



## diep le shaker

**E**ver wondered about portmanteaux - those wonderful utterances that blend two words in to one to give a more comprehensive meaning. Think brunch, think Franglais, think glitterati.

In recent years the portmanteau that has most amused me was discovered on the menu of a local takeaway: Thainese food. I scoffed at the naughtiness of this coinage, much in the way people must have scoffed when they first heard californicate or blaxploitation. In truth the whole concept of fusion food invites such marriages of words: Cal-Ital, Tex-Mex. It was only a matter of time before Siam went Sino.

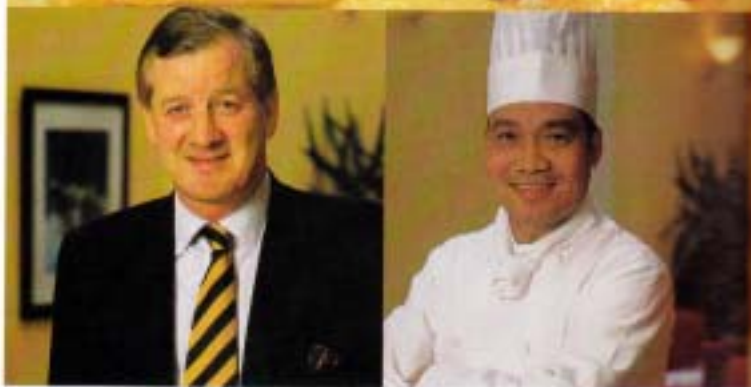
And given our newfound obsession with the Orient it was only a matter of time before the restaurants merged Thai and Chinese food to offer us a blend of both. While Asian fusion takes the best elements from the East many diners object to this indulgent alimentary interbreeding; something to do with 'if it ain't broke then don't fix it.'

I have a real love of Asian food, fused and rudimentary. Having spent 5 blissful months travelling through Thailand and Indonesia I developed a real appreciation of signature ingredients like fiery chillies, silky coconut milk, zesty lime juice and sticky rice. On the other hand Chinese food has never made the same impression on me. I suppose 15 years ago MSG ruled the wok and anything 'Chinese' that passed my lips seemed defined by gloopy textures and salty aftertastes. And then there were those tar-thick sauces masking the subtlety of prime ingredients from bean sprout to bamboo shoot to bok choy. Chinese food had a long way to come.

Many years on I am still sceptical (but this is nothing a 5 month visit to China couldn't put right). Having heard and read many good things about Diep le Shaker, which promises 'exotic Thai and Chinese cuisine' I decided a visit might help my malady. Hoping to find good Chinese delicacies I secretly delighted in knowing Thai was there as a fall back. Just in case...

First impressions were excellent. Diep is tucked into a lane way off Pembroke St and is a long, narrow room. A warm palette of reds and yellows combined with good lighting and handsome wood floors makes for a very comfortable dining experience. Tables are smartly set with tiny lilies in glass tubes and a large plant sleeps in the corner by the stairs. The meet, greet and seat is done in such a way that you just know you've fallen into good hands.

My guest, our esteemed art director, arrived a trifle late (see Phyl, I promised I wouldn't be too hard on you) by which stage I was half way through the basket of prawn crackers on the table. A Chinese friend of mine recently presented me with a shrivelled up leathery looking 'postage stamp' and then proceeded to explain that this is how prawn crackers look in their infancy. Sometimes ignorance really



is bliss - I see prawn crackers in a whole new light now.

While waiting for Phyl I ordered a sparkling water and was pleased to be offered a large bottle for the table. Much better value and a lot more water. Appetisers run the gamut from spring roll to scallops to crispy duck to satay. I took a deep breath and went for the hoi malangpoo ob, baked greenlip mussels with lemongrass, chilli and basil. Seven succulent monsters, giants of the bivalve world, came glistening in their sheaths, handsome shells with pearly green ridges. Pretty on the eye, pretty in the mouth.

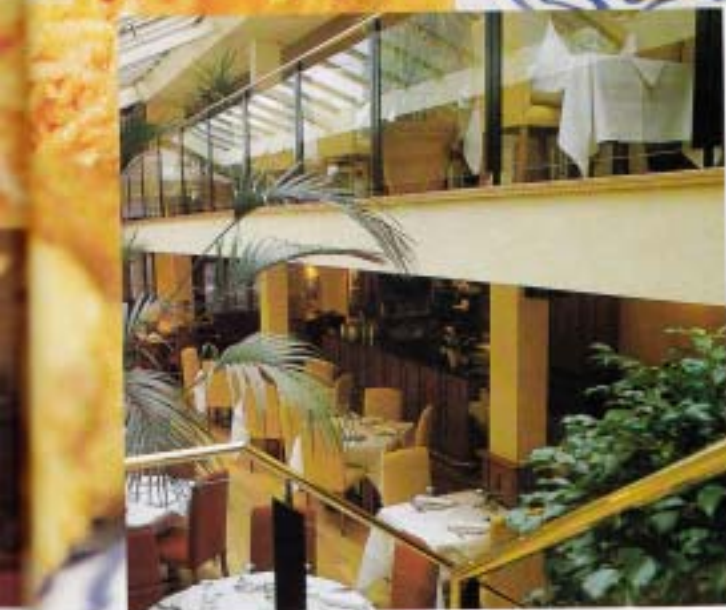
Phyl chose the Diep hors d'oeuvres, a selection of starters including chicken satay, spring roll, fish cake, prawn toast and stuffed chicken wings with a garnish of crispy noodles. Presentation was excellent and three little dishes of sauces arrived too. Her least favourite was the soggy chicken wing, although 4 hits out of 5 ain't bad at all.

Her main comprised sliced roast duck served on a bed of Chinese leaves and gravy. This looked delicious, and although the duck was cooked well with nice crispiness she felt disappointed by the Chinese greens. Imagining bok choy or tatsoi leaves the pale yellow cabbage



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: HOY MALANGPO OB (GREEN LIPPED MUSSELS); DIEP HORS D'OEUVRES; PED YANG NUMBOI (ROAST DUCK); THE RESTAURANT, MATTHEW FARRELL, PROPRIETOR AND CHARLIE THUMWATANA, EXECUTIVE CHEF.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER ROWAN



didn't live up to expectations.

I guess I wasn't thinking when I ordered my main course. I opted for pla shuchee; deep-fried monkfish topped with a dry red curry and garnished with Thai herbs. When asked by our waiter if I'd prefer it with rice or noodles I chose the latter without looking at the menu. This was a bad idea. For some reason I seem to think chunky, chewy buckwheat when I think noodles. These of course dominate in Japanese cooking - and I hold this fusion craze entirely responsible for my silliness. When my dish arrived I was faced with a plate of thin egg noodles dressed in soy - hardly an ideal accompaniment for Thai curry. Drawing attention to my faux pas I requested a bowl of steamed rice which appeared in a matter of minutes. Neither eyelid batted nor eyebrow raised as the waiter rectified things - and I wasn't charged for my negligence either. Well done Diep.

My red curry was delicious although I'd pass on the deep-fried fish. The batter was light but the overall combination would have proved more successful as a starter. I think I chose badly, however a restaurant like this shouldn't offer courses that leave room for bad feeling. Let's put it down to a question of taste.

After the plates were cleared there was a wonderfully long interlude. (Is there anything more frustrating than having a dessert menu thrust at you seconds after you finish your mains?) We were happy to toddle along with our crisp Chablis, Albert Pic 1997 and although the staff are highly attentive here they left us alone in the most pleasing of ways. In the name of research however I requested the sweets menu and was, not to mince words, astonished. A choice of six desserts offered such turkeys as ice cream, fruit salad and sorbet. How utterly uninspired. Not even the token lemongrass tart so beloved by Ireland's ethnic eateries. (Maybe the long interlude was initiated to distract diners from actively seeking the dessert menu. If it is a house tactic I can see why.)

Not wishing to write the place off completely I chose fruit salad hoping something exotic would appear to get me back on side. With a wealth of tropical fruits now so readily available I was a little miffed to receive a traditional mix of melon, soft apple, orange, kiwi and strawberry. All served in a chipped glass.

Phyl's starter had also arrived on a large porcelain dish with a chunk missing out of the side and I can't help wondering if Diep le Shaker needs a new kitchen porter. It definitely needs new bar glasses - we don't really want to be served sparkling water in branded vodka glasses - people dine out to get away from things like ad campaigns.

We finished our fair to middling meal with a flaming Sambucca, a pot of tea and a coffee. The food clocked in at £54, the drinks £31.50 and there's a 10 per cent service charge which was more than well deserved. We left £10 on top of this and hope it goes towards replacing the chipped dishes. This restaurant is doing so many things well but there's a little room for improvement too. ☹️

*Jillian Bolger*

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