

NEW YORK

Edited by
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FOOD



Kin Shop

High Thai

Harold Dieterle brings haute technique and Western touches to the traditional Asian cuisine. BY ADAM PLATT

IS THIS REALLY Harold's restaurant?" exclaimed one of my slightly starstruck out-of-town guests as we settled down to dinner at Kin Shop, the deceptively unassuming "contemporary Thai" restaurant that opened a month or so ago among the jumble of nail salons and Korean delis on lower Sixth Avenue in the Village. The Harold in question is Harold Dieterle, whom my guest (along with millions of other *Top Chef* viewers) knows as the original (and easily most talented) winner to emerge from that Bravo megafanchise. But despite Dieterle's triumph in the histrionic realm of reality TV, there's never been anything garish or self-promoting about his cooking or style. Like his first West Village restaurant, Perilla, Kin Shop exudes an unassuming, carefully calibrated, even neighborly feeling. The modest space is colored in soothing shades of jade. Nothing costs more than \$25. And about the closest thing you'll find to a glamorous signature cocktail is a glass of cool artisanal gin splashed with house-brined Thai pickle juice.

Even today, a truly effete Thai-food snob will tell you that finding a pure bowl of larb nur (beef salad) in this city is about as easy as finding a really good bagel in Bangkok. Downtown Manhattan, unlike, say, Woodside, has never been a hotbed for anything approaching classic Thai cooking, so Dieterle has wisely decided to educate his audience from the ground up. A glossary of Thai food terms is printed on the back of the menu (*kin* means "to eat" in Thai),

and many of his "contemporary reinterpretations" contain hearty Western elements like fresh Maine lobster (tossed with yellow curry), fat fried oysters (with strips of fried pork and a sprinkling of peanuts and mint), and fatty lobes of bone marrow designed to be rolled, taco-style, in buttery roti flatbread.

The curries at Kin Shop are ground in-house, and if you wish to add extra heat or a dash of sour, there are pots of white vinegar at each table, as well as Thai chiles that will curl the nose hairs of even the most seasoned reality-TV judge. The food may not have the lightness or

the mind-boggling variety of really authentic Thai cooking, but if you're looking for some heat, try the pan-fried crab noodles (tossed with hot roasted chiles), and if you enjoy mysteriously funky squid concoctions, you'll want a taste of the salty, fishy squid-ink-and-hot-sesame-oil soup, which contains Thai snake beans and bits of ground brisket in its murky depths. If you're in the mood for curries, I recommend the red snapper (fork-tender and garnished with a chile-rich red-curry paste), the rabbit (steamed on the bone in a wet banana leaf in a sour southern-style yellow curry), and the delicious massaman braised goat's neck scattered with shavings of coconut and frizzled shallots.

Whether it's proto-Thai food you're eating or a pot of *faux*-Indian vindaloo, there's something about a proper curry-fueled feast that promotes a sense of well-being and general bonhomie. Maybe that's why Dieterle's little restaurant was jammed, on the evenings I visited, with a boisterous mix of local revelers, food nabobs, and off-duty chefs sipping "spice friendly" whites from the wine list (there are 38 to choose from) and frosty bottles of lager and ale from distant breweries in Thailand, Belgium, and Laos. Thai desserts tend toward the decorative, the sticky, and the cloyingly sweet, and here your only real Thai option is a tepidly cooked wheel of passion-fruit pudding scattered with a few candied cashew nuts. Stick with a scoop or two of ice cream, that dependable Pan-national favorite, which is housemade, of course, and flavored with exotic, far-off ingredients like galangal and Thai iced tea.

JEFFREY CHODOROW has always had an old-fashioned restaurateur's fondness for Disney-style grandeur and theatrical display, and his latest big-top production is no exception. Bar Basque—which opened several weeks ago, on the second floor of a gleaming hotel tower called the Eventi, on Sixth Avenue in Chelsea—occupies an area almost as long as a city block. The lounge portion of the operation (ghostly lighting, black cocktail chairs, scarlet walls) looks like some recently refurbished, post-millennial version of an old Tunnel of Love amusement-park ride. The cavernous, well-appointed dining hall sits under the kind of majestic glass roof that suggests a Texas megachurch or the atrium of an expensive Asian hotel. In the evenings, random images (Spanish dancers, gorillas, anime cartoons) flicker on a Jumbotron screen suspended over the courtyard outside, giv-

★ ★
Kin Shop
469 Sixth Ave.,
nr. 11th St.
212-675-4295

★ ★
Bar Basque
839 Sixth Ave.,
nr. 29th St.
646-600-7150

★★★★ ETHERIAL

★★★★ EXCEPTIONAL

★★★ EXCELLENT

★★ VERY GOOD

★ GOOD

NO STARS NOT RECOMMENDED