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Fresh, pan-Asian fare and some eco-friendly flair

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BY GREG COX - CORRESPONDENT
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It's rare in these days of ever-increasing specialization that you come across a person you could describe as a Renaissance man. Meechai Kowae is just such a person.

Kowae, who opened Spize Café in August with his wife, Jacq, is a software engineer by day. By night, he cooks in his restaurant, serving a brief, varied menu of pan-Asian fare, most of it showcasing the flavors of his native Thailand.

Virtually everything, from the curry of the day to spring rolls filled with lump crabmeat, shrimp, vermicelli and fresh basil, is made from scratch. And when Kowae says he cooks from scratch, he means it. A recent Panang fish curry featured Spanish mackerel he had caught himself off the Carolina coast.



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SPIZE CAFÉ

121-108 Fayetteville St., Raleigh
828-5000

www.spizecafe.com

Cuisine: Asian

Rating: * * * 1/2

Prices: \$-\$

Atmosphere: urban casual

Service: friendly and efficient (counter service)

Recommended: herb-rubbed wings, baguettes, Thai fondue

Open: Lunch Monday-Friday, dinner Wednesday-Saturday.

Reservations: accepted

Other: Visa, MasterCard, American Express; beer and wine; accommodates children; modest vegetarian selection

The N&O's critic dines anonymously; the newspaper pays for all meals. We rank restaurants in five categories: * * * * * Extraordinary * * * * Excellent. * * * Above average. * * Average. * Fair.

The dollar signs defined: \$ Entrees average less than \$10. \$\$ Entrees \$11 to \$16. \$\$\$ Entrees \$17 to \$25. \$\$\$\$ Entrees more than \$25.



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Sadly, the mackerel a meaty, richly flavorful fish seldom seen hereabouts - was sold out by the time I made it to Spize Café. Instead, the fish of the day was the decidedly more mundane tilapia. I couldn't fault its freshness, though, and the peanut-thickened coconut milk curry, intoxicatingly redolent of kaffir lime leaf, delivers all the flavor you could ask for.

So do juicy herb-rubbed chicken wings, whose bronze skins fairly sparkle with lemongrass, making the decision whether to dip them

in the accompanying chile lime sauce a difficult one. Another small-plate offering - featuring sun-dried shrimp chips with complex, tamarind-tinged roasted chile paste - is a nod to Jacq Kowae's Malaysian birthplace, and a fine companion for any of Spize Café's handful of organic wines or bottled Asian beers.

It's tempting, in fact, to nibble your way tapas-style through an offering that includes roasted garlic shrimp and cashews, fried tofu with sweet and sour peanut dip, and modern twists on the Vietnamese banh mi theme ranging from cumin chicken to dry-curried eggplant. You can always save large plates such as tamarind prawns, lemongrass pork, and twice-cooked turnip cake with Sriracha hot sauce for next time.

At some point, though, you'll surely want to make room for Thai fondue. Billed as the house specialty, the fondue features your choice of tiger prawns, neatly trimmed ribbons of sirloin steak, or a combination of the two, which are brought to your table on a platter laden with a kaleidoscopic arrangement of fresh vegetables, mushrooms and vermicelli. Cook these to your liking in either of two classic Thai broths: tom yum, a rich coconut brew enlivened by the gingery kick of galangal; or tangy, lemongrass-perfumed tom kha. Dip as desired in the chile-spiked dipping sauce, and enjoy with a bite of jasmine rice. Once you've fished out all the tasty morsels, don't be shy about polishing off the soup.

Even a Renaissance man can't be in two places at once, so Kowae trained his kitchen staff to prepare a lunchtime offering of contemporary Asian salads and Vietnamese-inspired baguette sandwiches. They're good students, too, judging by the baguette I sampled recently: tender slices of chile-marinated steak, pickled daikon, carrot, cucumber, cilantro and romaine lettuce on a crusty loaf slathered with sweet chile mayo. Sliced fresh jalapeño, too, if you like. I like.

The list of entree salads covers a broad spectrum, from cellophane noodle with poached shrimp, roasted cashews and fresh mint to tuna and arugula with bird's eye chiles and lime mayo. Grilled pork loin and crispy shrimp wonton is a deservedly popular choice. The persnickety critic in me noticed that the wontons

were soft at their shrimp-filled centers when I sampled the salad, but the avid foodie countered that the filling was toothsome and the wonton perfectly crisp at the edges. Between the two of us, we managed to finish every bite.

Lunch and dinner, Spize Café is a counter service eatery, efficiently staffed by an eager young crew who take their cue from Jacq Kowae, the restaurant's warmly hospitable manager. The urban casual decor reflects the taste of Meechai Kowae, who has owned similar restaurants in San Francisco Bay area. Kowae also brought with him a commitment to environment-friendly living, which explains the recycled paper trays and tableware made of corn byproducts. Even the marble tabletops are repurposed, according to Kowae, using material salvaged from a building in downtown Raleigh.

What else, after all, would you expect from a Renaissance man?

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