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Burma, Baby, Burma

Green Elephant Gourmet offers an elegant mix of Asian styles

By Cheryl Sternman Rule



Photograph by Felipe Buitrago
Prawn Shop: A special sweet and sour plum sauce sets apart the Fruity Nutty Prawns.

WITH its bronze Buddha, stalks of blond bamboo and heavy imported china, Green Elephant Gourmet does atmosphere right. Fresh gladiolas, roses and orchids grace the tables, and the light from the large front windows lends a soft glow to the two-room space. Other decorative choices are almost funny: formal English teacups, for example, are emblazoned with the months of the year. On my first visit three weeks ago, I was a January. When I returned a few days later, I was a November. Time flies at Green Elephant Gourmet.

Husband and wife Michael Maung and Christina Yin opened this restaurant, their first, last July. Yin hails from China and Maung from Rangoon, the capital of Myanmar (known as Burma until 1989), and their menu is divided into Burmese and Chinese offerings. I homed in on the Burmese fare since it's far less common than Chinese food.

Burmese food draws influences from its three largest neighbors—China, India and Thailand—so many of its ingredients will be familiar to those well-versed in other Southeast Asian cuisines. Coconut milk, lime, tropical fruits, rice, noodles and curries all play prominent roles.

A velvety coconut chicken noodle soup (\$8.50) and a quartet of refreshing salads start your meal off strong. For each salad, noodles or greens are piled high in the center of a square platter, and crunchy add-ons ring the edges of the dish. Somehow, servers deftly incorporate the surrounding tidbits—which may include fried garlic, roasted peanuts, crisp sunflower and sesame seeds, pickled ginger and shards of toasty coconut—into the middle. This is no small feat given just how many conical piles of crunchy morsels line the rim. (If I were to mix this stuff in myself it would end up on the floor.)

The tangy tea leaf salad (\$8.25) with fried garlic, onions, peas, seeds and nuts offers an appealing saltiness and perfect contrast of textures and flavors. Glass noodle salad (\$8.25) is refreshing with cool, slippery rice vermicelli, plump shrimp, tomatoes, onions, cilantro and a whisper of fish sauce and citrus. Both easily serve two and set a high bar for the rest of the meal.

Rice is offered in several forms. A coconut version served in a silver tureen is pure comfort. And Green Elephant makes a beautiful pineapple fried rice (\$8.50) with shrimp and turmeric. Toasted cashews and generous threads of golden omelette punctuate the sunny yellow dish.

Unfortunately, some of the other dishes I tried lacked a depth and complexity of flavor. Curry beef with cubed potato and yogurt (\$10.95), while supremely tender, could have benefited from a heavier hand in the spice jar. Seafood pumpkin soup (\$8.50) was thick with pureed pumpkin and chunky with shrimp but offered no seasoning whatsoever. And poodi (\$8.50), a



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potato curry served with thin pancakes, was just plain boring. It's almost like the chefs lost faith in my ability to handle the complex flavors of this cuisine at some random point during both of my visits.

For those who order the *prix fixe* Burmese family dinner (\$17.95 per person), a plateful of piping hot banana fritters arrives for dessert. The fritters are light and crisp, their centers meltingly warm. Why they're served with so much whipped cream is anyone's guess.

Yin and Maung pay careful attention to the quality of service (which is superb), the visual appeal of the food (which is lovely) and the elephant-theme décor. (Maung was born on a Wednesday, the day of the elephant according to Burmese astrology.) If you order tea, servers appear throughout the meal to refill your cups-of-the-month from stately china pots, and they check in frequently to see how you're doing. It's these small gestures that make this place worth pulling for.

After interviewing Yin, I suspect that the decision to underseason several of the dishes stems from an assumption that local diners won't appreciate the salty, sour and spicy elements in authentic Burmese cuisine.

"We don't make the food spicy because the people around here don't want it spicy," she told me.

Those who enjoy mild food will likely be pleased. But when the rest of you visit Green Elephant Gourmet, ask them to pump up the volume on the flavor dial and to give you the real deal.

Green Elephant Gourmet

Address: 3950 Middlefield Road (Charleston Shopping Center), Palo Alto.

Phone: 650.494.7391.

Hours: Lunch 11am-2:30pm, dinner 4:30-9pm daily.

Cuisine: Burmese and Chinese.

Price Range: \$8.50-\$14.

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