

Banana Leaf offers a blend of Asian food traditions

Hamilton Spectator

It's always appealing to find some "cross-over" in the food a restaurant offers. I was at a place in New York some years ago that boasted it did a "fusion" of French and Japanese. That was very creative.

There's nothing quite that ambitious around here, but the owners of Banana Leaf in downtown Stoney Creek are thinking along similar lines.

They describe their food as "Asian Cuisine" without specifying it's Chinese or Thai or Vietnamese. It is in fact all those things, a menu best described as "pan-Asian."

A few of the true classics are there. Hot and sour soup. Satays. Pad Thai. Some regional specialties also crop up, but by and large the food at Banana Leaf is a happy mélange of ingredients and techniques that is rather difficult to pin down as to exact origin.

It's all very homestyle, the way you'd do it in your own kitchen.

The service is unflaggingly friendly and welcoming. On this cold evening, they cranked up the fireplace on the far wall (could have cranked down the music a bit, though, as it was quite loud). Still, it's the food that counts, and Banana Leaf gets very good marks for what comes out of the kitchen.

First up was a bit of a surprise, a bowl of house-made crisp noodles normally served with the soups but that they've started offering as a little snack.

We've all had those packaged "chow mein noodles" that are invariably doughy-tasting and bland. These fried treats were a few millimetres thick, delicate and lightly salted. Delicious. They really ought to package them and sell them as is.

Now the food we'd asked for started to arrive. That skewer platter (\$11.95) had great appeal, offering six good-sized spears resting atop a bit of salad and some cold Vitenamese rice noodles with a vague touch of vinegar. There were two skewers each of grilled beef, chicken and shrimp, making for a very substantial appetizer.

All the meats were lightly seasoned and dusted/crusted. The chicken and the beef were very good (could have used a bit more seasoning), but the shrimp stole the show — they were tender and just a hint briny.

We had chosen a dish of garlic bok choy (\$7.95) as a side, almost an afterthought. It was stellar. And here I thought I had sort of invented the concept at home; clean up some crisp bok choy, sauté a little chopped garlic in a bit of oil, add the veggies for a bare minute or so and voilà. The dish as presented at Banana Leaf was light and mild, the stalks were tender-crisp, the green leaves were just slightly wilted, and the garlic added a beautiful dimension of flavour.

The two mains were also highly satisfying.

The Thai-inspired green curry chicken (\$10.95) was loaded with chunks of chicken and lots of vegetables — carrot, peppers, onion, broccoli and mushrooms — in a properly soupy (not overly thick) gravy based on green chili paste that added a definite spicy bite but was not too searing, and was also redolent of coriander, lemongrass and had a subtle sweetness as well.

The duck nest (\$13.95) was most intriguing, and one of those items that certainly crossed over Asian cultural lines.

I could see different culinary traditions in the dish. It's basically stir-fried pieces of boneless roast duck (I was thinking BBQ duck you see hanging in Chinese restaurant windows) with vegetables — bamboo, carrot, shiitake and a chewy/crunchy black "mushroom" known as tree ear — mounded into a bowl of shredded and fried potatoes.

The duck had a hearty roasted flavour and was especially tender, and the mushrooms in particular added a nice woodsiness and contrast of texture.



Banana Leaf in Stoney Creek: A restaurant worth trying, says Dan Kislenko.



A spicy bite: Green curry chicken at Banana Leaf.



Garlic bok choy: A beautiful dimension of flavour.

It was a very nice dinner at Banana Leaf. The atmosphere is good, the food is fresh and plentiful, the concept is adventurous. Certainly, this is a restaurant worth trying.

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Banana Leaf Asian Cuisine

44 King St. E, Unit 8, Stoney Creek

905-662-5557

Bananaleafasiancuisine.ca

The look: Spacious, crisp, strip mall storefront

The feel: Friendly

Hours: Tuesday to Thursday 11:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., Friday 11:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m., Saturday noon to 10:30 p.m., Sunday noon to 9:30 p.m.

What you'll pay: Vietnamese shrimp fresh rolls are \$5.95 (two pieces). Pan-fried pork dumplings are \$7.95 for six. The vegetarian Tofu muoi cay is \$7.95. Sizzling black bean chicken is \$10.95. Thai beef stir-fry is \$10.95. Bun thang (round noodle soup) with chicken, Vietnamese sausage and egg is \$9.95.

The restaurant is wheelchair accessible.