

EXTRA

DINING

Addictive eats end Thai search

By ANNE HARRINGTON

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Finding a Thai restaurant in Northern Virginia is not difficult. However, finding a good one can sometimes be, but Manee Thai on Columbia Pike in Arlington, Va., fits the bill.

What is it about Thai food that makes it so addictive? The distinctive blend of chilies, garlic, ginger, lime juice and fish sauce that creates that remarkable sweet-spicy flavor in every Thai dish can start your mouth watering just thinking about it. Manee Thai's kitchen achieves that perfect blend of seasonings in each dish. And the food is anything but ordinary.

Start your meal with a steaming bowl of hot soup. Tom kha gai (\$2.95) is a heavenly scented soup with slices of chicken breast in a broth made with coconut milk, fragrant lemongrass and galanga, a relative of ginger root. The soup tastes as good as it smells. The richness of the coconut milk infuses the chicken for a burst of

flavor in every spoonful.

Another soup option is the spicy tom yum goong (\$3.95). This soup has a clear base flavored with lime juice, lemongrass and fresh chilies and loaded with black tiger shrimp and straw mushrooms.

The best way to work your way through the menu is to order a little of this and a little of that. Don't worry about ordering too much; leftover Thai straight from the fridge is always a treat. Of course, if you go ahead and clean your plate, don't run screaming to the gym. Thai food is known for lots of flavor but not lots of calories and fat.

Salads, for example, are fresh and bursting with flavor. The dressings are usually extremely light, with a base of lime juice and no cream or oils. The som tum papaya salad (\$5.95) is a delicious example. Unripe, green papaya is julienned then mixed with roasted peanuts, string beans, chopped tomatoes and tossed with a spicy lime

Manee Thai
 2500 Columbia Pike
 Arlington, Va.
 (703) 920-2033
 Open from 11:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Monday through Wednesday, 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, and 11:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Sunday.
 Major credit cards accepted.

dressing. Order the salad with the optional dried shrimp, they are a nice salty addition. Nua nom tok (\$4.95) also is a great salad with thinly sliced grilled beef tossed with scallions, red onion and cilantro served on salad greens and again dressed with a spicy lime-based dressing.

Entrees, across the board, are well-prepared and presented. You probably won't go wrong with any selection, so let your taste buds be your guide.

There are, however, several items that should not be overlooked.

When they are available, the soft-shell crabs — pu nim (price is seasonal) — are outstanding. Fried to crispy-crunchy perfection, the crabs are served with a choice of a fiery hot chili and garlic sauce; black bean, mushroom and ginger sauce; or a somewhat unusual celery, onion and curry sauce.

The drunken noodles (\$7.95),

a dish worth ordering just for the name, also is delicious. Fresh wide rice noodles are stir-fried with chilies, garlic, fresh Thai basil, tomatoes and a choice of beef, chicken or pork. The noodles have a wonderful, slippery texture.

For dessert, the banana roll (\$3.95) is an interesting dish. A ripe banana is wrapped in rice paper and covered with thick-sweet syrup. Coconut milk or lychee ice cream (\$2.95) can be a nice way to end your meal, however, when it is available, the traditional Thai dessert of fresh mango and sticky rice (\$3.95) is definitely the way to go. The combination of sweet, ripe mango and thick, hot rice that has been simmered in richly flavored coconut milk is unbelievably good.

Manee Thai restaurant upholds the fine reputation of excellent Thai cuisine with fresh and inventive dishes well-prepared in the traditional manner.