

Ooodles of tasty noodles

BY PHIL TRACY

NOODLES are ubiquitous in all Asian cuisines, but for some reason Thai cuisine treats noodles as the foundation of nearly every recipe. They not only form rice into noodles, they put noodles in their rice dishes.

Osha Thai Noodle Shop is among the best known Thai restaurants in town, owing to a combination of terrific food, reasonable prices and location, location and really late hours. Osha is Thai for delicious.

Osha is a favorite among the young because it stays open until 3 a.m. on Friday and Saturday and 1 a.m. the other days. San Francisco is a great restaurant city, but after 10 p.m. the choices get really limited.

Osha's location is another reason it's popular. At the corner of Geary and Leavenworth, the 38 Geary stops right in front. The steep incline on Leavenworth scares away faint-hearted drivers, leaving open parking spaces for those who dare.

The restaurant also is just three blocks from theater row — the Curran, Golden Gate and A.C.T. In 2000, my then-15-year-old protégée, the intrepid Casey Ellen Weiss, and I went to a matinee of "Cabaret." The 38 Limited shot right past the Curran and neatly deposited us in front of Osha. "Why not eat here?" Ms. Weiss inquired, and for her initiative we were rewarded with a tasty lunch whose particulars I cannot remember. What I do remember is that it set me back only \$15, including the Thai iced teas.

A couple of years later, I hosted Casey's mother and half-sister to an evening's encounter with Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood at A.C.T. By this time, Osha had expanded into a second room and though it was early evening (6:30) the place was nearly full. Osha has 20 booths or tables and a capacity of 75.

We ordered a variety of dishes and shared them freely. I started the ball rolling by ordering the Thai Sausage appetizer (\$5), which is one really long, thin sausage sliced into thirds served on a bed of lettuce, cilantro, shredded carrot and mint.

Bessie, Casey's half-sister, ordered Soop Nor Mai (\$5), a spicy bamboo shoot salad with red and green onions, chili flakes and lime juice. Carol, Casey's mother, who has an Asian Indian heritage, ordered the Thai Green Curry a la carte (\$8.50). Most Osha dishes come as either rice plate or a la carte, the latter being a much larger version of the entrée without rice, usually for \$2 more.

The Green Curry — choice of chicken, pork, beef or prawns (\$1.50 extra) — offered a succulent combination of green chilis, cilantro and coconut milk, along with Thai eggplant and green peas over a bed of vermicelli. Rice was the other option.

It was hot, but my poor white boy's tongue gladly braved the heat to get to the terrific sensations.

To round off the meal, we ordered Pad Thai (\$6), pan-fried rice stick noodles with chicken, shrimp, fried egg, bean sprouts and tofu in a creamy peanut sauce that at least two amateur Web reviewers have declared the best in the city. While I can make no such claim, having not had enough experience with Thai restaurants to make me an expert, I will say that while I usually do not care for peanut sauces or peanuts in general, this one made me put aside my prejudice and enjoy the taste sensations thoroughly.

With four Thai iced teas (\$1.25), tax and a \$4.50 tip, the entire bill came to \$42 and three very well-fed and happy people went off to hear Ms. Atwood explain the mysteries of Canadian fiction.

The next time I visited was last fall. I ordered Thai Boat Noodle Soup (\$6.50): rare beef (sliced, uncooked), beef balls, beef stew and rice noodles. I was offered my

choice of rice or egg noodles in three sizes — skinny, medium and fat. Being fat myself, I went with that option in rice.

With that much beef floating around, it took a while to sort out the varieties. The raw beef slices were cooked in the five minutes the soup took to get to me but was tender and tasty. The stew part seemed short on meat and long on fat and gristle and was also accompanied by bits of carrot and potato but there was so much else in the soup I really didn't feel cheated. The beef balls were more like rounded pieces of hot dog than tiny meatballs but not unpleasant. The soup also contained bean sprouts and spinach.

The best part of the soup, as it should be, was the broth. Hearty, rich in beef flavors and tangy, it was a perfect selection for a fall afternoon. Along with a Thai iced tea (iced coffee is also available), tax and tip, my bill was \$10. Would that the \$9 movie have been half as good.

After that visit I was determined to review Osha, so on the Friday proceeding the Memorial Day weekend, I took my fellow worker, Rumi, and off we went for some lunch and a formal chat with the owners. We split an order of Tom Yum Goong (\$7.50), a hot and sour shrimp soup with straw mushrooms, tomato, chili and lime juice. Again, the broth was the outstanding feature, being rich, reddish brown and fish-flavored. There was no onion or chopped-up bean sprouts that gives Chinese hot and sour soup its chunky consistency. The tomatoes were bite-sized wedges and the shrimp and mushrooms plentiful and tasty.

We also ordered Pineapple Fried Rice (\$6.50) and Osha Spicy Pan Fried (\$6.50). The fried rice, in addition to pineapple chunks, contained fried egg, tomatoes, green onions, cashews, raisins and shrimp. The Pan Fried used egg noodles, duck, tomato, brown mushrooms, onion, basil and fresh chili.

As we were starting to eat, Gen Wong, co-owner along with his wife Lalita, came over to our table and introduced himself. Gen Wong just turned 30, his wife is three years older.

Both Gen and Lalita were born in Thailand and came to Los Angeles separately in 1997. Lalita visited her sister, who was living in San Francisco, and helped do the cooking. Her sister and her sister's boyfriend quickly recognized that Lalita was a talented cook and began making plans to open a restaurant. She started the restaurant with money borrowed from her sister and

her sister's boyfriend. She and Gen met soon after the restaurant opened and were married the following year. Later they made enough money to buy the boyfriend out. They have two children.

The restaurant expanded in 2001 and continues to do a breakneck business. A perfect example of how popular Osha's remains is that when we left, at 2:30 p.m. on the Friday before Memorial Day, when many people had already taken off early for the three-day weekend, all the booths were filled and four parties were on the waiting list. ■

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