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RESTAURANTS

Wild Ginger goes glamorous ; Nancy Leson

Seattle Times restaurant critic

Restaurant Review

THREE STARS \$\$\$

Wild Ginger 1401 Third Ave., Seattle

Reservations: 206-623-4450

Hours: Lunch Monday-Saturday 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m.; dinner Monday-Thursday 5 p.m.-11 p.m., Friday-Saturday 5 p.m.-midnight, Sunday 4:30 p.m.-11 p.m.; bar open until 2 a.m. daily

Prices: Lunch: appetizers \$1.85-\$11.95, entrees \$7.25-\$19.95; dinner: appetizers \$1.85-\$16.95, entrees \$8.75-\$39.95

Parking: Valet \$7, pay lots nearby

Full bar / Major credit cards / No obstacles to access / Smoking in downstairs bar-area only

The sleek new Wild Ginger is like the lovable, laid-back old roommate who shows up at your college reunion with a Prada suit and a flash car. At first, your jaw hits the floor, but once over the initial shock - and after a beer and blab session - you realize that despite the new look it's still your same old pal.

That said, it took me four visits to get over the shock of the new Wild Ginger.

In 1989, Rick and Ann Yoder teamed with chef Jeem Han Lock, opening Seattle's foremost pan-Asian restaurant. Recently relocated from South-of-the-Hillclimb to renovated digs adjacent Benaroya Hall, the new Ginger is a high-torque restaurant for a high-tech town.

Even with doubled seating capacity, two lounges and several private dining rooms, securing a reservation is a tedious task. Expect to hear: "Thank you for holding. We are currently experiencing a high volume of calls. The next available receptionist will be with you shortly." Hang up. Half the seats are reserved, the rest held for walk-ins. And if you're coming for dinner, you'll likely be offered a 5 p.m. or 9 p.m. slot anyway, love it or leave it. I say leave it, knowing that a wait - even a long one - affords the opportunity to relax in the downstairs bar or, in that candlelit zen of iniquity, the upstairs lounge. Here you can sit and order a starter, or walk around with a drink and pretend you're crashing a hip party, aware that any moment you'll be called to dinner and that the caterer is among the best in town.

Dining out alone is high on my list of guilty pleasures. I did so, often, at the beating heart of the original Wild Ginger. Seated at the satay bar, I nibbled Bangkok boar and lemon-grass-luscious chicken and came to love Malaysian laksa, forever searching the recesses of my bowl for one last morsel of scallop, sliver of cucumber or spoonful of slippery rice noodles. My favorite seat? Back to the wall, the better to survey the dark and cozy scene: cocktail lounge, dining room, satay grill and all.

Now imagine the state of my jaw when I'm led to the new satay bar. With a view of stainless steel and gleam, a monolithic slab of black before me, back to the spare, sleek, blond decor of the mammoth new dining room, I was forced to call for a Momokawa to take the chill off. As the sake soothed, my satay arrived with its cunning complement of crunchy-sweet pickle. That's when the warmth and comfort that has always spelled Wild Ginger began to work its magic.

Everyone has a must-have dish or three at the Ginger. High atop my list is Fragrant Duck (\$8.50 lunch/\$14.95 dinner), incredible as ever, the skin spiced with cinnamon and star anise. The duck is meant to be eaten as a mini-sandwich, smeared with plum sauce and tucked into petite pillows of housemade bao.

The mess factor is undeniable, but the pleasure of doing battle with a whole Dungeness crab Singapore-style (market price/\$29.95) is a regular's rite of passage. Garlic, ginger, chilies and fermented black beans heighten a tomato-thickened sauce that packs a wallop. Crab cracker in hand, confront your leggy opponent, hot towel at the ready between rounds. Marry this with the killer Sichuan green beans (\$9.95) and die happy.

A rousing revelation, sashimi-grade Tuna Manada (\$17.95 lunch/\$26.95 dinner) swims in a sauce screaming with chilies, perfumed with lemon grass, soothed with coconut milk and thickened with candlenuts. You'll find it, along with simply steamed salmon Cantonese (\$22.95), listed among the specials. That list features many longtime favorites and is somewhat lengthier and (watch out!) considerably pricier than the standard menu. Sea bass proved a sensation when coated with herbs and gently seared, the buttery flesh served in a bath of lime, peanut and chili-stoked fish stock. But at \$31 for an 8-ounce portion, lord knows it should be.

Otherwise-lovely Black Pepper Scallops (\$14.75 small portion/\$21.95 large) had played too long in the sandbox. Seafood-studded Thai Noodles (\$10.25 lunch/\$13.95 dinner), eaten often to great delight in the past, were a dullard this time, thanks to under-saucing. Over-saucing marred the "dry-fried" Seven Flavor Beef (\$8.50 lunch/\$13.25 dinner), sweet hoisin masking the other six flavors.

Never perfect, but always ours, Wild Ginger still rules. Smart service, smart wine list, smarting with excitement, it's got new-Seattle yin and old-Seattle yang. And you've got to love that.