

Cheap and cheerful Colonel



Karen Batson has been pleased and somewhat surprised by the customers who have frequented her latest cooking venture, Colonel Tan's.

"The Colonel" was established as an adjunct to the Revolver Upstairs nightclub and intended to appeal to the nocturnal Chapel Street crowd, of a certain age. Its cheap and cheerful American diner theme with a Thai food twist was pitched at the young and ravenous. The grungy, retro décor is part-nostalgic and part-tongue in cheek.

But the appeal of this cavernous space, owned by nightclub royalty Camillo Ippoliti and Thai music star Tan Punturaumporn, aka Colonel Tan, has turned out to be broader. Customers have included older couples, family groups and dedicated diners, rather than solely the clubbers.

Batson has headed the kitchens at sibling restaurants The Toff in Town and Cookie for almost 13 years. The Colonel's nine-month-old menu is familiar Thai hawker-style, but it's lighter, tighter and loads of fun. Words such as burgers, fries, fritters and fried chicken are on the list, but on closer inspection pack a punch.

The burgers feature chicken and kaifir lime, the fries come with chilli and mayo sauce and the fried chicken is five-spiced and served with a serious green-chilli dipping sauce.

More traditional fare can be found in the betel leaf salad, a hotbed of ginger, chilli, peanuts and diced snapper designed especially for tucking inside fleshy green betel leaves. Or in the yellow fish curry (below) - a light, golden broth bobbing with chunks of

tender snapper and rafts of green papaya. It's served with a mound of rice and a pretty dish of shredded omelette, coriander and chilli.

Other options include stir-fries, noodle dishes, dumplings and salads. And it's all produced in a kitchen that the chef proudly announces has just one wok, a four-burner stove, a tiny deep fryer and a baby grill.

How they manage to plate everything so elegantly on earthy ceramic dishes of varying shapes is an additional mystery given the dimensions of that kitchen.

But perhaps the nicest feature of the generally delightful package that is Colonel Tan's, is the staff. Sure they're busy, and as the night lengthens they get busier, but they are the kind of diligent, cheerful people who will keep patrons of all ages and persuasions climbing those steep stairs to enjoy Batson's terrific Thai food.

VERDICT

Excellent value for money; first-class, cheerily presented, Thai hawker-style dishes are accessibly priced. Yes, they're smallish (but are cheap enough to order a few). There's novelty appeal in the decor, and something on the menu that will please everyone. Be warned. The stairs into the building are hideously steep and the music is LOUD. If the decibels grate, there's little you can do - the DJ, and the top shelf alcohol, are protected by industrial-strength cyclone-wire cages.



EAT THIS

Where: upstairs, 229 Chapel Street, Prahran
Phone: 9521 5985
Chef: Karen Batson
Prices: entrees \$4-\$11, mains \$7-\$16

Opening hours:
 Tuesday-Thursday and Saturday 5pm-late;
 Friday noon-late

There's sure to be something you miss on a first visit to Colonel Tan's. It probably won't be the array of chandeliers dripping from the ceiling near the bar, the upside-down '70s floor lamps hanging opposite them, or the massive caricature of Colonel Tan himself, but it could be the Thai pop images and record covers or the empty gilded photo frame near the tiny kitchen. The vibe at Colonel Tan's is part-'60s diner and part-'70s lounge room. The mismatched velour couches, low lighting and shag-pile rugs are the first things you take in, but later it's the cigar boxes holding the cutlery, the laminex tables with vinyl fruit-patterned cloths and the nostalgia-invoking pinball machines.

There's a poster wall that changes monthly too. This month's stunning black-and-white image is by Melbourne-bred, LA-based graffiti artist team Dabs Myla.