

# The Southampton Press

THURSDAY, MARCH 8, 2007

## Restaurants

### DINING OUT

## The Far East Thrives On The East End

By Alexandra Sanidad

On the strength of approving murmurs from the local grapevine, Matsulin, a three-year-old Pan-Asian restaurant in Hampton Bays, has defied challenges that have proved insurmountable for many an East End eatery.

First, there's the incongruous building that houses the establishment, with its brick exterior and small windows that make it look for all the world like the bank it once was.

"Passersby might miss us," said proprietor Vivian Ip, a warm, gregarious woman from Malaysia who is also the restaurant's weekday host. "We're planning on making the outside look more eye-catching."

A lease was signed in March 2003, with an opening planned for July 4. While waiting for permits to come through, the opening was delayed twice. Ms. Ip, brimming with enthusiasm and impatience, decided to proceed with the debut as soon as she could. Hence, on a snowy mid-winter day in January 2004, Matsulin opened. For five customers.

"But each night," she said, "we got more customers and two weeks later, the dining room was packed."

Open Tuesdays through Sundays for lunch and dinner, Matsulin serves its take on Chinese, Japanese, Malaysian, Thai and Vietnamese cuisine (with two dishes from Singapore) in a spacious, tranquil interior sectioned off into a sushi bar with nine stools and a main dining room with a partitioned area that allows for private parties. Seating accommodates 110.

The dimly lit dining room, replete with recessed lighting, was designed by Ms. Ip's brother, Kay Lim, a civil engineer who serves as host on weekends. Mr. Lim chose to keep areas separate with mahogany columns and large glass windows. "That way," he said, "you feel like you're in your own space without feeling closed off."

The columns are complemented by blonde wood furniture and dark red booths that line avocado green walls.

"It's the color of the forest," explained Ms. Ip, who also owns the Chinese take-out eatery, Ming Garden, in Hampton Bays. "It goes with the name." She and her siblings (who often give their input on her business) were inspired to name Matsulin for their father, a restaurateur in Malaysia who passed on many of his recipes to his children. His Chinese first name, Song, translates in Japanese as Matsu, meaning "pine;" his family name, Lim, sounds like the Japanese Lin, meaning "forest."

"Green's been a lucky color for us," she continued.

Luck may have helped Matsulin thrive—being adjacent to a movie theatre on Montauk Highway doesn't hurt—but Ms. Ip attributes her success to something else: "I make sure everything is top notch. We use spices from Malaysia. Otherwise, they wouldn't have that authentic taste. I hear sometimes that people think we're pricey, but you can't get this level of quality just anywhere. We have the best cuts of everything, ingredients that are imported, genuine. It's gourmet cooking."

Prior to joining the menu, all dishes have to get Mr. Lim's stamp of approval. "He'll taste it and say, no, this isn't ethnic enough," said Ms. Ip. Mr. Lim concurred: "People already know what Chinese take-out food tastes like.



Matsulin proprietor Vivian Ip with her older brother Kay Lim, who designed the interior of the restaurant.

ALEXANDRA SANIDAD

We didn't want to do that."

Matsulin's three chefs work with recipes culled from Ms. Ip's family members and their friends; the variety of the restaurant's cuisine reflects the influences of many other Asian cultures on the food of Malaysia. Matsulin's crispy fish (\$23), for example—a customer favorite—was added to the menu not only because Ms. Ip enjoyed the dish growing up, but also because she supports the Chinese belief that serving a whole fish symbolizes prosperity for the future.

To make this entrée, a sea bass—chosen for its ability to remain tender and juicy during the frying process—is lightly breaded, then deep-fried with pepper, mango, pineapple and a tangy sauce, the recipe for which was handed down by Ms. Ip's father.

Similarly, the Saigon pork chop entrée (\$18), was a family favorite made by Ms. Ip's grandmother, who procured the recipe from a Vietnamese friend. Pork is thinly sliced to encourage tenderness, placed in a lemongrass marinade, then pan fried.

Ms. Ip kept the American palate in mind before putting kari ayam (\$19)—a curry with chicken, potato and onion—on the menu. "A lot of people can't take too much spice, so we lowered the level we would normally use. We tried recipes over and over before finally adding them to the offerings," she said. "We had to make them perfect."

Matsulin is welcoming to diners unfamiliar with Asian cuisine; Ms. Ip has been known to consult with new customers and accommodate them by arranging for special tasting plates. A platter of mixed appetizers would feature four different items (\$8 to \$10), while an entrée plate might feature three or four selections (price varies). "People love it," Ms. Ip said. "Newcomers often come back; I remember their faces."

Many Matsulin diners can attest that this last statement is no exaggeration. Ms. Ip often surprises returning customers by welcoming them by name and remembering their preferences, after meeting them only once. When asked about this skill, Ms. Ip credited her genes. "My father remembered entire orders in his restaurant," she said. "He never wrote anything down."

In addition to dishes made from family recipes, the menu features the successful results of Ms. Ip's culinary experiments. The emerald dumpling appetizer (\$6) is Matsulin's spin on a type of dumpling served in Hong Kong restaurants made with napa cabbage, carrot and mushroom.

"That combination was too common; you can get it everywhere," said Ms. Ip. "So I tried making it with watercress. The crunchy texture of the watercress goes well with the shrimp." A black plum dipping sauce, another of Ms. Ip's inventions, accompanies the dish.

Other appetizers include crispy calamari (\$8), lightly battered and tossed with scallions, diced pepper and spiced salt ("And they're not chewy!" Ms. Ip points out.); spicy spinach (\$6), pan-

seared in a sauce originally conceived by Ms. Ip's aunt; and roti canai (\$5), a thin scallion pancake made for dipping in a chicken curry sauce.

Lighter fare includes a cold noodle salad (\$5) with bean sprouts, shredded carrot and cucumber in a peanut-sesame sauce; an oriental chicken salad (\$7) dressed with ginger vinaigrette (a customer favorite); and a spicy seafood salad (\$8) with shrimp, calamari, bay scallops, jicama, Napa cabbage, lemongrass and Asian basil.

The restaurant also has a large selection of sushi and sashimi by the piece (\$3); sushi entrées (\$15-\$23); rolls (\$3-\$7); and more intricate special rolls (\$10-\$13).

Desserts (\$7) aren't listed on the menu, but are available depending on availability of ingredients. When the right variety of sweet, meaty mangoes turns up in stores, Matsulin features a mango pudding. Asian fruits such as lychee and rambutan, which have a consistency similar to the flesh of a grape, might also be on hand. Most nights, Matsulin offers a dessert of fried bananas with vanilla ice cream.

In the off-season, the restaurant changes its menu of specials every month. Come summer, the menu has been known to change weekly. The most recent list of specials featured entrées like Ipoh ho fun (\$16)—which Ms. Ip says is a favorite in her home city of Ipoh—rice noodles, shrimp and fish cake in a creamy egg sauce; king rama beef (\$18), beef strips stir-fried in a spicy sauce with basil, string beans, peppers and onions; and Mongolian chicken (\$18), stir-fried with okra, peppers and onions.

The restaurant serves a variety of lunch specials: entrées with soup or salad (\$7-\$10) and bento boxes (\$10-\$18) with salad, miso soup and rice from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. From Sunday, and Tuesday through Thursday, a \$20 prix-fixe menu is available, and includes an appetizer, entrée and dessert.

A selection of hot and cold sake (\$13-\$23); Asian beer such as Sapporo, Shanghai and Asahi (\$5), plum wine (\$7), and red wine and white wine by the glass (\$7) is available.

Looking to open a branch of Matsulin in Nassau County, Ms. Ip and her family are currently on the hunt for the right space. In the meantime, "We're just going to keep doing what we're doing," she said. "It works."

## Matsulin

- ◆ 131 West Montauk Highway, Hampton Bays
- ◆ 728-8838
- ◆ From 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday; 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday; noon to 10 p.m. Sunday. Closed Monday.
- ◆ All major credit cards.
- ◆ Reservations accepted.
- ◆ Restaurant and bathrooms handicapped accessible.