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NaKorn Gives Evanston a Pad Thai-Free Taste of Thailand

The two-week-old restaurant goes upscale with its family-style fare.

BY PENNY POLLACK AND CARLY BOERS

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Charred eggplant and tomato at NaKorn PHOTO: COURTESY OF NAKORN

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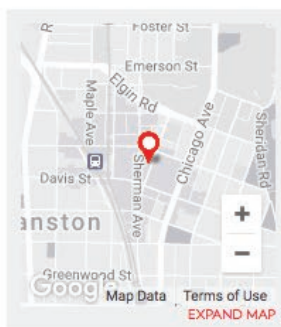
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Evanston is rich in ethnic cuisine: some authentic, and many, far from it. (College kids will always love their cheap noodle bowls.) NaKorn (1622 Orrington Ave.) falls unapologetically into the former camp. “There’s no pad thai—and I mean that in a positive sense,” says Joe Bogdan, an investor and business adviser for the two-week-old restaurant.

Owners and best friends Sam Rattanopas and Mina Sudsaard met while in grade school in Bangkok and moved stateside together in 1996 when they were in their twenties. Rattanopas spent 20 years in the Chicago restaurant biz (most recently as partner at the now-shuttered South Loop sushi spot Otsy) while Sudsaard worked as a designer.

Both women were hungry for a pad thai-free taste of home, and the simple concept for NaKorn—upscale, old-world dishes served family-style—was hatched. Two Thai-born chefs man the kitchen, and much of the menu pays homage to the flavors of the owners’ youth. According to Bogdan, the early customer favorite is a flash-fried whole branzino (\$32) named after Rattanopas’s father. For dessert, there’s deconstructed coconut cream pie with rice (\$8) made using a “secret recipe.”

Even the décor is a throwback right down to the plates, which are similar to those the women’s grandmothers used. Thai birdcages are used as light fixtures and handmade abacuses line the bar. “It’s warm and cozy and like an old Thai family business,” Bogdan says.



Early signs indicate that Evanstonians are picking up what NaKorn is putting down: “The Thai people who come say, ‘I haven’t had anything like this since I was a kid.’ Americans say they’ve never had anything like it,” notes Bogdan. “We already have repeat customers.”

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