

Fit for the King of Siam

NEXT day, we visited a quite different Thai restaurant in Lygon Street, where Italian eating houses no longer have a monopoly. The new Lemongrass, which was also packed, is very Carlton in style and clientele.

The premises had already been occupied by an Asian restaurant, an offshoot of the popular Little Malaysia, and an enterprising young Malaysian Chinese, Michael Mah, formerly of Zanies, is responsible for its transformation to Thai, the booming vogue cuisine.

Instead of the soft carpets, crisp tablecloths and air of gentility of middle-class Malvern, here you find hard surfaces of a modern bistro and the noisy chatter of a predominantly young crowd. But for experienced Thai food fanciers, Lemongrass is a serious restaurant with high credentials.

Lemongrass prides itself on offering Thai royal cuisine, the refined cooking and ornate presentation developed from the 13th Century for the kings of Siam, and Mr Mah has enlisted from Bangkok three chefs highly qualified in this ancient and authentic culinary art.

One is the niece and another also is a graduate pupil of one of the venerated Thai master chefs and cookery teachers, Mrs Boonchoo Pholwatana, now 72. Both cooked under her supervision at the highly regarded Bussaracum Restaurant in Bangkok, originally opened by a group of businessmen to entertain their clients and visiting VIPs with genuine Thai cuisine. In charge of the kitchen at Lemongrass is a chef with executive experience at two of Bang-

kok's top international hotels.

Thai royal cuisine requires meticulous preparation and decorative display. This professionalism is apparent in the dishes served at Lemongrass, and they look (and taste) almost too good to be served in such an informal ambience.

Some of the descriptions do not do justice to what comes on the plate. For instance, our appetiser of minced prawn salad seasoned with lime and chilli was presented in golf ball sized and shaped parcels wrapped in lettuce. Each was speared with a toothpick with a little ring of hot red chilli on top and a slice of cucumber on the base. This not only looked colorfully attractive, but offered the options of removing the chilli or countering its hotness with the cooling cucumber.

Our gai tom gah soup, made with lemongrass-flavored coconut milk, slices of chicken breast and a touch of Thai ginger root, was smoothly delicious and rich in hauntingly aromatic flavours. A bisected red chilli lurked at the bottom of the bowl to impart a touch of fire, easily avoided on sight but ready to explode like a firecracker in your mouth if bitten.

Then came a surprise. Traditional chilli dips are seldom served in Thai restaurants, and what is described here as "a prawn dip with fluffed, crispy fish and vegetables" is not what you might expect, or for that matter enjoy, if unaccustomed to Thai food.

It is a plate of neatly carved raw vegetables and a pungent thin sauce to dip them in. The sauce, fiery with chopped chilli, is made

mainly with the clear fish sauce and nutritious but rather unpleasant-smelling paste derived by pounding fermented salted shrimps ("prawns"). As for the fluffed fish, it was like eating shredded, crisply fried sponge.

Our main courses, like the appetisers, were prettily plated with ornate flowers and leaves carved from vegetables. We had chosen a red curry with king prawns and button straw mushrooms, and a stir-fry dish of pork, prawns and chicken with chilli and fresh sweet basil. Both were true to flavor, and offered the beguiling contrasts in which the Thais excel.

Coconut milk and cream had given the curry sauce a wonderfully rich and smooth consistency, and the slippery little mushrooms contrasted the crunchiness of the prawns. The stir-fry dish was a light, fragrant medley of subtle flavors and textures, dotted with potent red and green chillies which we cautiously fished out. Indispensable fluffy steamed rice was served from a traditional bronze bowl.

In spite of its Lygon Street location and the casual cafe look behind its plateglass shopfront, Lemongrass is a highly professional operation that is justly proud of its distinctive and refined Thai royal cuisine.

LEMONGRASS, 189 Lygon Street, Carlton. Tel. 347 5204. BYO. Lunch: un-Fri noon-2.30 pm. Dinner: daily 6-11 pm. Seats: 90. Owner Michael Mah. Chefs: Somluck Chinbodee, Boon-Aek Awbowtong and Chanya P. Nungool. Cards: AE BC DC V. Price: About \$60 for two.