lively Lemongrass brings more hip to West Street.

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By Mary Lou Baker

Photography By Scott Suchman

Lemongrass

167 West St.
Annapolis, Md.
410-280-0086

Food: Authentic hot Thai

Atmosphere: Electric

Clientele: Young and lively

Dress: Casual

Don't miss: Lemongrass soup; Shrimp Angel; Tiger Crying; duck dishes

Tariff: appetizers/soups/salads, \$3.95-\$7.95; lunch entrees, \$5.95-\$13.95; dinner entrees, \$7.95-\$15.95. Parking available in public garage behind restaurant.

It might be just a little yellow house on West Street in Annapolis, but the new bistro called Lemongrass has become “party central” for trend-conscious diners since it opened this past summer. Riding the crest of the phenomenal popularity of Asian cuisine in general, Lemongrass is the right place for a close encounter with authentic Thai food—as well as neighboring diners.

Since most of the seating is on high stools around an elevated bar in the center of the small dining room, you will likely be rubbing elbows with other diners in addition to your dining partners. The good news is that strangers become friends in this cozy arrangement, as witnessed on one of our visits, when a group of about a dozen thirty-somethings were exchanging cell phone numbers at the end of the festive hour they spent together.

Lemongrass attracts a mostly young and hip clientele to its bar-style seating. Older folks may prefer sitting at leather-upholstered banquettes fronting the pale lemon-yellow colored walls or in front of the vintage paned windows overlooking West Street. Young waiters in jeans and brown T-shirts buzz among patrons, some of them more knowledgeable than others about the menu.

We lucked out one evening with Doug, an earnest fellow whose recommendations were right on. With sixty-four Thai specialties on the menu, making a choice can be risky business for the uninitiated. The eponymous lemongrass (a tangy flavoring agent) is just one of the ingredients that distinguish Thai food, as well as kaffir lime juice, Thai basil, curries, coconut milk, garlic, hot chilies, tofu, cilantro, lots of veggies and seafood, and

sauces that range from mean to meek.

All around us, diners were asking questions among each other and to their servers. “I like hot, but not brutal,” cautioned one gentleman. “Love the sound of all the vegetarian entrees —just bring me your personal favorite,” said one trusting young woman.

Our waiter was on target with his suggestion of Shrimp Angel as a starter. Butterflied jumbo shrimp spread with garlic and spices had been rolled up like a cornucopia in rice paper, then flash-fried for a crispy finish. Five of these babies arrived on a plate with a garnish of shredded carrots, fresh basil, and a ramekin of sweet and sour sauce. We polished them off in record time, loving their lightness and the pleasant tingle of the sauce. They were like mini-ice cream cones, topped with a tangle of carrots to create a tantalizing hot and cool sensation. The lemongrass soup was another outstanding choice, its hot and sour notes creating a delightful melody in the mouth. Scallops, shrimp, tiny mussels in the shell, enoki mushrooms, and cherry tomatoes swam in a lemony broth that made this an intriguing dish.

The word boring simply does not apply to any of the food at Lemongrass. Tiger Crying, for instance, involves using your chopsticks to pluck thin slices of marinated and grilled flank steak from a plate. Next, dip it in the fiery sauce cut with lime juice, cilantro, red onion, and basil. Cry. Then take a swig of Singha beer, served ice-cold in thick-stemmed goblets. Pure pleasure for those who like it hot.

A tamer choice would be crispy duck, slices of the roasted breast deep fried in a tempura batter and stir-fried in a lightly peppered garlic sauce. A sprinkling of fried Thai basil leaves softens the spiciness of the dish while adding to its appeal. Like most of the entrees here, it was served with a mountain of sticky rice in a hefty bowl—a presentation reminiscent of a sundae without its topping. Sauce it yourself with the liquid from the main plate, then dig in with the chopsticks. The only disappointment we experienced was the crispy whole rockfish, which had actually been steamed to near-extinction.

True to its Asian roots, Lemongrass just tips its hat to desserts. Sticky rice with chopped mangos is a simple but appealing finale. Others may like the coconut custard cake, made in-house. A fried banana with vanilla ice cream is a soothing choice for the tongue after all the hot stuff.

Lemongrass is a vibrant and upbeat establishment, a one-of-a-kind restaurant with enormous appeal for those seeking to sample authentic Thai foods. The entrepreneurial and visionary owners, Gavin Buckley and Jody Danek (who also own, along with their wives Julie Buckley and Kristin Lewis, Tsunami and Metropolitan restaurants on West Street and several shops nearby) and Stanley Hsu saw the Thai tide coming in and hired Mam Kaikwan, a native of Bangkok, as the restaurant’s chef.

According to Danek, Lemongrass has been such a smash that plans for expansion in the adjoining lot are already in the works. As it is, the noise level at Lemongrass

threatens to break the sound barrier when the place is crowded, which it usually is. But the sound can best be described as “happy talk”—and is part and parcel of this newcomer’s engaging personality.

Mary Lou Baker has been a food writer for more than twenty years.