

## **Magnificent Elephants Spotted Near Tanglewood**

*By Wilda Spalding*

It is April and Spring is filling our eyes with its abundance of colorful delights. From the tiniest blue and purple flowers sprinkled through our just-about-needing-to-be-moved lawns to the bursts of purple, pink, violet, and white trees lining our highways and gardens as daffodils and tulips smile up from the earth after a curious winter's sleep. But what is this?...something new and quite wonderful...two magnificent elephants draped in royal, cloth-of-gold blankets are being housed at 4146 Clemmons Road across from Tanglewood. Anticipation had been mounting for weeks as people awaited their discrete arrival. "We were waiting for them...looking for signs of life...it is so exciting to have them in our own backyard," exclaimed Donna Williams who lives just down the road from Tanglewood when speaking of the arrival of CHANG THAI (which means Thai Elephant). Children love it. People of all ages and backgrounds are driving miles and miles for it—in from all over the country, lines are even seen to be forming on some days.

Are these elephants on loan from the "Thai Elephant Conservation Centre" in Northern Thailand which is under the royal patronage, of H.H. Queen Sirikit of Thailand or have they come from the stable of Royal Elephants belonging to her husband, H.M. King Bhumibol? In its native Thailand, the Asian elephant is impressive not only for its size, but for its intelligence, memory and pleasant nature. Its strength, inherent dignity, and majesty has ensured it a special place in the hearts of the people of Siam (ancient name for the peoples of Thailand) and in the royal families for many centuries as well. Sadly, this gentle giant is on the endangered species list, rapidly nearing extinction, which has already been the fate for the Dwarf Elephant of SE Asia. But what are these two doing here across from Tanglewood Park in North Carolina...and is it a good thing?

Do you know that elephants consume around 440 pounds of food a day? They can consume around 200 different types of plants...and in fact, they are the largest consumers of plants among all the animals on this delicate planet of ours. Eating for an average of 18 hours a day, they also drink on average 60 gallons of water a day each. Yikes! Can our beloved Tanglewood Park sustain such an appetite? And what of the gentle, winding beauty of its neighbor, the Yadkin River—whose water-line already is a bit low again this time of year!?! Wait a minute...by now you must be wondering: is this an April Fool's Day joke? Well, yes and no. Chang Thai (meaning "Asian Elephant") is the name of a quite fabulous new restaurant across the 158 from Tanglewood at 4146 Clemons Road. Parking is easy and its doors are open from 11am until 10 o'clock at night. To the many hundreds who have already experienced its wonder since its opening on the 5th of November 2006, it is "no joke."

The Thai Elephant may indeed be the symbol of a nation. But for us here in North Carolina, as we are nearing the Tanglewood exit off the I40, it is symbol of deliciously healthy meals, gracious welcomes, and of being transported by our taste buds, the soft, lightly exotic music in the background, the ornately carved teak screens and the hand stitched art of two elephants hanging

majestically on the wall--to a place of nourishment, good health, and what one might call a 'divine' peace, so welcome whether after a full day of work, or as a relaxed place to get to know a new date, or to celebrate life itself.

CHANG THAI restaurant has a real 'family' feel to it. "We want to do family style...with style," said Nok, a modest young woman, who although part Founding Owner can be seen donning a magnificently intricate formal jacket of welcome from Thailand or a simple white, cook's jacket helping out in the kitchen. CHANG THAI was opened by a family team where "everyone worked hard to open it", including Nok's Mother who flew in from Thailand. Ruttana Cohn, (nicknamed "Nok" which means "Bird") with Nok's husband (a National Guardsman), do the daily running with a graciously efficient staff of other people including many of her husband's North Carolina family and family members of the all-woman, mature Thai cooks smiling out from the kitchen and immaculate grill.

Nok's mother started preparing her for this moment since the age of 13 when she was sent away to learn the restaurant trade. Nok then went on to work in various restaurants in Thailand and the USA, learning as she went and creating her own culinary delights, like the angelically light 'Spring Rolls with Cheese'— a most popular appetizer at CHANG THAI. While we were doing the interview for this article, Nok deftly created a vegetable flower, twirling a simple paring knife about a vegetable, as if it were the finest sculpture. Such special care is taken with everything in this quite magical place, tucked so discretely in the shopping development across from Tanglewood Park. The smells wafting into the parking lot are enough to irresistibly draw one into its world of welcome and culinary heights.

Reverend Candis Burgess, the Rector of St. Clement's Episcopal Church in Clemmons, a frequent 'guest' at the restaurant, exclaims that already, just to "sit and mull the spices...the fragrance is incredible" The restaurant is named after the Asian Elephant which is Nok's Mother's favorite animal. The tasteful décor is mild yellow (the King's color) and red which is considered to be lucky. Just to the side of the two elephants artwork at the entrance, you will notice a small space set aside for special respect. Each morning, the 'family' of CHANG THAI meets there to honor the Thai King and their own family roots and traditional ancestors. Family is very important to them. Children really love it at CHANG THAI, fascinated by the elephants and silk paintings, the Asian dolls and...of course...the yummy food.

It is quite impressive to hear our North Carolina kids asking for Thai and Japanese foods in the languages native to those peoples! "Why Japanese foods?" I asked Nok. Evidently, some of the children asked for it...and that was all it took. Now a number of dishes from Japan are also available. "We cook with ZERO grams of trans fats. We want to keep healthier people. We want people to come and leave happy," says Nok as a beautiful flower keeps emerging from the vegetable in her hand while the swift movements of her paring knife continue. "Take for example, garlic and onions are baked the day before, slowly all night, and then made into a paste for many of the dishes. It is a lot of work. All of the food is fresh.

Ordered in three times a week, not just once like most restaurants”. If anything is not just the way you like it, Nok will ask the cooks not just to ‘fix’ the meal but to cook a completely NEW meal with your requests incorporated. At CHANG THAI they are committed not only to bringing delicious food to ‘guests’ but to listen to them. Much like the beautiful flower that is emerging from Nok’s carving, they respond to suggestions from their ‘guests.’ An example is a comment casually made by one guest about the wine glasses....the very next day, brand new glasses were stacked, sparkling near the wine rack.

I have eaten Thai and Asian food pretty much the world over, and have never tasted food that even comes close to those prepared by those wise, smiling Thai lady cooks at CHANG THAI. So many of the people I interviewed, like Lyndora visiting from Louisiana just swear by the Sizzling Flounder...besides delicately exotic tastes, surrounded by generous amounts of vegetables, the fish is truly unbelievable...like some sort of soft butter, literally melting in your mouth. Asking Nok how they make it so, she said it has to do with the way it is marinated and prepared. Donna Williams a nearby neighbor said that the Sizzling Flounder is, “Incredible. Once found, you will never have anything else. You just come and order it over and over again.” Marcia Mills, formerly Minto from Winston-Salem, famous for her Gumbo, drove 14 hours straight up from her home with her new husband in Shreveport, Louisiana. “I’ve been dreaming about that coconut soup since I first had it...my first stop had to be to get me some more!” And, wow, the Tom Kha Gai (I just ask for the coconut soup) is just terrific. Just had your first taste of Tom Kha Gai and your senses are still reeling from the exotic citrus flavor of something that clearly was not a fruit, did you bite into something so exciting and pleasant that you thought about forgetting the main course and simply ordering more soup? The “kha” in that soup is a fantastic member of the ginger family called galanga or galangal. Ingrid Caiman, a long-time student of Ayurvedic(ancient medical knowledge from India) and Tibetan medicine, wrote that Galanga had been given by God to provide protection against illness. Speaking of being given by God, evidently, a gentleman from Pastor Burgess’ congregation at St. Clement’s stood up at Announcement Time during Services and exclaimed that if people had not yet gone to experience CHANG THAI, that they really should. One might paraphrase that by saying that, indeed, the food and wholesome environment is truly “divinely” inspired. My husband and I certainly feel blessed that CHANG THAI has come to its present location near by!

As a gift to all of us, Nok has shared the recipe for the coconut soup. I think it would just be easier to let her ladies cook it. You can get ‘take out’ or have them do catering for you by calling (336) 778-0388 or call and make reservations for lunch or dinner. But for those of you who might like to try it at home, here it is: Shrimp Coconut Soup with Galanga and Lemongrass In a solid pot, combine the first 8 ingredients. Bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for 5 minutes. Add the final 6 ingredients and simmer until the shrimp are cooked, approx. 3 to 4 minutes more. Serve hot. 1 cup water & 1 tsp. chicken broth & 3/4 tsp. salt 1 tsp. fresh lime juice & 1 tsp. sweet chili paste 1/4 cup chopped fresh lemongrass, tough outer leaves removed 2 Tbs. peeled and thinly sliced fresh

galanga 4 Kaffir (lime leaves), crushed 1 cup coconut milk medium shrimp, peeled and deveined fresh mushrooms, tomatoes, onions, largely cut some baby corn pieces  
Another gift that Nok and her husband are extending to all of us readers of the “Villager Voice” is that when you bring in a copy of the April edition with this article in it, you will receive a free appetizer with the purchase of a regular priced entrée and 2 drinks. Thank you, Nok, for coming and bringing this magnificent tradition of CHANG THAI to us. When I asked Nok what brought her here to our special part of North Carolina, she answered with a gentle smile and laughter reminiscent of wind chimes in an evening breeze...”destiny”. And let us all say, AMEN.

Guest Contributor: Wilda Spalding who makes her home in Bermuda Run with her husband, Barry Geller, and puppy named Chummy, is an internationally known writer, educator, and human rights advocate. She has appeared on TV and Radio both in the USA and abroad. Wilda is an ordained minister and heads up IHRC/CIDH, a nonprofit whose motto is “positive people for positive change”.