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A Gingerly Approach

Don't be too tough on Mountain View's exciting new Yellow Ginger Cuisine as they work out the kinks

By Cheryl Sternman Rule



Photograph by Felipe Buitrago
FISH FIREWORKS: Firecracker balls are a unique take on ahi.

LIKE ANY business venture, new restaurants can take a while to work out the kinks. Some nights sizzle, with well-executed dishes floating harmoniously from kitchen to table. Other visits disappoint, leading disillusioned diners to wonder how a favorite new eatery could fail to deliver on its previous level of quality. Inconsistency is a hallmark of youth, and new restaurants should be given wide berth and forgiven for occasional off nights. Ultimately, cream will rise.

There's a lot of figurative cream at Yellow Ginger Cuisine, a relatively new Southeast Asian spot on the site of the former Malaysian restaurant Baba Neo in Mountain View. Two of my lunch visits were so excellent I'm convinced that my single disappointing dinner must have been an anomaly.

Owner Harvey Chia purchased the space on Moffett Boulevard in late May of this year and, against tall odds, opened Yellow Ginger only a few weeks later, on June 8. (According to Benjamin Power, Mr. Chia's nephew and the restaurant's unofficial General Manager, Chinese superstition holds that some numbers and their corresponding dates are inherently lucky. June 8, 2007, or 6/8/07, was one of those dates, hence the rushed opening.) Fortunately, family members helped paint and spruce the place up in short order, and their keen attention to detail shines through. The semicircular dining room is a soothing ocean blue, and the dark woods and decorative archways lend the space a real air of sophistication. Even the simple white dishware is eye-catching, with its whimsical contours and aesthetic curves.

The menu offers traditional Singaporean dishes, a smattering of Thai classics and several fusion specials, with abundant noodle-, rice-, and curry-based selections. (Singaporean cuisine draws heavily from Chinese, Malay and Indian influences.)

Presentation varies dramatically. Some dishes were so lovely they elicited oohs and ahs, not only from my table but from neighboring ones, too. Others (the noodle dishes in particular) lacked the same level of visual finesse.

My first lunch at Yellow Ginger was terrific. Roti prata (\$5), a fried Indian bread, arrived piping hot with a coconut- and curry-scented dipping sauce. The bread yielded seductively when pulled apart, and it's the restaurant's best-selling starter for good reason. The firecracker balls (\$8)—deep-fried spheres of rice with ahi tuna centers—were equally good, better even, and attractively garnished with a spicy chili sauce, green onions and black and white sesame seeds. The little bites burst with flavor, and the presentation showed real artistry.

At \$7–\$9, lunch specials are reasonably priced, and many of the curries come with a pyramid of rice and a side salad. Winning choices included the thin slices of penang beef (\$9 lunch/\$10 dinner) in a coconut and red curry sauce punctuated with spinach, pineapple, bean sprouts, bell peppers and Thai basil. Also terrific was the cinnamon-scented beef rending (\$8/\$10), which showcased fork-tender, succulent meat showered with wisps of grated coconut. Both dishes were beautifully plated, and a great bang for the buck.

The meal ended with one of the best desserts I've ever enjoyed in a local Asian restaurant: Thai-inspired goring pisanf (\$7), a warm batter-dipped fried banana served with coconut ice cream, Grand Marnier-laced cream, and a drizzle of strawberry sauce. It couldn't have been tastier. Overall, a strong showing for my first visit.

My second, at dinnertime, left me flummoxed. Was this really the same place? Pot stickers (\$8) were overly sauced and chewy, and an eggplant salad with shrimp, water

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chestnuts, chicken and a sticky sweet dressing (\$16) was truly bizarre. And then our server appeared with the beef short rib special (\$20), drenched in so much port wine sauce it left a trail behind him as he carried the dish from the kitchen. When he set it down, it sloshed onto the next table and dribbled onto the floor. (Then he disappeared. We had to beckon him over a few minutes later to wipe up the mess.) A shame, too, as the meat and sauce were both delicious.

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When I returned for a third meal, the food was once again above reproach, particularly the sweet and tangy barbecued pork loins (\$8/\$11). Servers were attentive and professional, and even the diners at the next table raved loudly about their meals. ("This is my new favorite Asian restaurant," one cooed.) Clearly the staff had had an off night on my prior visit.

Yellow Ginger has proven that it's more than capable of serving great food, and the elegant atmosphere is an added bonus. It may just need a touch more time to bring the mid-week dinner service up to the level of its popular lunches.

Yellow Ginger Cuisine

Address: 311 Moffett Blvd., Mountain View

Phone: 650.964.2888

Hours: 11am-2:30pm and 5pm-9:30pm Tue-Sun. Closed Mondays.

Cuisine: Southeast Asian

Price Range: Lunch specials \$7-\$9; small plates \$5-\$11; large plates \$8-\$20.

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