

ONE Passion

By Charlene Campbell
Photos by Kevin Lorenzi

Typhoon

242 S. Highland Ave.
Pittsburgh, PA 15206
412-362-2005

Typhoon

Watcharee Tongdee is a beautiful, fine-boned figure who packs a punch. In the kitchen, that is.

Don't be fooled by her small stature or her kilowatt smile - her passion is chilis and the hotter the better. That goes for her sister, Busaba, and the rest of their family as well. That's not as true for Michael Johnson, her business partner. He likes it a little cooler. He doesn't understand people who go for the burn that follows with tell-tale signs of a red face, runny nose and tearing eyes. That's too hot for him.

Chili peppers are a huge part of Thai cooking. Thai chili peppers, also known as birdseye chile peppers or *prik ki nu*, are found in most Thai dishes and are a base for many curries. Watcharee explains that for her dishes to be truly Thai - her kind of Thai - they need to have the heat factor amped up several levels beyond what she serves her customers. Johnson agrees that when the Tongdees are cooking for themselves they add a lot more chiles than most customers or he himself could bear. It's a cultural preference that, Watcharee explains, is found throughout Thailand, especially in the offerings of street vendors. In the mountains of Thailand they don't grow coconuts, so the curries are more concentrated and the peppers have a stronger role in a dish than in other parts of the country.

Since leaving Thailand, the Tongdee family has put down culinary roots here in Pittsburgh. Besides Typhoon, which is a little over three years old, Siripol Tongdee, Watcharee and Busaba's brother, is the owner of the Sweet Basil restaurants in Squirrel Hill and Lawrenceville. Originally from the Northern Tak province of Thailand, the family describes cooking as a bonding activity that includes the men as well as the women and spans generations. If the kitchen is the hub of family life and cooking the tie that binds, you could venture to say that the family that cooks together stays together.

When I visit the restaurant, I meet three generations of family helping out. The Tongdees' mother, Pusadee, who taught all the children to cook, quietly watches and listens as her daughters share the knowledge she bestowed upon them at a tender age.

Busaba and Michael explain to me that the most basic part of Thai cooking is the subtle layering of the same four basic flavors or elements in different combinations and proportions. The essential Thai elements are sweet, sour, salty and spicy. Every Thai dish has these elements and they move across your palate at different moments. In Thai cooking, the chilis add heat but don't erase the taste of the other ingredients. The heat comes in a wave across your tongue and then leaves you finishing with another element in the dish.

Other common ingredients that add flavor to many dishes are the Khaffir Lime and its leaves, which are the bay leaf of Thai cooking; lemongrass; galangal, which is part of the ginger family; and nam pla, which is fish sauce that contributes the salty flavor in most dishes. Cilantro, a.k.a. coriander, is an herb that Thai cooks use from root to seed. The distinct nature of each of these flavors is never muddled.

Johnson points out that Thai food, while spicy, can be made to accommodate even the most timid tongue. The one-to-ten scale of spice/heat can be tricky from restaurant to restaurant and culture to culture, but those with a low-to-no spice threshold can find something to love. Curry can be tamed, as can most dishes, so just ask for a little less spice; or if you are like me, order with reckless abandon and tell the chef to pepper it up.

RECIPE

Typhoon's Spicy Beef Salad

(serves 4)

INGREDIENTS

- 5 oz. baby arugula
- 16-24 oz. strip steak or lean cut of beef (4-6 oz. per person)
- 2 medium fresh shallots, sliced thin
- 2-3 Thai chili peppers (*prik ki nu*), finely chopped
- 1 stalk lemongrass
- 10-12 mint leaves
- 3-4 sprigs of cilantro
- 1 tablespoons dried shallots
- 4 teaspoons fish sauce (*nam pla*)
- 4 teaspoons lime juice
- 1 teaspoons sugar

Put the steak on the grill. Mix the fish sauce, lime juice and sugar in a medium mixing bowl. Slice the shallots thin. Cut and peel away the outer hard part of the lemongrass stalk, keeping the tender inner rings. Coarsely chop the cilantro. Add all of these plus the mint and chile peppers to the mixing bowl and mix loosely but well.

Grill the beef to medium rare, and slice into bigger-than-bite-sized strips. Plate the arugula. Add the beef to the dressing mixture and toss thoroughly with tongs. Arrange an even amount of beef on each bed of arugula. Drizzle a little more of the dressing on each salad if desired. Top with the crunchy dried shallots.