

Alison Cook: Restaurant Review



The Enomatic wine-dispensing system at Rattan allows the eatery to keep wine fresh so it can be served in impeccable condition either by the glass or by the taste.

KAREN WARREN: CHRONICLE

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A new breed of bistro

By Alison Cook, Houston Chronicle 2007

Rattan's Pan-Asian cuisine still lacks focus, but its exemplary wine service hints at good things to come

From its handsome contemporary design to its freewheeling menu to its groundbreaking argon-replacement wine system, Rattan Pan-Asian Bistro is the sort of restaurant you would expect to encounter inside Houston's Loop 610.

Yet its lofty two-story entrance and crisp stone facade overlook Eldridge Parkway in west Houston, where it joins Aka Japanese Cuisine and Le Mistral in a mini restaurant row that would be welcome anywhere in the city.

Rattan, a project of Sinh Sinh founder and former owner Ron Chen, marks the latest in a new breed of ambitious, chef-driven suburban restaurants that includes Killen's Steakhouse in Pearland, J's Bistro in the northwest, Taverna Winery & Restaurant in Conroe, Pulcinella Ristorante in Katy, Valentino's Seafood in Webster and Amici in Sugar Land. Together, at long last, they signal that Houston's dining scene is maturing.

It's a happy thought, and there may be no better venue than Rattan Bistro in which to lift a glass to the spreading of culinary wealth. That's because Rattan's sleek ***Italian Enomatic wine-dispensing system — which replaces the air in opened bottles with weighty argon gas — delivers wines by the glass (or the taste) in impeccable condition. It works every time, as far as I can tell, whether the wine is a lively, unpretentious white Bordeaux or a premium Chilean cabernet.***

The Pan-Asian food can be very good at Rattan, but it's still inconsistent. The wine program, however, is a reliable joy, notably lacking in the heartbreak of by-the-glass wines that lose their heart and soul after hours or days.

What a treat to be able to taste a perfectly preserved, climate-conditioned ounce or two of 2006 Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc, the fragrant wine that made New Zealand whites famous, or the rich, costly charms of a head-spinning 2001 Cesari Amarone.

Don't like them? No harm, no foul, no grievous expense. Move on and discover a new favorite, such as a dark, plummy New Zealand pinot noir, the 2005 Amisfield. Or a 2006 Château Gravelle-Lacoste (Graves), the aforementioned white Bordeaux, with just enough crispness and acidity to stand up to Rattan's spicy sushi rolls.

The raw rolls, in particular, are worth a try. Spicy tuna is simple and effective, with a welcome cucumber crunch. The Bistro Roll, which combines salmon, tuna and baby yellowtail with mango and clever tempura-battered jalapeños, would be even better with half the mango and double the jalapeño. (I asked for it that way the second time around, and the kitchen accommodated the request with swell results.)

Instead of the usual sweet goo drizzled on the plate, the Bistro Roll wears a laid-back ribbon of wasabi aioli. A signature Rattan Roll topped with ponzu-seared baby yellowtail (kampachi) would have been stellar had its fried-kampachi interior not been dry and overcooked.

There's a limited selection of nigiri sushi, the familiar rice clumps topped by fish. Tuna, seabass and kampachi all were brisk and fresh, the rice just sticky and vinegared enough. One afternoon, I saw executive chef James McMillan tutoring his staff in a "sushi class" in the glassed-in conservatory dining room. He's an Irish-looking guy who can erupt into fluent Japanese, which is less surprising when you learn that his mother is Japanese and that her family owns a number of Japanese restaurants in Austin.

The remaining two-thirds of the Rattan menu hopscotches from Vietnamese to Thai, Japanese to Chinese inspirations, with varying success.

There are a lot of chefs in this kitchen. McMillan is assisted by Denis Tong and Billy Lee, two of Ron Chen's ace cooks from Sinh Sinh, where they worked in a Chinese-Vietnamese mode. The spirit of consulting chef Magnus Hansson, who contributed such Thai dishes as the pad Thai and the salmon with massaman curry sauce, hovers over the menu, too.

Two months into the restaurant's life, these varying influences and personalities have not cohered into a focused whole. Execution bobbles, bouts of off-putting sweetness and occasional blandness rear their heads, and at such moments it is all too tempting to compare the dish at hand to the original source.

At other times, the comparison delightfully fails to matter. Take that pad Thai: Saucier by far than the traditional Thai rendition, which is more of a dry sauté, Rattan's balances sour, sweet, hot and salty in a highly satisfying way. My initial skepticism dissolved as I ate every rice-noodle strand in the bowl.

Vietnamese garlic beef, cubed and toothsome with its roasted garlic and glazed onion, could stand up to any treatment in town, and the tomato-fried rice with it is an ingenious touch.

On the other hand, a bowl of Japanese soba noodles with seaweed, wasabi, black sesame and tempura shrimp seemed horrifyingly sweet, as if the noodles had been

marinated in fruit juice. Otherwise blameless lemon-grass shrimp, grilled with their tails on, sat on steamed garlic spinach that had been saturated in a sweet-sour sauce that was too sweet to maintain interest.

A Red Curry Basil Chicken would have been easier to love had it been labeled a basil stir-fry; the rich, nuanced layers of a genuine Thai red curry were disappointingly absent. (The chunks of sweet potato in the mix made for a pleasant surprise.)

Sweet potato popped up again, to dramatic, caramelized effect, in one evening's improbable-sounding special of filet mignon with vermicelli, sweet potato, shiitake mushroom and asparagus. Darned if it didn't all hang together, courtesy of a lambent brown sauce, and even generate some excitement. "Medium-rare" turned out to be half-raw inside, however, which did not keep my group from gobbling the whole thing.

Among the first courses, chicken potstickers had an elegantly loose minced filling and thin, crackly wrappers. Tempura shrimp did not boast the airy froth of batter suggested by classic versions, but their pleasing crunch was heightened by a sour-sweet chile glaze that kept its sugar in balance.

A gorgeous Indonesian satay sampler had a delicious marinade, but the chicken skewer was dryish, the pork too chewy. Only the tender beef skewer hinted at what the dish could be.

What I thought was an order for tom kha gai, the spicy Thai coconut-chicken soup, showed up instead as a bland Asian Thai Chicken Noodle Soup oversupplied with wide, flat rice sticks. And a Spicy Warm Thai-Style Beef Salad that was way too short on lime dressing the first time out fared better the second, while never quite rising to the exciting levels of its source dish.

Dessert can be fun here. A crackly layering of molten bananas and won ton skins is voluptuous. But the showstopper, in its clunky, rustic way, is the whole young coconut filled with a cream-topped gelatin, which diners scoop out of the shell with a spoon. The cool shiver of clear gel and white cream is made by adding gelatin to the coconut milk, then refrigerating. Scrape hard enough and you come away with resilient young coconut meat as your final layer of enjoyment.

The banquette-wrapped, skylit surroundings are so relaxing and the servers so earnest about doing a good job that it's impossible not to feel optimistic about this interesting restaurant.

And the neighbors? I'll bet they're thrilled. Where else on the far west side of town are they going to have the chance to fall in love with a 2004 Don Melchor Cabernet from Chile, delivered in a cellar-temperature glass, in peak condition? At under \$20, it's a major urban discovery.

Rattan Pan-Asian Bistro

1396 Eldridge Parkway, 281-556-9888

Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays; 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays

Credit cards: all major

Prices: starters \$4.95-\$11.95; entrees \$7.95-\$17.95; sushi rolls \$6-\$13

Reservations: walk-ins OK

Noise level: moderate

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