

May 2, 2004

DINING OUT; Pan-Asian in Hampton Bays

By JOANNE STARKEY

MATSULIN quietly took root in Hampton Bays over the winter. This pan-Asian restaurant, whose name means pine woods, offers several cuisines: Chinese, Japanese, Malaysian, Thai and Vietnamese, bolstered by a few dishes from Singapore.

The staff is as diverse as the food. The owners are Malaysian, the sushi chef from Japan and other chefs from Hong Kong and Malaysia. The dining room crew was sweet and accommodating, even remembering second-timers by name and recalling their food preferences. On a blustery, early spring, mid-week meal, when the restaurant was nearly empty, service was exceptionally attentive and concerned. On a busy Saturday with tables filled with many large parties, some of the niceties fell by the wayside. That night the table was never wiped off between courses. But the kitchen was still speedy and the busy busgirl topped off water glasses every few minutes.

Matsulin is housed in a building that very obviously was once a branch bank. Diners enter the restaurant from the parking lot in the rear. Inside, they see an airy, almost stark room with green walls, bare tables and lots of blond wood. Darker wood square columns and beams outline a sushi bar.

The menu is dominated by dishes from China, Japan and Malaysia. They are joined by nine from Thailand, three from Vietnam and two from Singapore. Diners can have fun zeroing in on old favorites or trying something new. In the first category were edamame, which got the meal off to a good start. Those warm, salty, in-the-shell soybeans were addictive.

Other friends that made a good showing were an appetizer portion of filigree shrimp tempura and vegetables, an order of assorted sushi rolls and a spicy Thai salad of cold pristine seafood, jicama and Napa cabbage. Do-it-yourself lettuce wraps, hailing from Hong Kong, featured cool crunchy lettuce cups and an especially flavorful hot minced pork filling.

A bit more unusual were the martini shrimp from Thailand. Six large shrimp were covered in thin eggroll wrappers, crisply fried and served in a martini glass with a spicy dipping sauce on the side. The dish created a sensation, as did the dainty Vietnamese basil spring rolls and the Thai crab cakes, which consisted of four golf ball-size spheres with a texture similar to the topping on shrimp toast. We loved them, but they arrived on a bed of emerald green coconut, not the promised jicama-pineapple salsa.

The beautiful salmon sashimi salad, a colorful mosaic of bright raw fish, cucumber, onion and mint, satisfied, but a very bland pork and pickled vegetable soup didn't.

Entrees had the same high success rate as appetizers. Our favorites were crunchy, sweet-tangy Malaysian spareribs and the three thin Saigon pork chops, which profited from a tasty marinade. Both of these entrees appeared with rice and a clump of salad dressed in a creamy ginger amalgam. Another headliner was the whole crispy fish under a mantle of julienned peppers, onions and mango in a sweet-sour sauce. Fish yuki, pan-fried fillets with a ginger-scallion topper, set upon a bed of baby bok choy passed muster but was less spectacular.

Dishes I'd order again are the tuna soba (pan-seared slices of rare tuna surrounding cold noodles in a peanut butter sauce) and a Malaysian dish called ayam mangga: Sliced white meat chicken tossed with strips of colorful peppers and mango, mint and a chili-fueled sauce, then piled into fresh mango boats. Long beans stir fried in bean sauce with preserved vegetables got thumbs up, as did two noodle dishes: Pad Thai, which was a moist rendition, and crab meat

yifu mee from Singapore, which starred angel-hair pasta with shrimp and bean sprouts. The menu listed crab rather than shrimp and noted that the dish was served in a hot pot. Ours came on a plate. One offering that failed to please was daging rendang from Malaysia, described as steak cubes in "dry coconut curry." It was the meat that was dry.

Dessert was limited to ice cream, tempura fried bananas or a combination of the two. The last was a super sundae of two vertically split bananas in crunchy coats nestled alongside scoops of vanilla ice cream with a drizzle of chocolate sauce. One night, free fresh orange slices provided a refreshing finale to a tasty meal at this agreeable newcomer.

Matsulin

131 West Montauk Highway, Hampton Bays, (631)728-8838.

Very Good

ATMOSPHERE -- Open, airy Asian.

SERVICE -- Speedy, concerned, usually attentive. May falter on busy nights.

SOUND LEVEL -- Average.

RECOMMENDED DISHES -- Vietnamese spring rolls, martini shrimp, lettuce wraps, crab cakes, edamame, shrimp tempura, sushi roll trilogy, spicy seafood salad, salmon sashimi salad, crispy fish, spareribs, pork chops, ayam mangga, tuna soba, spicy long beans, pad Thai, fried banana sundae.

WINE LIST -- A leather bound list of 19 with prices of \$16 to \$48.

PRICE RANGE -- Lunch, entrees \$8 to \$15 (include soup or salad). Dinner, appetizers \$3 to \$8; entrees \$12 to \$26 (Peking duck \$39).

CREDIT CARDS -- Visa and MasterCard.

HOURS -- Lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Dinner, 5 to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, till 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 12:30 to 10 p.m. Sunday. Closed Monday.

RESERVATIONS -- Needed on weekends.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBILITY -- Fully accessible.

REVIEWED BY THE TIMES -- May 2, 2004.

RATINGS -- Extraordinary, Excellent, Very Good, Good, Satisfactory, Fair, Poor. Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.