



# SIMON THOMSEN | Restaurant review

## HOW IT RATED

### HOLY BASIL

The food ..... 14/20  
 The staff ..... 7/10  
 The drink ..... 3/5  
 The X factor..... 4/5  
 The value..... 9/10

The total out of 50

**37**

#### Address

233a Canley Vale Rd, Canley Heights; ph 9727 7585

#### Food

Lao and Thai

#### Drink

Small, limited, affordable list, plus Thai and Laotian beers, as well as great non-alcoholic fruit shakes. BYO \$3 a glass

#### Hours

12pm-3pm seven days  
 5pm-10pm, Sun-Wed  
 5pm-11pm Thurs-Sat

#### Chef

Tony Inthavong

#### Owners

Tony Inthavong and Louise Nguyen

#### Wheelchair access

Limited (steps to toilet)

#### Parking

Off-street parking

#### Price guide

Entrees: \$3-\$10.90  
 Mains: \$10.90-\$16.90  
 Desserts: \$11.90

#### Snapshot

Holy Basil lifts the notion of western Sydney's Asian restaurants from downbeat ethnic ghetto to smartly modern, and is all the more exciting for its rarely seen Laotian flavours.



Some like it hot

**C**HILLI heat is measured on the Scoville scale. Capsicum rates 0, while pepper spray scores 500,000-plus. As Holy Basil's manager, Tony Inthavong takes our order, he asks "mild or medium chilli?", and warns that medium isn't as gentle as it sounds. But some restaurant critics can't take a hint.

Being the sort of bloke who'll munch on a scud (a birdseye chilli, score 50,000-plus) for kicks, I'm up for the challenge. All I can say is the tamarind-sour Laos-style papaya salad, \$9.90, laced with dried shrimp and capped with a small salted crab, made this grown man cry. Medium is the new hot in Laos. It's tears, nose runny, and mouth on fire. I loved it, but let's just say it's fiery enough to change a global warming sceptic's mind.

Holy Basil changes plenty of perceptions. Toby's Estate signage around the footpath seating initially throws you off the (kaffir-lime) scent. It remains cheerfully cheap, yet the decor is inner-city smart, with a wall of granite mortars and pestles, dark timbers and Buddhist art, all peeling open to the gentrified streets.

We've grown used to Thai restaurants in every 'hood, but the food of its eastern neighbour, Laos, has failed to make the same inroads. Holy Basil is a fine exemplar of Laotian style, while incorporating the familiarity of Thai. It's also a typical contemporary story of Australian flavours.



**Hot stuff:** Holy Basil's chicken feet salad buzzing with chilli sauce and lime, pickled vegetables and peanuts, and the smart new restaurant.

**Pictures:** John Fotiadis

The Inthavong family fled their besieged, landlocked homeland and spent five years in a Thai refugee camp before migrating to Australia.

Holy Basil is a family affair. Matriarch Kambo is the font of recipes, not least the fabulous sour and salty nam jim dipping sauce. She often joins son Tony in the kitchen. Daughter Nicky is also on the floor.

The service is more homely than polished, a reflection of Laotian dishes with a strong, humble peasant background.

Spicy duck salad, \$14.90, is Asia's answer to France's salade landaise, using the giblets as well as breast in a sour and pungently salty blend of cabbage, mint, coriander, galangal and chilli. Offal also stars in the vinegary, gelatinous chicken feet salad, \$9.90,

buzzing with chilli sauce and lime, pickled vegetables and peanuts. The Laotian approach is more earthy than Thai, yet remains clean and lively.

You can pick Laotian diners by their rice. Sticky, rather than steamed rice, \$3, is the staple, presented in a small basket to roll into balls and eat by hand.

If I didn't tell you the crisp caramelised slices of meat were grilled marinated ox tongue, \$8.90, you'd probably mistake it for rump. Enjoy it with Mum's nam jim anyway.

For something a little less feral, the marinated quail, \$10.90, is a fine starting point. Succulent deep-fried quail would make The Colonel green with envy. Only the fish cakes, \$7.90, disappoint. Their pedestrian nature explained later when Inthavong confesses

to running out of the house-made version and using store-bought. Just four months into opening, I'm still forgiving.

He was honest enough to say the king prawns were frozen before I ordered Penang curry, \$15.90. A shame – the five rubbery prawns short-change the sweet shallow pool of bean-laced, coconut-based sauce.

We finish with the wow moment: crispy fish (market price/\$44.90). Whole deep-fried snapper is a study in contrasts hot and cold, sweet and sour, soft white flesh and crunchy skin, shredded green papaya and cashew nuts. I'd return daily for this. It places Holy Basil at the epicentre of Sydney's great Asian restaurants. And if I can summon the courage, I'll ask for more chilli next time.