



Robin's Nest: Hanging with the boys at the club, Thai food joys

By ROBIN WOODS

For Montclair Local



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Robin Woods is a Montclair Girl-about-Town, writing about activities, stores, restaurants and interesting people that catch her eye. She's written memoir and personal essay as well as music and fashion columns for various NYC newspapers.

Got something you think should be in Robin's Nest? Write to us at culture@montclairlocal.news.

THIS LADY ALLOWED



The bowling lanes at the Commonwealth Club. ROBIN WOODS/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

After attending a number of social and political events at The Commonwealth Club, a men's membership

organization, my feathers were ruffled a bit as I mused, “In this day and age, how can we have something like this here in our progressive town?” Well, folks, some people have never heard of it, and there is absolutely no opposition or hard feelings at all. I stand corrected, and went on a grand tour there to find out what’s what, and what it’s all about.

Thought to be the oldest men’s club in New Jersey, established in 1904, its purpose (from their charter written 114 years ago) is “To promote sociability and good fellowship among the men of our community, to foster manly ideals in the boys and provide them with club facilities, to stimulate the interest of this community in all local and general questions which concern the commonwealth.”



Robin holds Commonwealth Club memorabilia. ROBIN WOODS/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

Montclair resident Benjamin Moore (the paint guy) was a former president there from 1914-1917 who paid off and wiped out the original mortgage for the club, with a promise that it never be encumbered by debt. There’s a lot of history here.

I was happily surprised that the club manager is a woman. Sandy Finnegan is fierce and feisty, both house mother and enforcer who keeps everything together. It’s a large and cozy place, newly repainted in trendy colors while keeping intact the distinct architectural features such as crown molding and a brick fireplace. Township Councilman-at-Large Rich McMahon and Club President Bohdan Polansky joined us as we went downstairs to the basement. There’s a six lane bowling alley there, where 24 mens leagues bowl Tuesdays through Thursdays. Female guests of members have six teams there on Mondays. “It’s a unique place where people can come together and choose a night to have some fun and bowl,” Polansky said.

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The décor and lanes bring back memories of those retro, good old fashioned non-computerized places where many of us spent our childhoods.



Rich McMahon at the Commonwealth Club bar. ROBIN WOODS/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

It’s a warm, family oriented club where men 21+ can be members. Their oldest member, at age 93, is Jack

Anderson. Fathers, sons, grandchildren and the whole gang can go there seven days a week. Don't forget to check out the beautiful bar, hand crafted by our favorite Irishman, Rich McMahon. To date, no female has yet applied for membership.

Something to add to my Bucket List?

KAI YANG



Sara Sheree and Robin Woods at Kai Yang. ROBIN WOODS/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

All of that manly stuff gave me an appetite, so I moseyed downtown to Kai Yang, opened in September by owner Sara Sheree. Her warm and gracious personality makes you feel like part of her family. The name of the restaurant literally means "rotisserie chicken" in Thai, which is street comfort food. Born in Bangkok and now a local, Sara explained that Thai food is known for its sauces, slow cooked with patience. The cuisine is a mixture of what she said is Thai, Chinese and Muslim cultures. Sweet, sour, salty and spicy give the food its distinctive taste. I was able to get her to tell me that tamarind is one of the dominant spices in Thai food, along with red and green chiles. Other than that, it's a secret.

Sara fondly remembers cooking all day Saturdays in the kitchen with her grandma, as she watched her prepare an endless array of food. It was a girls-only event, with no boys allowed. Grandma never wrote down the recipes or gave her exact measurements. She spent years trying to replicate what was made. "Family is important. I appreciate my family more and the love that we have. We owe everything to our parents and grandparents."

As you walk in, you notice the colorful, warm, and somewhat kitschy décor, from the portrait of King Rama V and a large red statue of Buddha at the entrance, to the wildly colorful floral table coverings with matching plates. Indian inspired tapestries hang on a side wall, with flattering pink lighting.



The table is set at Kai Yang. ROBIN WOODS/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

There are many types of curry on the menu: Panang, Massaman and Karee. I am crazy about the sumptuous yellow Karee curry with Thai chiles. Although you may add chicken or shrimp to each, I had the good old vegetarian version, medium spiced. Flavorful roti bread is the best way to sop up the delicious curry broth.

The Kai Yang itself is wonderful slow cooked spiced and marinated rotisserie chicken, served either as a whole or halved portion. Three combinations for the chicken include papaya salad, with a choice of grilled pork

sticks, grilled beef or minced chicken. Sticky rice accompanies the large platter. I brought carnivores along with me to taste test, and they all agreed that it was the best chicken they've ever eaten. True to her culture, Sara doesn't "Americanize" the food, but you can choose the level of spiciness from mild to very hot. Authentic Pad Thai and other noodle or rice dishes are on the menu, too. Appetite sated and with history lesson to boot, I'm off on more adventures in Montclair.

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