

## Metro Restaurant Reviews

August 2005... by Laurie Black

Ratings: \*\* **very good**

KHAO is not your average Thai restaurant. Not local, not cheap, not a carbon-copy menu. Not even necessarily traditional. All of which is good (not that I have anything against cheap eating, and they somehow managed to gain points on this score too; read on...). The decorators have been to town in what has been a tricky spot on the ground floor of Chancery Chambers. Against buttery yellow walls there are glossy subtropical plants, modern gilded sculptures and more chandeliers than Versailles. Well, probably not. Let's just say there are a lot, both of the pendant and sconce variety, and they look rather fab. The effect is jungle-glam.

Obviously we're past average ratings already here. Service at Khao is well above that level too. - on two visits it has been attentive, utterly charming and very friendly, and on the second night, which was bleak outside, a gas heater was quietly brought over to help hasten our defrosting. Most endearing of all, as I paid, the first rendition of the bill was quietly binned and a second prepared because the thoughtful man remembered giving us a discount voucher the previous week so he had deducted 10 percent from our bill, unprompted.

SO TO THE FOOD. Khao's chef has cooked at Huka Lodge, and there are certainly high standards apparent here. The menu is a balance of traditional dishes and innovations; it's the first time I've seen a Thai menu that seems to have noticed it's in New Zealand. Some dishes make the most of New Zealand meat, including lamb: we tried flamed, thinly sliced rare scotch fillet on roasted vegetables with tamarind and dried chilli sauce, a dish that satisfied the steak urge at the same time as being fragrant and quite lip-burningly hot. ("Kiwi hot, not Thai hot," our waiter had suggested. Well, yes.)

Ocean's Harmony, a rich, spicy mixture of seafood, arrived in a foil basket on a searing hot cast-iron plate. We encountered a slight surprise in the roast duck curry; I was intrigued to try a Thai-Chinese dish with backyard New Zealand fruit in it, but "grapefruits" turned out to be grapes, of course. The dish I most want to get back to is the exemplary beef salad: tender prime beef, punchy limes dressing, slivers of cucumber. Delicious, and piled high. Actually, the generous serving were almost a hindrance, keeping us from dining Thai-style on five dishes at a time.

While the food, service and decor made the greatest impression, it's worth noting that Khao has a much better wine list than any Thai place I've been to in years. We enjoyed a Pegasus Bay riesling; Australian guru of Thai cookery David Thompson swears by pinot noir with Thai food but it didn't work for me.

I had been graciously invited to the opening of Khao, but declined in the interests of prolonged anonymity. Now I wonder if what I thought was a slight difficulty with English was in fact intentional: the invitation read: "Certainly, we inevitably raise the higher standard of Thai culinary in Auckland". Too true.

## RESTAURANT REVIEWS

## KHAO THAI CUISINE ★★

2 Chancery St, City. Ph 377-5088. \$\$

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LAURIE BLACK

## THE GROVE ★★★

St Patrick's Sq, City. Ph 368-4129. \$\$-\$\$\$

**W**e're back at The Grove for our first serious inspection since our Restaurant of the Year Awards judging earlier in the year. And it's a pleasure. We are lucky enough to have one of the very nice tables for two that are right up against the Albert Street window. The room has been softened by a delicate wash of colour on the walls; suede-covered padded chair seats offer comfort. Granted, it's not quite so pretty if you have one of the tables in the

KEN DOWNE