

# DINING OUT

Most of us were likely introduced to Asian food at a Chinese restaurant. For more than a century, Chinese restaurants have punctuated the American landscape, whether in small towns or large cities. The once-new foods, flavors and textures that Chinese cuisine brought to our palates are now well assimilated into the American diet. Although less familiar, the delights of other Asian cuisines, like their Chinese counterparts before them, have

recently begun to find their way into our dining tastes. Most noteworthy perhaps among these Asian imports is Thai cuisine.

Thai cooking is a happy blend of elements brought from several of its Asian neighbors, especially China and India, and even from Portugal, Spain and the Americas. This delightful accommodation is well reflected in the dishes on the menu at the Thai restaurants beginning to appear across the country, including here in eastern North Carolina.

One staple element in Thai cuisine, especially the food of northeastern Thailand, is sticky rice. In fact, a relatively new Thai restaurant in Morehead City bears the name Thai Sticky Rice. Its broad menu certainly includes sticky rice, but ranges far beyond this Thai staple to include noodle, curry and stir-fried dishes—each blending foods, flavors, textures and aromas to please our senses.

Thai Sticky Rice serves both lunch and dinner. The lunch menu brings together selections from its dinner counterparts—noodle, curry and stir-fried dishes. The lunch menu in each category typically offers a choice among central ingredients: beef, chicken, pork, shrimp or tofu. Then the chosen ingredient is blended with various vegetables, herbs and spices in a savory sauce. The vegetables include bamboo shoots, bean sprouts, broccoli, green beans, baby corn, carrots, green onions, yellow onions, red and green peppers, chili peppers, peanuts and potatoes. The herbs and spices include various curries, garlic, sweet basil and lemongrass. The sauces include brown, oyster and sweet-and-sour sauce. Menu items appeal to a range of tastes and, delightfully, to several senses. The lunches are served with rice and a spring roll. They are priced according to the choice of central ingredient, ordinarily between \$6.95 and \$10.95.

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The dinner menu opens with an enticing variety of appetizers. Most familiar perhaps are the spring rolls and dumplings (both steamed and deep fried) and the beef, chicken and pork satay (meat sliced, spiced and cooked, then served on a stick). Surely less familiar is the Tod Mum Pla (fish patties blended with red curry and green beans, deep fried and served with a cucumber relish) and the Goong Hum Pah (shrimp stuffed with a combination of seasoned crab meat and ground pork, wrapped in rice paper, deep fried and served with a specially made house sauce). Also available as appetizers are Thai meatballs and fried tofu. The appetizers, both adventuresome and less so, are priced between \$3.75 and \$7.50.

Soups, too, are available, both in bowl and in full-pot portions. Reflecting the Chinese influence on Thai cuisine and widely known to the American palate is wonton soup. Less obviously derivative are Tom Yum, which combines chicken, shrimp, tofu and vegetables in a savory broth with chili pepper, lemongrass, straw mushrooms, onions and scallions, and Tom Ka, which brings together beef, chicken, pork, shrimp and vegetables with coconut milk, green onions, tomatoes, lime juice and Thai ginger. Bowls of soup cost \$3.75, while pots cost \$10.95.

Perhaps the most popular food category with Americans on a Thai restaurant menu is the one including noodle dishes. Thai Sticky Rice offers a wide variety of noodle dishes to satisfy this taste. Pad Thai is likely the most familiar such dish. It combines meat, seafood or tofu with stir-fried rice noodles, bean sprouts, eggs, green onions and a characteristically Thai sauce. Among other selections on the menu in this category are Rad Nah (broccoli stir-fried in oyster sauce, added to the patron's meat/seafood/tofu choice and placed over large rice noodles) and Mama Kee Mao (spaghetti stir fried with oyster sauce, chili pepper and the diner's choice of meat/seafood/tofu). The noodle preparations are priced between \$8.95 and \$13.95, the top price reflecting the patron's decision to combine meat, seafood and tofu in the same noodle dish.

The curry dinners at Thai Sticky Rice give witness to the diversity of influences on Thai cuisine. These dishes make use of a range of familiar curries—green, red, yellow—and add less well known panaeng and massaman versions to their repertoire. They combine vegetables and sometimes fruit and nuts with meat, seafood or tofu in aromatic and flavorful curry sauces. Particularly interesting among these options is the restaurant's massaman creation. In this dish, the diner's choice of beef, chicken, duck, pork, shrimp or tofu is sauteed together with onions, pineapple chunks and potatoes, then blended with coconut milk and finally topped with roasted peanuts. The cost of the curry items ranges from \$10.95 to \$15.95.

Stir-fried cooking has become quite popular with Americans, both at home and in restaurants. Thai Sticky Rice does not disappoint patrons in this category, since its menu features several inventive stir-fried dinner possibilities. Once again, central to these options is the choice of meat, seafood or tofu. The choice is combined with vegetables, fruit, herbs, spices and sauces to satisfy most palates. Among the vegetables are American table staples like broccoli, carrots, green onions, yellow onions, green beans and green and red peppers. Diversifying these staples are the less-common baby corn, bamboo shoots, cashews, pineapple, snow peas and Thai chili peppers. All of this is prepared in appropriately herbed and spiced brown, curry and sweet-and-sour sauces. The stir-fried dishes range in price from \$8.95 to \$15.95.

A special category of options on the dinner menu is labeled "Hot Plates." Three of these items center on duck, and two on fish. The duck may be ordered as Duck Basil (prepared with sweet basil, onions, garlic and chili, red and green peppers in a brown sauce) or as Gorgeous Duck Vegetable (made with mixed vegetables in a Thai special sauce), both stir-fried. It may also be chosen as Spicy Roast Duck, which is sauteed with bamboo shoots, green beans and curry in an oyster sauce. The fish possibilities include a boneless or whole fish stir-fried with onions, scallions, green and red peppers in a special sauce and a salmon filet cooked in a paneang curry sauce. These preparations cost either \$13.95 or \$15.95.

A special note: American palates range from meek to bold. The chef at Thai Sticky Rice recognizes this and works to accommodate a full range of tastes for spice. The typical dish at the restaurant may be ordered to suit the individual diner's palate—from mild to medium to spicy to very spicy.

Desserts are also available. They include sticky rice custard and sticky rice with mangoes, as well as Thai donuts and fried cream cheese wontons. The desserts are priced at \$2.95 and \$4.95.

Thai Sticky Rice is located in the Pelletier Harbor Shops complex at 4426 Arendell Street in Morehead City. The restaurant is open Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., Saturday, noon-9 p.m., and is closed on Sunday. Reservations may be made by calling 222-3500, and the menu can be viewed on the restaurant's website at [thaistickyricenc.com](http://thaistickyricenc.com).