

# THE FIND

## *Wat Dong Moon Lek in Silver Lake*

The Thai noodle shop offers a mix of traditional and trendy dishes, plus a surprisingly delicious lineup of desserts.

By Linda Burum, 14th October 2009

Scrawled across a huge, zany illustrated chalkboard in vibrant pastel tones, Wat Dong Moon Lek's bilingual menu is a crowded pastiche of witty drawings, slogans and photographs. It has the feel of an interactive website, and like the décor at this 4-month-old spot, the food takes a hip, updated cue from an archetypal Bangkok noodle house.



Stylized, yes, but it's not a touristy dumbing down of the genre. The clean bright flavors and subtle refinements preserve a Thai noodle shop's soul, yet the cooking reflects the urban Thai culinary trends inspired by owner Billy Jalanugraha's visits to his native Bangkok.

But the Thai customers flooding into this light-filled café in Silver Lake first come to try its namesake dish, *Wat Dong Moon Lek noodle*. The treasured Bangkok classic is named for a very old Thai temple close to the hole-in-the-wall spot that has sold the specialty for decades. "People would drive for miles just to eat this," remembers Jalanugraha, who used to frequent the shop as a youngster and has managed to acquire the recipe.

The noodle soup's intense beefy broth with a touch of garlicky sweetness becomes more compelling the more of it you eat. A sort of distant cousin to Vietnamese pho, it holds rare beef slices, braised beef, tender meatballs and slender, slightly chewy pho-style rice noodles topped with a crisp herb-vegetable garnish.



Jalanugraha has come up with a pork version that tasters at my table liked even better. Its broth, based on cured pork hock, fills the palate with a wonderfully delicate smokiness.

## Tightly edited menu

Wat Dong Moon Lek may have a noodle shop vibe, but don't look for an all-encompassing menu with 50 variations on each noodle style. The dishes in its carefully edited selection are as finely tuned as a Tesla. Tom yum noodles break with tradition, using udon instead of the familiar rice noodle. Their thick wheatiness soaks up the high-octane chile-lemon grass broth and squirts deliciousness into your mouth with every chewy bite.



Noodles are just a start. There's a wonderful list of *kàp klâem* — bar-snack-like small plates. Some are familiar and others invented, but all have that typically vivid Thai intertwining of sweet, salty, tart and a zing of heat.

The *larb tod*, usually rather tough, chewy patties, is crisp-edged free-form chunks of ground chicken, lime leaf and toasted rice powder dropped into hot oil with small whole dry chiles. Heaped on a platter, the phenomenal result is offered up with strips of basil and cooling raw cabbage, in the style of regional Isaan cuisine.

In contrast, rambutan salad with shrimp is glossy orbs of the fruit swimming in a coconut cream dressing accented with slivers of white onion and sesame seed to add crunch and bite.



Dumplings, a pillowy blend of lean pork and shrimp chunks, are homey, hand-shaped comforts.

Crispy deep-fried shredded taro wrapped in crackly tofu sheets is a favorite recipe of Jalanugraha's mother-in-law, who used to sell it for holidays at her neighborhood Thai farmers market.

A few noodle dishes and Hainan chicken are served in demi-portions and qualify as small plates, though they are not listed under that heading.

This kitchen loves whole green peppercorns: The chile peppercorn rice plate with crisp sliced long beans in a dry red curry base is absolutely galvanizing. Crispy pork belly cubes come sans red chile, but the fatty meat and peppercorn heat are fireworks for the palate.

Check the chalkboard for other specialties: One night it was fried catfish steaks in dry chile loaded with the peppercorns and krachai — a ginger-like rhizome.



## High-end desserts

A major surprise — the restaurant's fine-dining-caliber desserts — are the original creations of Jalanugraha's wife, Somjai, who trained as a pastry chef at the California School of Culinary Arts in Pasadena. She uses fruit essences in novel ways. Her mixed berry tart with an almond crust, mounted on crème anglaise infused with a pomegranate reduction, comes topped with a little orb of vanilla bean ice cream. Her multilayered mini chocolate mousse cake in a pool of glossy tangerine sauce gets a garnish of rum-caramelized banana chunks.



Wat Dong Moon Lek may ostensibly be about noodles, but you just might be lured again and again by its desserts.

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