

living/

# TUCKING IN TO A JOURNEY OF SURPRISES

It's a lesson in culinary theatrics at Sra Bua by Kiin Kiin, the fine dining outlet of the luxury Siam Kempinski Hotel in Bangkok, writes **Fauziah Ismail**

“THE piece of land where the hotel is, used to be part of the palace grounds,” Samir R. Wildemann tells me as we sit across each other at the dining table at Sra Bua by Kiin Kiin restaurant. “And here, where we are now, used to be the lotus pond,” adds the German national, who is the general manager of Siam Kempinski Hotel Bangkok.

Sra Bua, in Thai language, means “lotus pond”. And there are two man-made square lotus ponds of different sizes in the restaurant itself. The lotus occupies a very special place in the lives of the Thai people. Legend has it that when Buddha took his first seven steps after his birth, lotus blooms opened from underneath to support the tender soles of his feet.

Sra Bua, which is the fine dining offering at the luxury Siam Kempinski Hotel Bangkok, is a duplicate of its sister restaurant, Kiin Kiin, in Copenhagen, Denmark, which is the only Thai restaurant in the world to have a Michelin star.

Kiin, in Thai, means “eat”. Kiin Kiin is owned by French-trained chef Henrik Yde-Andersen, who is from Denmark, and Thai-Danish software engineer, restaurateur and entrepreneur, Lerchai Treetawatchaiwong.

Glancing at the menu, I note a section labelled as “The Journey”. Below it is a list of 10 dishes, five of which are appetisers, two mains, a palate cleanser and two desserts. “Hey, there’s curry in the menu,” I exclaim to KSK Land head of communications Alex Lim, who’s seated to Samir’s left. He had earlier whispered to me that there’s no green curry in the menu. What, no curry in a Thai restaurant? Green curry is in fact the 19th item on CNN Travel’s World’s 50 Most Delicious Foods (Readers’ Pick) in 2011.

But the menu reads a little funny. Frozen Red Curry, DIY Noodles, Flower Shop, and Crab Cornetto? Sra Bua is certainly not your typical Thai restaurant. Neither is Kiin Kiin.

**MOLECULAR GASTRONOMY**  
Yde-Andersen’s love affair with Thai food began in 2006 while holidaying in Krabi. It was the burst of flavours of the classic Thai soup with coconut milk called Tom Khra (which made his eyes water, he said in an interview that made him stay on in Thailand for the next five years. He worked in the Thai kitchens to learn as much as he could before flying back to open his own restaurant in Copenhagen.

“We were jealous that the French-style restaurants held a monopoly on fine dining. We wanted to see if we could morph the two worlds together,” Yde-Andersen wrote in a little booklet which was given to us after the dinner.

What they have done at their Thai restaurants is to deconstruct the Thai dishes through molecular gastronomy where the chefs experiment culinary possibilities by using ingredients from the food industry and cooking them using tools from the science laboratories.

Molecular gastronomy entails, among others, the use of carbon dioxide to add bubbles and make foams, liquid nitrogen (to freeze soups, sauces and gravy), food dehydrator, maltodextrin (to turn high-fat liquid into a powder), lecithin (an emulsifier and non-stick agent), hydrocolloids such as starch, gelatin, pectin and natural gums (as thickening agents, gelling agents, emulsifying agents and stabilisers, sometimes needed for foams), edible paper made from soy beans and potato starch.

The term “molecular gastronomy” was first coined in 1992 by Oxford physicist Nicholas Kurti and French chemist Hervé This. Some chefs, however, prefer to call it multi-sensory cooking, modernist cuisine,



Sra Bua dining area.



There’s also minced scallop mixed with a coconut sauce served in a lotus flower floating in a vase. Yes, what I had thought was a piece of decoration turned out to be a dish.

culinary physics and experimental cuisine. A quick Google search took me to a molecular recipes website which shared the history to this. An English teacher of cookery, Elizabeth Cawdry Thomas, had proposed a workshop in which professional cooks could learn about the physics and chemistry of cooking.

She was married to a physicist whom she met at a physics conference in the Ettore Majorana Centre for Scientific Culture in Erice, Italy. At that time, there was a group of scientists who used to have annual meetings in Erice to discuss the physics and chemistry of cooking but there were no chefs involved.

Thomas then recruited Kurti, an Oxford physicist who had a television show and had written a book about the science of cooking. The organising group was then completed by the addition of Harold McGee, the American food science writer, and This, French physical chemist and magazine editor in Paris.

It has, therefore, become a household concept over the last 20 years, with some of the world’s best and most well-known chefs such as Heston Blumenthal and Ferran Adria, who was the first to embrace science in the kitchen at restaurant el Bulli, and Yde-Andersen, swapping their toque blanche (white hat) and apron for a lab coat, and may maybe, safety goggles.

Yde-Andersen himself had, in some interviews, described what he had done to the Thai dishes as a “suicidal mission” but one worthy of a star of excellence from Michelin. A one-star Michelin restaurant is defined as “a very good restaurant in its category”, two Michelin stars denotes “excellent cooking, worth a detour” and three means “exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey”.

I’m told the Michelin inspectors are due to visit Sra Bua but of course they’ll come unannounced. The restaurant would only get to know if they have been rated after the visit.

**CREATIVE FLAIR**

Every plate, from start to finish, is a piece of art at Sra Bua. And there are plenty of theatrics that captivate us when dishes are brought to the dining table. Unabashedly, we whip out our camera phones to take photographs and shoot one-minute videos of our food, much to the amusement of Wildemann and Lim.

Although he’s dined at Sra Bua a few times before, Lim never let us to us what to expect, “...lest it would lose the element

of surprise,” he says, chuckling.

Personally, I couldn’t wait to try the frozen red curry but there are five other appetisers before that. Well, not exactly. There are nibbles before “The Journey” starts, all based on Thai street food. We’re served, among others, crispy chicken skin with frozen balls of satay sauce, crunchily soya sauce meringue with wasabi dipping and a bag of spiced nuts. “Dip the meringue in the sauce and eat it,” instructs Wildemann, before adding: “And that bag is edible.”

There’s also minced scallop mixed with coconut sauce and served in a lotus flower floating in a vase. Yes, what I had thought was a piece of decoration turned out to be a dish.

But the most flavourful among all the nibbles is the Thai-style chicken sausage, which is smoked to perfection. “When you eat this, you’ll feel like you’re eating the sausage by the roadside. In fact, some people say it smells like the back of a tuk-tuk. That’s the street smell for you,” says Wildemann.

After what seems like an endless serving of nibbles, the waitress emerges at the table with a bowl filled with what I thought was sugar (I didn’t dare try) and some seashells decorated on the top. A drinking straw is poked into the “sugar”. This is how the first appetiser, Laksa-based crab, is served.

On the side is grilled squid and oyster tempura with a sour and spicy dipping sauce. The soup is buried under the sugar and we’re instructed to get to the soup using the straw.

Suffice to say, I’m pretty curious by nature. I really wanted to know what’s under the sugar. After sucking on the thick and creamy soup, I pull the straw out of the sugar. Tied to the straw is a small plastic bag which held the soup. “Now, that looks like garbage on the beach,” the waitress says as she clears the table for the next four appetisers.

The Maine Lobster Salad and frozen red curry are served in a bowl with vapour (happens when water is added to dry ice) rising out of the bowl’s hollow base. This, I’m duly informed, is Sra Bua’s signature dish. I read that Yde-Andersen discovered the dish by accident. He woke up starving one morning and pulled out a container of leftover curry, which had frozen. He ate it as it was with rice and found it to be delicious. The explosion of flavours in the mouth is unexpected as the frozen red curry melts inside. Liquid nitrogen freezes the curry but does not in any way compromise its flavours.

Another interesting presentation is Beef Masaman with Potato, Five Spiced Soup and DIY Noodles. Yes, we have to prepare the tofu noodles ourselves using a syringe. Draw the tofu into the syringe and then release it into the bowl of soup.

The final dish on the menu is Thailand’s ubiquitous dessert, Mango with Sticky Rice. A tiny amount of glutinous rice is placed at the bottom of a clear glass bowl and topped with diced mango. On top is a ball of coconut cotton candy. “Are you ready?” the waitress asks as I prepare to switch on the video function on the phone. She pours the coconut sauce on the cotton candy and it melts onto the mango and sticky rice.

“Are you sure that’s the final one?” I ask her. “Yes, yes,” she replies, smiling but within minutes returns with a selection of petit fours and jellies in the shape of Lego blocks to cap the long-drawn dinner.

Why Lego? Well, the chef is a Dane after all. ➔ [fauziah@nt.com.my](mailto:fauziah@nt.com.my)



Foie Gras with ginger and plum wine.



Frozen Red Curry with lobster salad.



Banana Cake with salted ice-cream and caramelised milk.



Tom Ka with baby corn and chanterelle mushroom (frozen).



Chef Henrik Yde-Andersen