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A Thai family affair in Belfast

NICK ON RESTAURANTS

Nick makes his first trip to Northern Ireland. A version of this article is published by the Financial Times.

Helen O'Malley, 54, is the most unlikely restaurateur I have ever met.

She is blonde, pert and very determined. While a mother to eight children, from 27 to six, (four boys and four girls), she also presides with a smile over the hectic comings and goings of most lunches and dinners at her restaurant, the Bo Tree Kitchen in Belfast.

Here she serves excellent Thai food cooked by her ex-husband, Pun Bua-In, known since childhood as Suthat. Among the waiting staff is Suthat's second wife, Ooa, and on occasion one or more of O'Malley's five children with her second husband, David Gavaghan.

O'Malley has been a successful restaurateur on and off for the past 25 years but this was certainly not the career that she or her parents (her father is a retired judge) envisioned for her. She was a history undergraduate at Balliol, Oxford, alongside Michael Gove, before travelling to Thailand, where she met and fell in love with Suthat.

They came back to England, where he worked as a chef, most notably at Bhan Thai, the then-groundbreaking Thai restaurant in London, before deciding to open on their own.

Oxford beckoned, as did the then-neglected shell of the once-famous La Sorbonne restaurant above the High Street. 'I remember standing on the floor where the

customers would sit and being able to look right down into the kitchen below, it was in such a state of disrepair', Suthat told me.

But this was nothing that money and hard work could not repair and soon Chiang Mai Kitchen (named after Suthat's birthplace) was born. Queues promptly followed and O'Malley and Suthat experienced the fruits of their labour.

Living and working together in such close proximity is not necessarily good for any marriage and they divorced in 1997. Chiang Mai Kitchen was sold in 2005, O'Malley met her new husband and soon followed him to Belfast.

Suthat also moved to the Northern Irish capital and together they planned another Thai restaurant, the Bo Tree, much larger and grander than anything they had done before. Building costs escalated on the three-storey building and the restaurant was busy only at weekends. The Celtic Tiger economy collapsed and the banks foreclosed, leaving the Gavaghan/O'Malleys to live in a house they had bought for staff accommodation. Suthat went back to London to work as a chef, leaving O'Malley to nurse her wounds and her growing family.

'I never wanted, or believed, that my career should end on a disaster', O'Malley explained, and for five years she kept looking for a way back. Then one day she knocked on the door of a building on the corner of University Avenue and asked whether it was for rent. A deal was quickly struck and Suthat and his new wife were quickly summoned back to Belfast. Bo Street Kitchen was born in November 2017.

Since then, its popularity has exceeded even O'Malley and Suthat's expectations. The menu is principally that which Suthat cooked originally at Chiang Mai but with the addition of a blackboard full of Chef's Favourites and priced even lower than in Oxford for the local market.

Everything is made with attention to detail in a kitchen staffed by young Thais and which Suthat apparently never leaves. A tom ka gai (£4.95), a rich coconut soup with mushrooms, galangal and lime juice was light and creamy; kueytiew ki mao, a stir fry with chicken and vegetables, was fresh and spicy (£5.95); a beef massaman curry (pictured above) was rich and satisfying (£5.95); a plate of thinly sliced Chiang Mai sausage (£5.50) was hot, pungent and so spicy that it called for a lot of liquid to follow; and even their version of the ubiquitous phat thai was served full of chicken and king prawns and was a resounding success (£6.95).

Weekly sales average £17,000, a sum reminiscent of the halcyon days in Oxford, which for an unlicensed premises (the restaurant is in an area of the city controlled by the Holylands) is extremely impressive. But for O'Malley it is not really the figures that matter.

‘The charm of being a restaurateur is watching people come into the restaurant looking slightly anxious, perhaps because their table is not quite ready, and then leaving with a smile on their faces.

‘Last night we had a problem. The waiting staff was taking the orders and inputting them into the computer but the printer was not printing the tickets out in the kitchen. Confusion ensued. One table had to wait an awful long time and then their main courses arrived before their starters. I managed to placate them and fortunately at the end they said that they had had such a good meal that they would be back.’

Hospitality is also, O'Malley believes, an excellent training ground for her children. ‘It teaches them to be polite, to smile at the customer who must always be left with the impression that they are in the right, even if they are not always. And it instils in them a certain amount of discipline, that they cannot stay out late on a night before a shift.’

And on working with your ex-husband, I ask innocently? ‘That instils some discipline in both of us’, came the diplomatic response. ‘We know not to shout at one another in the middle of service!’

The Bo Tree Kitchen 65 University Avenue, Belfast BT7 1GX; tel +44 28 9050 7544

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