



LANGBAAN

One of Portland Oregon's Top Restaurants

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

LangBaan, a culinary gem in Portland, is a haven for food enthusiasts. Led by the culinary prowess of Executive Chef and Owner Earl Ninsom, Partner and Executive Chef Kitsanaruk Ketkuaviriyant, and their team of experts, LangBaan offers a unique tasting menu that represents a theme or region. This menu, a delightful journey of flavors, follows a pattern of a few small bites, soup, a crudo or salad, and a large family-style spread, promising a culinary experience like no other.

EARL NINSOM

Ninsom is from Bangkok, Thailand. Growing up, he spent his summers cooking over a charcoal fire with his grandmother in southern Thailand. In 2000, Ninsom graduated from college and moved to Los Angeles, California, where he washed dishes and prepped food at his uncle's restaurant. The family moved to Portland, Oregon, in 2009, and Ninsom opened his first restaurant, Paadee, which means "to bring good things." Later, Ninsom opened LangBaan, the 24-seat tasting menu restaurant, in a small space attached to PaaDee. He paired the menu with beverages selected by Alan Akwai. In 2015, LangBaan was a James Beard "Best New Restaurant" semifinalist.

In the fall of 2021, LangBaan found its new home at 1818 NW 23rd Place in Portland, a space that perfectly complements its culinary excellence. Today, two seatings are available four days a week: Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, offering more opportunities to savor this unique dining experience.

KITSANARUK KETKUAVIRIYANONT

Ketkuaviriyonont loves Chinese food. His grandparents are from China, and he gained an appreciation for the flavors of this cuisine by cooking with his grandmother and by visiting Chinatown in Bangkok during the Chinese New Year. During these trips, he was educated about the culture of the Chinese-Thai people. He learned about cooking techniques, the culinary flavors, and the local produce. He also began to understand the Thai style of eating, where respective flavors of salty, spicy, fresh, and sometimes smelly work together in harmony, each dish complementing the others.

AN ISAAN-INSPIRED DINNER MEAL

Recently, I had the pleasure of joining Allison from Travel Oregon for a dinner at LangBaan. The evening was a culinary adventure, with smart and delicious wine pairings enhancing the flavors of the menu. The inspiration for the menu that evening was Isaan (also spelled Isan) cuisine, a vibrant and diverse culinary tradition from the northeast region of Thailand. With its unique flavors and cultural significance, Isaan cuisine was a perfect choice for a memorable dining experience at LangBaan. Isaan food is less common outside of Thailand, but inside the country, it can be found everywhere, from street food vendors in Chiang Mai to high-end restaurants in Bangkok; this is probably because many of the people have left Isaan to look for work in the more affluent cities and brought their food with them.

Isaan food differs from what Westerners typically think of when they think of Thai food. Predominant flavors and ingredients include chili peppers, lime, peanuts, dried shrimp, fresh fruits and vegetables, sticky rice, cilantro, mint, and other fresh herbs. Although the layers of flavor are very complex, the food preparation is relatively straightforward and faster to assemble. Where curries often require hours of simmering, clean, bright-flavored salads form the backbone of Isaan cuisine. Marinated grilled and fried meats accompanied by sticky rice are typically paired with one of the region's "tams" or salads.

DELICIOUS DINING

Sharing communal dishes is common in Thai food culture, and family gatherings are a huge part of the Isaan eating tradition. Allison and I each enjoyed various individual dishes, and later, we shared dishes accompanied by rice.

I loved the Miang Som with shrimp, cara cara orange, caramelized fish sauce, peanut, coconut, and betel leaf. These heavenly bites were filled with multiple flavors and offered a satisfying crunch. They paired fabulously with the 2021 Sottilnoce Lambrusco Cattabrega Emilia-Romagna, IT. I have made this particular dish for parties in my home, and it is always received well.

The Kanom Krok, with a Hokkaido scallop, coconut puree, lemongrass, and lime leaf, served in a crispy rice cup, was another favorite and was best eaten in a single bite. The scallop in the coconut cream was sweet and tender, and the rice cup added a beautiful crunch. This dish is a favorite at LangBaan and has been on the menu since day one.

The Sai Grok Isaan, a pork dumpling bathed in a bone broth with glass noodles, brown butter, palm sugar, chili powder, and some radish, was delicious.

Moving into the heartier fare, the Tom Prape with salmon, shimeji, shallot, and crispy rice in an aromatic broth was flavorful and light, the perfect dish to serve on a wet, chilly night in Portland, Oregon. Opposites attract with this pairing. The initial taste of this dish was robust, ar-

omatic, and acidic, and it is balanced perfectly with the peachy sweetness of the 2022 Vollenweider Riesling Kabinett, 'Trarbacher Burgherg,' from Mosel, Germany.

The Sok Lek, Wagyu New York beef with beet, beef fat, broccolini, pea tendrils, and fried garlic arrived garnished with watermelon radish. Molly, part of the bar team, paired this course with a 2023 Terres Promises A Ma Gjise Provence. The tart notes of cranberry and cherry cut through the fattiness of the beef dish.

Khao Neow, the black and purple sticky rice wrapped in a banana leaf, was served in honor of the Isaan region, which grows the majority of sticky rice in Thailand. The sticky rice arrived with a relish, beef brisket, and quite a few other small dishes.

The 2001 Chateau de Sau Rivesaltes Rancio, Roussillon from France, with a stunning caramelized color and notes of maple syrup, stood up to the two desserts. The Rice Khao Lam, prepared in a bamboo cup, was a sticky rice pudding with bean paste, coconut, strawberry, and sesame candied brittle. The Pang Cha-Thai consisted of jackfruit sponge cake, Thai tea, rum, coconut yogurt, and lime leaf. As is typical of Asian desserts, the two offerings were light and tasty but not overly sweet.

Although LangBaan's tasting menu consists of numerous courses, they are all portioned out so that there is enough to enjoy all the flavors and textures of each course but not so much that you walk away uncomfortable at the end of the evening. LangBaan is an excellent place to enjoy a Thai-centric dinner with one or more friends and family. Diners can choose from a fun and exciting drink menu or partake in the professionally paired wines.

