

Asparagus

A fusion of Thai, Vietnamese and French

BY DONNA KIESLING

Never having tried Thai cuisine, I was hesitant about venturing out to Asparagus restaurant in Merrillville.

But one dinner taught me food from this region does not have to set your mouth afire (although it can, if you'd like).

Executive chef Tammy Pham and her husband, Sapion Chung, opened Asparagus in September in the building that formerly housed Balagio. The couple also owns the two Siam Marina restaurants in Calumet City, Illinois.

"I grew up a city girl," Pham, who hails from Saigon, says with a laugh. "It was hard to me to move (a restaurant) here."

The restaurant features muted lighting and colors of cream and soft green. Stalks of straw between glass panes serve as wall décor and small candles flicker on tables. Classical music provides a nice ambience.

Asparagus has an extensive standing wine list along with special selections. The entire menu has a good array of choices, from starters to dessert, and its namesake vegetable stars in many dishes.

The food is a fusion of Thai, Vietnamese and French influences. For appetizers, we had the Phnom Penh



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prawns (\$10), which were marinated and grilled and served satay-style on skewers with Cambodian dipping sauce (a modified sweet and sour). Spicy Lemongrass Beef (\$9), marinated in lemongrass, sesame seeds, herbs, chopped onion, garlic and honey, was tasty yet deceptively spicy and delivered with hot sauce and cucumber salad.

Our waiter also assured us the kitchen will tone down items listed as "spicy" for less adventurous diners.

The asparagus and crabmeat soup (\$7) was deliciously light and filled with delicate noodles, while the crispy asparagus salad (also \$7) arrived bathed in a lively peanut dressing. The Asparagus Beef Lover (\$22) consisted of beef tenderloin marinated in the restaurant's own steak sauce and blended with aspar-

agus, soy sauce and stir-fried Thai basil mixed vegetables, accompanied by a side of rice. This dish, though milder, had intense flavor.

Seafood Panang (\$25) was a tantalizing concoction of shrimp, scallops, green mussel and squid in a curry of cardamom and coconut milk with Thai basil and fresh pounded peanuts.

Desserts are made from scratch by Asparagus' pastry chef. Choices include tiramisu and crème brûlée, but more exotic are the green tea or pumpkin ice creams and green tea and raspberry cheesecake lollipops. The seasonal Yule log was a creamy milk chocolate confection, while the flourless chocolate cake flavored with Chambord was satisfying and sweet. All were priced at \$7.

There also are several dessert wines, plus coffee, cappuccino, latte, espresso and hot green, herbal or jasmine tea.

Located at 7876 Broadway in Merrillville, Asparagus is open for lunch Monday-Friday from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Dinner hours are Monday-Thursday, 5-10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5 to 11 p.m.; and Sunday, noon to 9 p.m. For more information, call 219-794-0000. ■