

All in the Family

Bangkok City Hasn't Strayed Far From Its Roots

Will Maddox, Advocate Magazine

March 2018

Santhorn "Ood" Thavornkaew begins his day by taking his kids to school and driving to several Asian grocers and farmers markets in Richardson and Garland to collect the herbs and spices needed to make the flavors at Bangkok City. In the early days, he imported some of what he needed directly from Thailand.

Ood came to the United States to study English at the University of North Texas in 1990. He started working at Lower Greenville's Thai Thai, a restaurant his cousin owned along with Bangkok City.

His sister Janpen came to the U.S. in 1992 and when their cousin decided to move back to Thailand, the siblings took over the Old East Dallas restaurant in 1993. The two have spent every day at the restaurant since then, except for the four days a year it is closed.

Ood handled the cooking while Janpen managed the books. Resisting pressure to adapt their recipes to an American palate, they doubled down on authenticity. Ood remembers calling his mother long distance several times a week in the early 1990s for \$3 a minute to make sure he had the recipes right. "Hey mom, how did you make this

one?" he would ask. Their parents raised seven children in the Thai countryside, and their mother cooked traditionally with coal over an open flame.

In a world of trendy concepts and well-funded restaurant groups, Bangkok City is still a family operation. Both siblings live within blocks of the restaurant and Janpen's daughter (who is now a student at Harvard) and her friends work in the restaurant.

The brother and sister have rebuffed numerous offers to expand to multiple locations. "Every day people tell us we need to open in Rockwall or McKinney," Ood says. "Give me a break. We need time for family."

Winter is busy for Bangkok City, as fragrant curries and spicy noodle soups are popular on chilly winter evenings. Despite endorsements from Thai natives, awards from the Dallas Observer and an explosion of growth in Old East Dallas, the Thavornkaews want to keep things just as they are. Ood estimates that 90 percent of their customers are regulars. "We are growing but not a huge jump. I like it that way," Ood says. "We are proud of what we have. We just want to work hard and do the right thing."

BANGKOK CITY

Ambience: Date night casual

Price Range: \$12-\$20

Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. every day

4301 Bryan

bangkokcityrestaurant.com



The Brannon Building, which houses Bangkok City, opened in 1924. In the 1930's, the second floor was a dance hall called the Cavalcade Club. And the famed Children's TV Show Barney occupied the entire third floor while in the early stages of developing the series.