

Tan and terrific

The cafe at city mega-bar Cookie is one of only a handful of Melburnian eateries that consistently and accurately hit the Thai cuisine nail on the head. While most Thai restaurants in our city play at the safe, sugary end of the spectrum, Cookie chef Karen Batson and her all-Thai kitchen team understand the joyful mix of sourness, fishiness, chilli heat and sweetness that makes Thai food so much fun to eat. Now Batson has decided to spread the love to Prahran, opening Colonel Tan's in a corner of another mega-bar, Revolver Upstairs.

The south-of-the-river move is logical for a couple of reasons. Firstly, Revolver is owned by the same guys who own Cookie (Camillo Ippoliti and Tan Punturaumporn) and, with the constant crush and critical acclaim in their city business, expansion makes sense. Secondly, Chapel Street is, with a few exceptions, something of a culinary wasteland. A well-priced, quality, casual Thai restaurant is something of a shoo-in for success.

There's nothing fancy about the decor at Colonel Tan's, despite the presence of massed chandeliers over the dining area. Revolver has always prided itself on its grungy, second-hand aesthetic and the new diner has followed suit with mismatched kitchen chairs and laminex tables topped with floral and fruit motif vinyl cloths. There are distressed brick walls, shag pile rugs on the walls and floor, and cutlery wrapped in coloured paper napkins sitting in old cigar boxes on the tables. It's not flash but, along with the slightly vague but very welcoming service, it has a definite charm. Those who are a little wobbly on their pegs should note that the bar is not called Revolver Upstairs for nothing - there's a steep, lengthy flight of stairs to negotiate on the way in.

Colonel Tan's menu is similar to Cookie's but more limited - understandable, given the pint-sized proportions of the kitchen at the back of the dining room. Similarly the wine list has nothing on the encyclopedic tome at Cookie, but there's a good selection of moderately marked-up Old and New World labels and a lengthy, cuisine-appropriate list of beers.



Batson's food at Colonel Tan's has an endearing snap and fizz to it. This is Thai food not afraid of lashings of fresh chilli and tongue-puckering citrus. There's plenty of fried and wokked stuff, alongside the curries and salads, while some more Westernised burger and sandwich options feel perfectly at home in the bar setting.

There's an excellent cashew salad (\$8.50), the nuts sharing a bowl with roughly chopped tomato, cucumber, coriander and chilli and tossed with a salty lime dressing that has a hint of fish sauce.

Also good is a salad of snapper (small pieces battered and fried to a crisp/chewy consistency), cucumber, tomato, ginger, lime and chilli (\$9.50) that comes with a small stack of handsome, healthy betel leaves. It's a dish where the salad is rolled in the leaf and has a nice balance of soft and crunch, heat and sweet.

There's the very good (and highly addictive) Colonel's Five Spice Chicken (\$14.50) a generous serve of salty, battered and deep-fried chicken pieces and a robust and wok-smoky dish called Fat Duck Noodles (\$12.50), which combines duck meat, wide and slippery rice noodles, cabbage and broccolini and chunks of green and red chilli.

With its big bouncy flavours, cheap prices and relaxed/funky ambience, Colonel Tan's is already one of the best places to grab a bite in this neck of the woods. Glamorous it ain't, but that's just part of its appeal.