

EAT MELBOURNE
ST KILDA

CLEVER THAI
JOINT EXCELS

CHARLONG

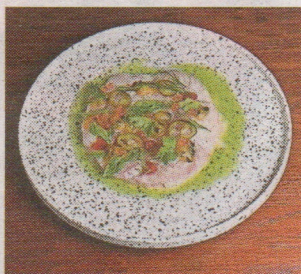
124 Carlisle Street St. Kilda, Melbourne,
0466 244 666. charlong.com.au
Small: \$8-\$26; Large: \$24-\$26;
Dessert: \$6-\$12

Verdict: Tasty little charmer

You could look at Charlong as a nice, new neighbourhood Thai joint and you'd be right: there's green curry, wokked noodles, papaya salad and friendly service. But you'd also be wrong: Charlong is so much more than a standard suburban restaurant. It's clever, creative, run by women and could only be in Melbourne.

Co-owner and chef Alex Kaew and her business partner and front-of-house manager Sara Pimsamarn do everything themselves, including curry pastes and spiced sausages. Pimsamarn has a background in five-star hotels. Kaew has worked in some of Melbourne's best Asian restaurants, picking up skills and strategies, while also studying for a Masters degree in marketing and business. It's so tough for restaurants to make a go of it these days that I frankly feel nervous for anyone putting it all on the line and opening the doors. Hearing about Kaew's extra qualifications gave me comfort. It gets even better: she grew up in Chanthaburi in Thailand's east and spent long days helping at her grandmother's food stall. Anyone who's wrangled a mortar and pestle since they were 10 understands flavour.

You don't need to know any of that to appreciate the delicious food. Prawn betel leaf is the umami bomb version of surf 'n' turf, with sweet prawn and pungent chicken jungle sausage piled into a thrilling bite. Kingfish is briefly cured with makrut lime salt then laid in a shallow coconut-and-galangal broth that tips a hat to Filipino kinilaw, Thai tom kha gai and Spanish gazpacho. It's dressed with passionfruit, which sounds bonkers but completely works as an alternative acid bounce. The green curry recipe is from Pimsamarn's family, balanced with grachai (wild ginger) and bolstered with turmeric-cured then charcoal-grilled eggplant. Add brisket if you like (I did): it's a perfect meaty soaker for the elegantly spiced broth. Thai milk tea is given new life in the panna cotta tart with brown butter crumble and whipped coconut cream. It's excellent after dinner but I would also come here in the afternoon just for this dessert.



St Kilda's Charlong is bright and cheerful, the food flavourful. For example, the kingfish sashimi (dressed with passionfruit), the prawn dumplings (rethought as ravioli) and the Thai tea tart (from left). PHOTOS: JOE ARMAO

Kaew has cooked at Phamily Kitchen (Vietnamese), Longsong and Longrain (Thai), Hochi Mama (Asian fusion), Rice Paper Scissors (Asian street food), Mr Miyagi (snacky Japanese) and was most recently head chef at BangBang in Elsternwick (Asian fusion). She's basically put herself through restaurant school and there are elements of the whole curriculum in what she's doing at Charlong. But the dish I loved most is inspired not by an Asian kitchen but by iconic Melbourne pasta restaurant Tipoo. Dumplings are rethought as ravioli, filled with king prawn and bathed in lobster head bisque that's hot and sour like tom yum but enriched with butter. Tapioca beads are cooked with dark soy and squid ink to make a "caviar" garnish. It's genius. There are many reasons why dumplings shouldn't be considered cheap food; Kaew's rendition offers a closing argument.



DANI VALENT

ALSO TRY

SAINT GEORGE
54 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda, 03 9125 5277,
saintgeorgestkilda.com.au

This 100-year-old pub has had a few false starts in the past decade but hopefully it's on track now with menu direction from chef Karen Martini, who wowed Fitzroy Street for so many years at Melbourne Wine Room, which was diagonally opposite.

DOC ST KILDA
14-16 The Esplanade, St Kilda,
03 9968 6667, docgroup.net

The St Moritz apartment development had a failed tenancy with flashy Loti but it's trying again with a safer offering from well-known pizza brand DOC. You can't go too wrong with a good margherita or napoletana but there's also housemade pasta, such as the three-meat agnolotti with veal, pork and rabbit.

THE PRINCE DINING ROOM
2 Acland Street, St Kilda, theprince.com.au

In another try-again moment for St Kilda, the upstairs restaurant at The Prince is reopening next week with Sydney chef Mitch Orr (Kiln) and ex-Pipis Kiosk chef Ben Parkinson taking the food in a new direction. They're flagging a menu built around the wood-fired grill with a focus on local seafood and vegetables. It's a gorgeous space so let's hope they make it work.