

Meet Your Iron Chefs: Orchid Thai's Thay Siharath vies to keep his crown

By Brock Weir

Chefs across Aurora are waiting with baited breath this week to learn just what they will have to work with in the second annual Iron Chef Aurora.

Creative juices are flowing in many of Aurora's favourite restaurants as five chefs prepare to do battle at the Aurora Community Centre on Thursday, May 29, as the hockey arena is transformed into Kitchen Stadium, the arena of Aurora's culinary supremacy.

Defending his title this year will be Thay Siharath, owner of Orchid Thai, situated on Yonge Street, just north of Aurora Heights Boulevard. Working with last year's secret ingredients of beer and asparagus, Mr. Siharath won over the crowd with his mix of sweet, savoury and spicy dishes featuring shrimp and beef.

Although asparagus is not a flavour particularly prevalent in Thai cooking, Mr. Siharath approached it as he would a green bean.

"I used the similarity of the vegetables to what they have in Thailand and it didn't taste bad!" he says. "I was quite surprised it turned out so well. I understand what asparagus tastes like and I tried to pair it up with stuff I knew a lot about in terms of Thai cooking and luckily it turned out well!"

Since arriving in Canada from Thailand at the age of 11 in 1979, he has seen firsthand how Thai cooking has taken a foothold in the Canadian market, and finding a special place in Canada's cuisine as well. It was shortly after arriving in Canada as well that he discovered his own love of cooking.

Watching his mom hard at work in the kitchen, he says he has fond memories of sneaking in to steal a taste of the meal to come? damn the consequences if he got caught!

By his late teens, his friends who were able to sample his own creations suggested he open a restaurant. Clearly it was good advice.

"Thai food has been in Canada for quite some time now and I am sure a lot of the patrons who were at Iron Chef last year had some experience of Thai cooking," he says. "They brought in their own experiences of Thai food. For Thai cooking, it consists of sweet, sour, bitter and, of course, spice. If you can try to bring that out in your cooking, that is the ideal. Thai cooking entertains the five senses of your tongue and that is what you try to do."

Before each chef knows what their two secret ingredients are, however, the creative juices can only flow so far. When asked if there was anything he was crossing his fingers would be out of the question as far as ingredients go, he did not hesitate with his answer.

"Cheese!" he says. "We don't cook with cheese at all. You don't see dairy at all in Thai cooking, but I guess there always has to be a first time! Whatever we have to cook with, I just want to let the food speak for itself. At the end of the day, I am just happy to be in the competition. It is a fun event, and if we can help out a little bit as well, that is what we are looking for."