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Kin Shop: 'Top Chef' Winner In the Ring for Best Thai in NYC

Posted by [The Serious Eats Team](#), November 2, 2010 at 11:00 PM



SLIDESHOW: Kin Shop: 'Top Chef' Winner In the Ring for Best Thai in NYC

[Photographs: Robyn Lee]

One could be forgiven for having low expectations of [Kin Shop](#), Harold Dieterle's new Thai restaurant in the West Village.

Because, on some level, it sounds like a disaster. *Top Chef* graduate takes over a floundering [trendy Chinese spot](#) and turns it into a "contemporary Thai" restaurant? In another chef's hands, you may well have found showy and unevenly executed fusion fare.

But Harold Dieterle has already started to prove that he's more than a television phenom. His West Village spot [Perilla](#), classy but understated, is the sort of neighborhood restaurant that might not come to mind often, but when it does, you're reminded of how tasty those duck meatballs and squishy doughnuts really were. It's been quietly successful since he and partner Alicia Nosenzo opened it in 2007, no small feat for a small restaurant over these last three tumultuous years.

Dieterle has clearly been slow and deliberate in his choice to branch out—only a second restaurant in the four-plus years since his television crown. He's got a tight beat, the two restaurants within a ten minutes' walk of each other. But while his expansion is cautious, Kin Shop is anything but.

Simply put, it's some of the best Thai food we've had outside Thailand. Eyebrow-raising good. Text-your-friends-from-the-table-good. Return-the-next-night good. We walked in with no particular expectations, and left absolutely floored by what Dieterle's kitchen had served us.

Kin Shop

469 6th Avenue, New York NY 10011 (b/n 11th and 12th; [map](#)); 212-675-4295; [kinshopnyc.com](#)
Service: Confident and friendly
Setting: Comfortable and colorful, well-lit
Must-Haves: Duck Laab, Peas with Bay Scallops, Rabbit Leg, Goat Curry
Cost: \$9-14 starters, \$15-25 mains
Grade: A



At its best, Thai food should be light but intense, rich but refreshing, and above all, balanced. **The precise balance between sweet and hot elements is key to the cuisine.** Too often Westernized restaurants will tone down the heat without also taking down the sugar to an appropriate level. The result is food that's cloying and heavy instead of fiery and vibrant.

Though very few of the dishes at Kin Shop could be considered "authentic" Thai fare, Dieterle seems to understand the concept of balance at the heart of the cuisine, deftly orchestrating Western cooking methods and ingredients with their Thai counterparts. It's not an easy rope to walk, but when it works, it comes together gloriously on the plate. **And Kin Shop works very well indeed.**

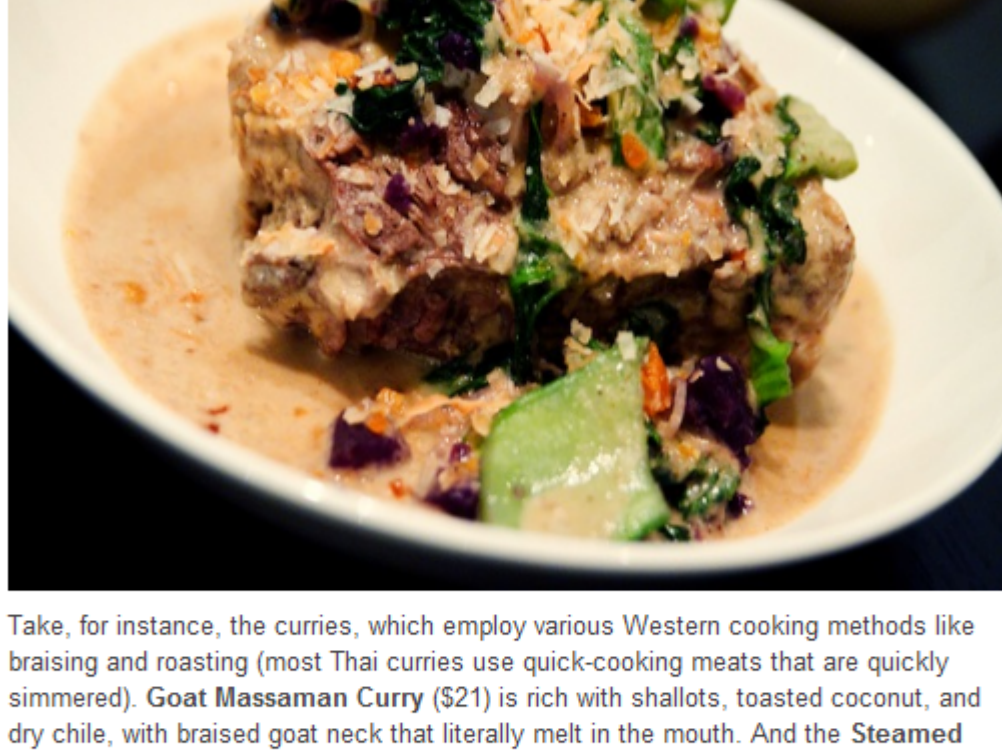


Spicy Duck Laab Salad (\$13) is perhaps the most traditional dish on the menu, and the one most familiar to frequenters of New York Thai restaurants—at least in name. Where the average laab in the city is heavy on sugar and light on spice, Chef Dieterle holds no punches and goes for the classic, flavored primarily with dried chiles and toasted glutinous rice powder. It's one of the rare dishes on the menu that goes for straight authenticity with little by way of Western interpretation—and it's one of our favorite dishes on an extraordinary menu.

Like many dishes at Kin Shop, the **Selection of Grilled Eggplant** (\$8) caught us completely off-guard. Velvety grilled Chinese eggplant and crisp, seed-filled Thai eggplants are deeply charred; their smokiness combined with a sprinkle of fish sauce lends a savoriness that borders on meaty, while tapioca-like pearls of rice flour add yet another textural element to this surprisingly complex dish. We'd ordered it as vegetable afterthought, but it's one of the dishes we're still thinking back to, days later. The **Warm Sliced Snap Peas with Bay Scallops** (\$12) are another textural masterpiece—the sweet and briny scallops are cooked from one side only, giving them deeply developed flavor with a medium-rare tenderness.

To say that we didn't find the other starters *quite* as impressive is to say that we found them incredibly tasty, rather than absolutely stunning. The **Squid Ink & Hot Sesame Oil Soup** (\$10) was deep black and intensely aromatic; you've got to really love squid ink to enjoy this one. The chile-spiked vinegar at the table brings the whole thing into much sharper focus. And a **Fried Pork & Crispy Oyster Salad** (\$12) layered tender slices of pork belly between large, crisp oysters—each individual component was fantastic, even if the dish didn't turn into something more than the sum of its parts.

Chef Dieterle seems to favor the dry-chile-based cuisines of Northern Thailand as opposed to the fresh bird chiles used more heavily in the south. The deeper, richer flavor is appropriate, given the slight Western twists he gives to much of the food.



Take, for instance, the curries, which employ various Western cooking methods like braising and roasting (most Thai curries use quick-cooking meats that are quickly simmered). **Goat Massaman Curry** (\$21) is rich with shallots, toasted coconut, and dry chile, with braised goat neck that literally melt in the mouth. And the **Steamed Rabbit Leg Yellow Curry** (\$23) actually undergoes a two-part cooking process—an initial braise renders it completely tender and moist, while a brief last-minute steam in a banana leaf stuffed with rice lends it another layer of aroma.

Dieterle's **Pan Fried Crab Noodles** (\$21) are one of the best renditions of this dish we've tried, in Thailand or out. The vermicelli noodles maintained their distinctive chew, picking up a deep smokiness from the wok. \$21 for a bowl of noodles may seem steep, but when the noodles are this briny-garlicky good, they're worth every penny. And while we're not sure where the chef is getting his **Wild Striped Bass** (\$25) right now (the season waned a couple weeks back), with fish this delicious, we're not questioning it. It's sweet, spicy, and aromatic, with matsutake mushroom, holy basil, and rambutan—cooking a dish that's simultaneously comfort-food satisfying *and* completely novel is quite an achievement in our book.



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So enraptured were we with the appetizers and mains, that we were almost relieved when we *were*n't won over by the one dessert in the house besides ice cream. (It reminded us how spoiled we'd been with earlier courses.) The steamed **Passionfruit Pudding** was moist and tasted powerfully of the fruit, but not particularly exciting. And the ice creams (\$9 for three scoops), while unique and perfectly flavored, were icy—almost crumbly—in texture. The Thai iced tea was the best of the group (which also included a fantastic ginger and kaffir lime).

[View more dishes in the slideshow above »](#)

In many ways Harold Dieterle's *Top Chef* victory was a mixed blessing. It got customers in his door, but at the same time, may have kept some from taking him as seriously as they should. His first restaurant, Perilla, while hardly a letdown, made no particular mark on the city's dining scene, further compounding the problem. But with Kin Shop, Dieterle's proven that he's not just a Top Chef winner—he's a real-life contender.

—[J. Kenji Lopez-Alt](#) and [Carey Jones](#)

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