

TOP 5 spots where Fusion meets Pan-Asian

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There's been a blurring, of late, of the line between menus defined as pan-Asian (each dish from a distinct Asian country) and those that are Asian fusion (a marriage of East and West in terms of flavors and techniques). Instead of quibbling, why not simply enjoy these five restaurants, which showcase Asian cookery in multiple ways?

BAANG CAFE & BAR. 8285 Jericho Tpke., Woodbury, 516-692-0809. For Asian food that pops, this high-energy Woodbury restaurant presents a lively range of choices, many reflecting a marriage of French techniques and Asian traditions. The crackling calamari salad, sparked with lime, chili and miso, is a virtual must-order. So is the chicken salad made with Napa cabbage and a sesame vinaigrette. A main course such as the grilled Shanghai beef in hot oil with cilantro, shallots and soy shows just what the kitchen can do. Desserts - such as the bittersweet chocolate pagoda - are as pretty as they are indulgent.

BLUE OCEAN. 300 Central Ave., Bethpage, 516-822-2888. With a menu both pan-Asian and Asian fusion, this sleekly contemporary Bethpage restaurant serves up such inventive dishes as a tuna "Manhattan" in a cocktail glass and a multilayered sushi "cake." A highlight from chef Raymond Lin's French-Asian repertoire is his fragrant oven-roasted sea bass with lemon butter sauce and Asian greens.

MATSULIN. 131 W. Montauk Hwy., Hampton Bays, 631-728-8838. Situated in a space that once functioned as a bank, Matsulin offers a wealth of Asian dishes from a variety of countries. What surprises is that everything - from the explosive "volcano" maki roll to the Malaysian chicken curry to the crisp Vietnamese-style calamari to the Chinese fried honey chicken - is disarmingly good. Not to be missed is the Phuket fried brown rice with chicken, shrimp, eggs, cashews and fresh pineapple.

SWEET BASIL FUSION RESTAURANT & BAR. 6500 Jericho Tpke., Commack, 631-499-1828. One spoonful of chef Anand Tiwadam's lemongrass-infused parsnip soup is all you need to know you've arrived at a place where the cooking is as confident as it is inventive. This is a cavernous space but one that's hard to find, since it's tucked into a corner of a nondescript strip mall. There's nothing nondescript about the steamed black cod in brown butter ginger soy broth or the Chilean sea bass served over bok choy with miso orange emulsion.

WILD GINGER. 48 Great Neck Rd., Great Neck, 516-487-8288. True, you may not be able to carry on an intimate conversation at this splashy high-decibel hot spot in a Great Neck shopping center, but here it's really about the food, both pan-Asian and Asian fusion. Highlights include the Sichuan-style ravioli, the Vietnamese summer roll and the "fire wok" - lobster, shrimp and scallops in a Thai curry sauce.