## Dining Thai-Style at Sap's Fine Thai Cuisine:

When you sit down to order at Sap's you'll be given a place setting, ice water, and a menu. Your place setting conforms to the tenants of Thai dining: you get a fork, chopsticks, a napkin, and no knife, since Thai food is prepped into bite-sized pieces before it's cooked. The Thais are one of the most sensible societies on the planet when it comes to a method of transporting food to the mouth.

Before the time of King Chulalongkorn the Great (Rama V) Thais ate with the right hand, as was the practice in much of SE Asia. Rama V is largely credited with modernizing Thailand in the latter half of the nineteenth century; he was educated by an Englishwoman, he courted and entertained Western diplomats and leaders, and traveled abroad. It is said that one morning he ordered his kitchen to cook a palace meal and invited the British consul over for dinner. Rama V sat him down and asked him to 'eat as they do in Europe' so that that he could observe Western table 'skills'. After completion of the meal, the King decided he had no use for a knife when eating Thai food, since it was already cut into bite-sized pieces during preparation. The King found the fork and spoon quite practical and so begun the use of cutlery in Thailand.

As an interesting sidenote, the story of the tutor of Prince Chulalongkorn, Anna Lenowens, was penned by Margaret Langdon, entitled *Anna and the King of Siam*. Rogers and Hammerstein wrote a musical based on Langdon's book called *The King and I*, and later a movie starring Deborah Kerr and Yul Brynner was based on the musical play. The book, play, and movie are all so filled with historical inaccuracies and fallacies that they are banned in Thailand, and considered grossly insulting to the monarchy.

The primary Thai eating instrument is a table spoon: *chawn dto*, presented with the plate. It is held in the right hand, and used to cut, dissect, and scoop. A fork, *sawn*, is held in the left hand, used primarily as a "pusher" to get food onto the spoon. Thais do not place a fork into their mouths as a general rule; it seems dangerous to stick such a sharp object into the mouth. For soups, Thais use a Chinese-style, deep, ovate, flat-bottomed spoon (*chawn tom*), which is presented with the bowl of soup or curry at Sap's. Chopsticks (*dta giab*) are used in Thailand almost exclusively for eating noodles, when they are used at all. In deference to the large number of Asians that regularly dine at Sap's, chopsticks are provided as part of the place setting. You should not place your chopsticks into your empty bowl when finished: it's considered bad luck, since it is symbolic of death. Thais would never put their lips to the top of a drink can or bottle, so a glass and drinking straw (*laawt duut*) is always provided.

## **Thai Table Manners:**

Whereas Western diners will tend to order individual dishes they share only when offering the occasional taste to fellow diners, Thais prefer to go about it in a far more social manner. Thais generally eat in a communal manner, sharing dishes among the group of diners. Care is taken to order a collection of dishes that is varied and balanced, and that covers a full range of tastes. Thais have a term for the blending and balancing of flavors in a properly planned meal: *kurn jao tong pai doey kan*. Spicy, sweet, salty, and sour, as well as seafood, meats, and vegetables will all be represented,

along with at least one soup or curry. The task of ordering is normally left up to the senior women in the group. Dishes such as noodles are generally excluded, since they are typically a *jaan diaow*, a one-plate meal meant to be eaten by one person dining alone.

In Thailand, as at Sap's, dishes are served as soon as they are cooked so that the food emerges from the kitchen piping hot. Consider that Sap's kitchen, unlike much of the competition, cooks every single dish to order, separately. Sap's does make the concession to bring appetizers out first, which is not the general rule in Thailand, where everything is delivered from the kitchen as soon as possible.

Thais will almost always eat their food with a plate of rice, since the flavors tend to be strong and concentrated. Thais add small amounts of each dish to their rice, tasting each dish separately. To take a large portion at once is considered greedy. They would never consider dumping their rice into the serving bowl, or mixing their rice into a dish all at once. Ideally, Thais will take as much as can be eaten in two or three bites at one time, and then move on to the next dish. It ensures that there is plenty of each dish for all at the table to share, and makes the dining experience relaxed and more enjoyable. It is polite to wait until the most important person at the table invites the group to help themselves before starting to eat.

Rather than pass the dishes around the table, Thais will pass their individual plate or soup cup to the person nearest to the dish they wish to try next. It is considered rude to not clean your plate, since it implies that the food wasn't good enough to finish to the last morsel. It is also considered rude to incline a serving dish, so that every morsel can be scraped onto a diner's plate. The goal is to extract every bit of wonderful food without appearing to be greedy.

In Thailand, the bill is presented to the person who seems to be the most important, and they are expected to pay the tab. Over there, as at Sap's, the bill is paid through the waitperson, and *not* paid at the counter. In America, where the tip is *not* included in the bill (unless you are with a party of five or more), a tip is expected by the server.

## **Final Suggestions:**

As good as the *pad thai* is at Sap's, there are dozens of other wonderful dishes on the extensive menu, in all categories, that are just as good as the *pad thai*. Try to get out of the rut of ordering the same dish every time, and learn to explore the menu. The service staff can be very helpful in making suggestions if you are unsure about a dish. There is a wealth of authentic, delicious Thai food to be found on Sap's menu, and the savvy diner will want to experience a broad range of the excellent Thai culinary repertoire to be found within.

Where feasible, Sap's will try to moderate the heat of a dish, but that is *not* always possible; the waitperson will know if it can be done or not, and will be happy to let you know. For your convenience, the menu has small chile symbols next to each item on the menu which gives an indication of the relative spiciness of a dish. If you have exceeded your heat quotient, the most effective way to sooth your mouth is to have a

glass of refreshing Thai iced tea or Thai iced coffee, or a bowl of Sap's excellent house-made ice cream or sorbet; dairy is the most effective way to beat the heat of chiles.

We hope that this primer on Thai-style dining has been beneficial, and will make your dining experience at Sap's Fine Thai Cuisine even more authentic and enjoyable.