

N.Y. / REGION | DINING REVIEW | NEW JERSEY

Full Menu, Stuffed Plates: A Review of Aoyama in Wyckoff

By SHIVANI VORA MARCH 13, 2015



The dining room at Aoyama is spacious and casual.
Fred R. Conrad for The New York Times

I've always been skeptical of long menus. Is it really possible for a restaurant to serve such a large variety of dishes successfully?

Apparently it is. Aoyama, a nearly three-year-old French Thai and Japanese place in Wyckoff, offers over 100 menu options. The kitchen, surprisingly, manages to do more than justice to many of them.

The owner, Peter Liang, says his mission is to have an affordable restaurant that doesn't skimp on quality. "I like the concept of giving diners lots of choices at a good price but using fresh produce, meat and seafood," he said in a phone interview after my visits. Mr. Liang owns a second location in Mendham, also called Aoyama (Japanese for "blue mountain"), which serves Chinese and Japanese food.

Before we ordered, we noshed on addictive warm chips that come with meals. They're fried in-house with ingredients that Mr. Liang keeps secret — he would only reveal that corn flour is in the mix — and served with a zesty scooping sauce of tomatoes, cilantro, purple onion, basil and Thai chilies. We then made our selections from the French Thai part of the menu.



The grilled seafood platter combination
Fred R. Conrad for The New York Times

A mussels appetizer was fiery and enjoyable. Steamed in a broth of dried red chilies, lemon grass chunks and coconut juice, the mollusks packed a wallop of heat without being overly spicy.

We also liked the tropical-tasting salad of meaty grilled squid, sweet mango chunks, pungent shallot bits and mesclun greens tossed in a peanut dressing, and the roti, a round thick-layered bread accompanied with a souplike curry of puréed vegetables, fresh green chilies and mint.

Though entrees had the same pep, they were gargantuan. There was over a pound of red snapper fillet, jumbo shrimp and scallops in the grilled seafood platter combination, for example, which also came with sticky rice wrapped in a banana leaf, and grilled zucchini, eggplant and yellow squash. The fish tasted like it was caught that morning.

The one-and-a-half-pound steamed lobster surrounded by stir-fried baby bok choy had a slightly bolder taste with its ginger garlic and basil sauce.

And then there was the one-and-a-half-pound roasted rack of lamb. Thud. And yet the depth of seasonings was evident in every bite; the meat is marinated overnight with red chili peppers, Thai basil and black and green peppercorns. The pan-seared shiitake mushroom flower and potato-and-leek pancake accompanying the meat was sophisticated comfort food at its best.



The roasted rack of lamb
Fred R. Conrad for The New York Times

We didn't fare as well with the Japanese menu. Forget the lukewarm-bath-like miso soup; the real disappointment came from the much-hyped Sushi Special Roll section.

Our roll, the "Dream and Dream" — half Alaskan king crab, radish sprouts and cucumbers wrapped in rice paper and drizzled with chili sauce, and half tempura lobster with orange masagao (roe from a capelin fish) wrapped in soybean paper and topped with eel sauce — was Instagram-worthy with its bias cuts and colorful presentation, but was so

mushy that it was hard to decipher any of the ingredients.

Only the yakisoba noodles weren't a letdown. Stir-fried with soy sauce, julienne onion and carrots, and baby bok choy and topped with black sesame seeds, they were crunchy and warming, even without the chicken, usually mixed into the dish, which had been left out the day of our visit.

The desserts, mostly made by a dedicated, in-house pastry chef, are a must at Aoyama. The creaminess and pop of ripe fruit in the mango guava cheesecake with a graham cracker crust was hard to believe, and the individual butter tart filled with a lime custard and drizzled with chocolate sauce looked and tasted as if it belonged in an upscale patisserie.

All of Aoyama's spice and sweetness is served in a spacious and casual dining room. There are high ceilings, brass chandeliers, a worn red carpet and tables with white cloths. One of the walls is covered with LED lighting that changes colors every few seconds, creating a soothing effect.

When we walked in, Mr. Liang greeted us with such warmth and familiarity that we wondered if he had confused us with someone else. He hadn't; all diners get the same effusive welcome. Our wait staff was also upbeat and speedily complied with every request, but they weren't perfect. On one of our visits, numerous servers brought dishes to diners who hadn't ordered them — so many times that the scene was borderline comedic. On that same trip, our food came out in a puzzling sequence: One entree showed up with the appetizer, and our rice never arrived.

But there are more highlights at Aoyama than drawbacks, and they begin with the size of the menu.

Aoyama

319 Franklin Avenue, Unit 112

Wyckoff

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Aoyamanj.com

Good

THE SPACE The restaurant is part of the Boulder Run shopping center, and the 120-seat large and airy dining room almost resembles a mini banquet hall. There are white tablecloths, tall wood chairs, high ceilings, a well-worn red carpet and round brass chandeliers. Two walls with windows are draped with curtains and another is covered with LED lighting that's constantly changing among five colors such as bright pink and blue. The sushi bar has an additional 11 seats. Wheelchair accessible.

THE CROWD Families with children of all ages, couples and groups of friends, all of whom seem to be regulars.

THE BAR B.Y.O.B.; no corkage fee.

THE BILL Entrees, \$13 to \$35. Appetizers, \$3 to \$17. Sushi, sashimi and rolls on the Japanese menu are between \$3 and \$19. Desserts, \$7 to \$12.

WHAT WE LIKED Steamed mussels, roti with curry sauce, roasted rack of lamb, seafood platter combination, steamed lobster with garlic ginger and basil sauce, yakisoba noodles, mango guava cheesecake and chocolate lime tart.

IF YOU GO Mondays through Thursdays, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. (lunch) and 4:30 to 10

p.m. (dinner); Fridays, and Saturdays, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. (lunch) and 4:30 to 11 p.m. (dinner); Sundays, 3 to 10 p.m. Reservations are strongly recommended for the weekends. There is plenty of parking in the shopping center's parking lot.

RATINGS Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, Poor.

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