



Michael Ma fires up a wok as he prepares Pad Thai at Lublae Thai Restaurant.

By **Martín S. González** ■ Staff Writer

“You ready for a show?” Michael Ma, a chef at Lublae Restaurant in Rosemead asked as he stood before a blazing hot wok in the restaurant’s kitchen. Not awaiting an answer he tossed a handful of shrimp into the wok, sending a huge fireball soaring up in the air.

As the 110,000 BTU flame under the wok roared and the shrimp sizzled fiercely, Ma expertly and efficiently added strips of fried tofu and sweet radish to the

wok, building layers of flavor. Next came rice noodles, which had been briefly dunked in chicken broth followed by a seasoning sauce that included fish sauce, lime juice and rice vinegar.

On the cover: Award-winning Pad Thai from Lublae Restaurant.

With a flick of his wrist, the pad thai noodles were plated and garnished with fresh carrots and cabbage and draped with a thin egg omelet. The whole process lasted no more than two minutes.



Staff photos by GREG ANDERSEN

Thai Toast, above, is a specialty at Lublae. Below, Danuscha Ma puts the finishing touches on her award-winning Pad Thai.

"In Thailand, a larger omelet is made and the noodles are bundled inside the egg," said owner and head chef Danuscha Ma, as she draped the omelet over her son's handiwork. "It takes too much time to do, so this is my version."

Ma carefully sliced open the omelet and draped back the egg to reveal the noodles, making sure the shrimp were placed on top. Presentation is very important for Ma, but flavor remains paramount. At her Rosemead restaurant, Ma makes all of the restaurant's curries from scratch, milks her own coconuts and even makes her own shrimp paste, which contains no less than 15 ingredients.

"I've gone through four blenders already," Ma said.

The allure of Thai cuisine and what sets it apart from

other Asian cuisines is the mouthwatering dishes that are created from ingredients such as lemongrass, shallots, a form of ginger called galangal, kaffir lime leaves and lots and lots of chilies. The driving force in Thai cuisine is to create a balance in a dish between hot, salty, sour and sweet. Ma is passionate about finding that balance in all of her dishes, but is also aware of the American palate.

"I have a number system so that customers can order dishes as spicy as they would like," Ma said. "One is very mild and 10 is very spicy. We still get a lot of customers who order 10, though."

Although accommodating to non-Thai palates, Ma is eager to share the authentic flavors of her native country with her customers. The restaurant's menu includes a number of dishes not often seen on many Thai restaurant menus, like nam prik ka pi, a salmon filet, deep-fried and flavored with Ma's secret recipe shrimp

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paste, and a delicious Orange Fried Rice. Ma proudly displays her certificate from the Thai Ministry of Education that certifies her training as a chef in the Royal Thai Style. A blank space below will soon be filled by son Michael's certificate upon his graduation in June from the California School of Culinary Arts in Pasadena.

Although a myriad of ingredients are sometimes used, Thai cuisine is surprisingly easy to prepare. As is the case with most restaurant recipes, you may not achieve the same level of flavor as in a restaurant, where blazing hot burners provide a taste you are just not going to get at home. But a popular appetizer on the menu, Thai Toast, is, by Ma's admis-



sion very easy to prepare.

"There are not many ingredients and it is very easy to prepare. I like to fry the whole piece of bread and then cut it after," Ma said. "I use Wonder bread. They make very good bread for Thai Toast."

After a mixture of shrimp, pork is slathered on a slice of bread. Ma fries it, mixture side up, scooping oil onto the mixture to bind it to the bread. The Thai Toast is served with and delicious cucumber relish, the sweet and spicy component in the dish.

The spicy coconut chicken soup, Tom Kha Kai, was not much harder to prepare. Once the ingredients are assembled, it was just a matter of what order they were added to the pot. Although Ma adds her signature shrimp paste to the soup off the heat before it is served, at home she suggested serving the paste

on the side to add to taste.

"You will know the chicken is done when it is plump. For home, they can use store-bought shrimp paste to make it easy," Ma said.

Ma's Pad Thai recipe, an award-winning recipe at the 2000 California Pad Thai Festival sponsored by the Office of National Culture Commission of Thailand, is the most complex of these dishes to prepare, but again, once the ingredients are assembled, the actual cooking time, even on your home stove, will be very short.

"You can chop up the egg and add it to the noodles," said Ma. "But it will look better if you place it on top."

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