

June 01, 2017

BUSINESS LUNCH

# Sophisticated Thai in Evanston

By JOANNE TRESTRAIL



SHARE Facebook Twitter LinkedIn 0 Google+ 0



Photo by NaKorn

Clockwise from top left: fried tofu with frisee, pan-roasted whitefish fillet and grilled octopus.

Over the course of our decades-long love affair with Thai food, we have found the ingredients traditionally associated with it—lemon grass, tamarind, coconut, ginger, peanuts, mint, noodles, lime and chili peppers—addictive in almost any combination. When we go weeks without them, we get restless. Luckily, Thai restaurants abound here, and they'd really have to drop the ball for us to be unhappy. They rarely do.

NaKorn ("metropolitan" in Thai) doesn't push the envelope conceptually or execute as deftly as glamorous Arun's in Albany Park or scrappy ATK in Lakeview, but it's markedly more charming and ambitious than the usual neighborhood Thai spot, and more refined than most of the student-friendly eateries in Evanston's main business district. With Northwestern University, Rotary International and other large employers nearby, the area bustles at lunchtime.

The 60-seat restaurant, which opened late last year, is the brainchild of Bangkok natives Sam Rattanopas and Mina Sudsaard, who bring to the table the authentic flavors of their childhood (the women have been friends since third grade). Their cozy, bilevel dining room has light fixtures made from wicker birdcages overhead, oversize abacuses used as design elements down below and a huge portrait of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (who died in October) on one wall. Sidewalk seating accommodates 20 more diners, weather permitting.

The menus list dishes you might not be expecting, including braised pork shank with sauteed Swiss chard (\$28), crisp fried whole branzino (\$32) and steamed Chilean sea bass with baby bok choy (\$30) in the evening. Lunch options are more modest but still interesting. Sauteed white prawns in a coconut curry sauce with young peppercorns on the stem (\$16), served with rice, is a terrific midday meal. Braised chicken breast with rice noodles in a spicy lime broth with vegetables and crushed peanuts (\$14) is another good choice. We also liked the blue crabmeat with spicy turmeric-coconut curry (\$18), though its rice noodles, which arrive tightly bound around chopsticks, are tricky to manage.

Appetizers, vegetarian dishes and salads are available all day. Among starters, grilled octopus with a lacy black tuile made with squid ink (\$9) is beautiful and flavorful, even if our octopus could have been more tender. Another showstopper, a salad of raw beets sliced paper thin and stacked, napoleon-like, with cherry tomatoes between the layers (\$10), is both a crunchy pleasure and an impressive feat of engineering. When local tomatoes are in season, it will be even more satisfying.

Diners looking for something more familiar should head for sauteed rice noodles with coconut-tamarind sauce, ground pork, bean sprouts, tofu and egg (\$12); though not as elegant as some other dishes, it's close enough to pad Thai as to make no difference. Housemade sodas (\$4)—especially the one with roasted pineapple and Thai basil—are refreshing.

There's a full bar with local and Thai beers, wines by the glass and bottle, and also specialty cocktails, including one called Evanston Never Sleeps (has anyone ever said this about Evanston before?).

Servers are well-informed, friendly and efficient, attuned to the needs of lunchers with time constraints.

Lifestyle Dining Evanston

**NaKorn**

1622 Orrington Ave., Evanston  
847-733-8424  
NaKornKitchen.com

**Cuisine:** Thai  
**Vibe:** Upbeat, hospitable  
**Sound level:** Conversation-friendly  
**Entree price range:** \$12-\$16 (lunch)  
**Reservations:** Accepted  
**Private room:** No  
**Wheelchair accessible:** Yes  
All restaurant meals are paid for by Crain's reviewers, who visit restaurants anonymously. They sometimes follow up with phone calls to management after they visit to clarify information.  
**How our rating system works**  
**See more Business Lunch reviews**