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[Seattle](#) > [Print Edition](#) > [Industries](#) > [Retailing & Restaurants - Restaurants](#)

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On the menu

Seattle's Wild Ginger makes a tasty lunch choice

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Who are the smartest people in Seattle? Quite possibly, the servers at **Wild Ginger**. At least they're among the most prepared.

Before they ever face the public, they train for eight days, studying the ins and outs of one of the city's widest-ranging menus. They learn ingredients for dishes from South China, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia, along with finer points such as when to warn about the presence of allergens, such as peanuts, or that neon yellow enemy of white shirts, turmeric. (For that, they offer you a bib.)

But the service is only part of the reason the latest Zagat guide rates Wild Ginger as Seattle's most popular restaurant. Mostly, it's the concept.

In 1989, owners Rick and Ann Yoder came up with what was then a novel idea. They would serve a wide array of first-rate Asian food in a smoothly run, Western-style restaurant. It worked then and it still works now, six years after moving to a sprawling and swankier 350-seat space across from Benaroya Hall in downtown Seattle.

The second-smartest people in Seattle might be those who take their business guests there for lunch. The guests get to experience a local icon and, for a relatively small bite out of the expense account, everyone gets pretty good food.

First impressions: a grand entryway with big potted plants and a view of the main dining room, a two-story affair with massive, gracefully shaped pillars and natural woods trimmed in black. Rows of booths line the sides, balcony tables survey the scene from above, and a satay bar claims the back. There's also a second, brighter room with floor-to-ceiling windows, wicker furniture and both table and counter seating. Upstairs is a cozy lounge with full menu.

At first glance, that menu can make you feel like Marco Polo trying to discover half a continent in a single meal. Not that the menu is extremely long. It just covers so much territory.

The journey's first step could be something from the satay bar. Singing Fish (\$5.95 for one skewer, \$9.75 for two) features grilled mahi-mahi with a vibrant dill and Thai chili sauce. Saigon Scallop (\$5.95, \$11.95) has four plump sea scallops per skewer, expertly grilled, with soy-vinegar sauce, pickled cucumbers and some jasmine sticky rice.

The fixed-price lunches are a bargain (\$12.50). Our Dragon lunch, for example, had chicken pot stickers, grilled Cambodian pork steak with a small salad and rice, Szechwan green beans and a scoop of gelato, ice cream or sorbet. The pork was slightly dry and the rice barely warm, but the wok-fried green beans (a perennial takeout hit) were amazing and our dessert choice -- ginger ice cream -- hard to beat.

Emperor's Bowls (\$7.95-\$9.95) range from soups to noodles to laksa, a spicy Malaysian seafood stew. All are big enough to share, and the two we tried were slurp-a-licious. Seven Elements Soup combines coconut milk, tender white-meat chicken chunks and loads of egg noodles. Squash and Sweet Potato Stew is perfect on a chilly day, simultaneously spicy and sweet.

Topping the "midday meals" list is Fragrant Duck (\$9.95), a house specialty, with moist duck slices crusted with cinnamon and star anise and served with steamed buns and a thick, chutney-like plum sauce. Just as good is Seven Flavor Beef, its thin slices wonderfully enhanced with the colors, crunches and tastes of lemon grass, peanuts, hoisin, chilies, fresh basil, garlic and ginger.

During three lunch visits we found another good side dish -- Wild Mushrooms with Peapods (\$8.95) -- and a disappointing salad, the Vietnamese green papaya, a monotonous mound of white and orange strips. And we found a server who forgot to bring dishes for the former and couldn't identify those strips in the latter.

Our other two servers were hard-working and helpful with good suggestions and telepathic skills. One, sensing that our table of three wanted to share, even offered to split everything we ordered, including each course of a fixed-price lunch. Sharing is a good idea at Wild Ginger. So is avoiding the hectic hour of noon to 1 p.m. when lines have been known to reach to the street. But even though dinners can be memorable and the most experienced servers generally work at night, lunch is a great way to go.

One of our anonymous reviewers regularly visits a Puget Sound-area restaurant unannounced. The Puget Sound Business Journal pays for all meals. Opinions expressed here are strictly those of the reviewer. Reactions will be published in the Letters column.