

Wild Ginger: The Thai That Binds

Carl Pelofsky

Imagine for a moment walking into Don Mueang International Airport, making your way into the bourgeois (the word you want to use is “remarkable,” but you are jaded and anxious) United Club, sitting in a futuristic fiberglass seat surrounded by light-colored woods, brilliant polished nickel, walls made of glass, and waiting for one of the servers—beautiful but non-descript, charming but detached—to bring you your house thai margarita, fired with chili infused tequila, grapefruit juice, offered in a glass with a sea salt rim. You turn to your right to find the man at the table next to you has chosen the Scuttlebutt Porter, a local brew from Everett, and it is only then that you remember that you are not in Bangkok at all, but at Wild Ginger right here in downtown Seattle.

Months ago in my review of the Vietnamese Hipster Wanna-Bistro Tamarind Tree, I reminded you that Seattle’s location on the West Coast did not purport, as Tamarind Tree reinforced, any true connection to the Pacific Rim, neither geographically nor gastronomically. Its spring rolls were tragically fall, its grilled eggplant a fractured Humpty Dumpty, the bloom frightfully faded and dreadfully wilted from its Lily Blossom Halibut.

So with renewed (if forced) optimism I make my way to Wild Ginger, another stylized, overly wrought concept, painfully slick and implicitly tony, packed with slightly narrower ties and Angel Jackson knockoffs. At the suggestion of my waiter, who comically asks me to call him simply H., I begin with the lemongrass tofu. The menu reads “made with hints of chili,” so I pursue the clues frantically and fruitlessly, biting hopefully into the insipid sponges, finally abandoning them and asking H. to discreetly whisper to the chef that a hint is only magical if at some point there might be a revelation.

The man next to me, finishing his first Scuttlebutt Porter, tears through the Cambodian-style Kom Pot Short Ribs, pulling flesh from bone with the ferocity of the very Bangkok boar that the Wild Ginger itself serves with a surprisingly aromatic raisin plum sauce.

I move quickly to the laksa, a spicy seafood bouillabaisse from Malaysia. The fish labeled fresh was mealy, the scallops chewy, and the proudly-claimed “local” mussels would have been wiser to have invited cousins in from Portland to simmer in this coconut broth-based dish fit not for the Skipper nor his first mate. And at the Wild Ginger I suddenly find myself not a red-headed movie star but an increasingly agitated Mrs. Howell, while my neighbor, the beer-swilling, rib-eating Professor, insolently slurps his Mekong Hot & Sour, eyeing me, his Mary Ann, and taunting me with his taro stem, fried shallot, pineapple, tomato and glorious trio of mint leaves.

Hope desperately waning, I move to the main dish. After much consultation with H. I choose the Seabass. Identified puzzlingly as “Certified Sustainable,” the fish draws me in through the notion that my consumption of him functions as a beginning for this friend, not the end, and I choose the green mango paste and yellow curry over the peanuts and fresh Asian herbs to coat him on his ride down the River (Chop) Styx. My neighbor, now on his fourth Porter, chooses the troublingly pedestrian duck. The house specialty—the first item in the entrée section. Predictable and mundane. Laughable.

The bass presents itself beautifully, an inspirational palette of green, gold and dashing white, firm and confident on the plate. I admire it with the understanding that all that came before it merely dissonant prelude, while this piece the sonata, the concerto, the symphony. With my baton I strike

the downbeat, and from adagio to accelerando, I am he, and he, I.

The first measure strikes a chord. But with each bite the tempo becomes uneven, the rhythm indiscernible, the notes dots on a page, unreadable, inscrutable. The mango paste sits on the plate, a discordant soupy mess. The curry underwhelms, a broken string, a flimsy, tattered, dime-store bow. The bass itself, once urgently mapping its climb to baritone, loses its way, absent a voice.

At my own table in the next seat appears the Scuttlebutt Porter himself. In front of him the truly succulent duck, now divided neatly in two, separated onto a pair of small plates. Together we share the aroma of cinnamon and star anise, an alluring licorice, a delectable candy. I ask him to leave, but he refuses, the two portions strikingly equal, the bass shoved carelessly to the side.

“Try it,” he says. “It’s good.”

I reach across the table for my original plate, but weakly, begrudgingly, I taste the duck. I feel a smile teasing, but I suppress it, remembering that the first bite of the bass masqueraded as more than fine. But the second bite of the duck is even better, as is the third, as is the fourth, and before long we share the duck in all its majesty, in our reverie, until all that remains on the table is the memory of all that I had tried before, all that had frustrated me, all that I had found disappointing and disillusioning.

Wild Ginger, 1401 Third Avenue, Seattle \$\$\$

Food: ★★★★★

Atmosphere: ★★★★★

Service: ★★