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# Making the great leap forward



## Larissa Dubecki

### Chin Chin

14/20

Modern mash-up of classic Asian cuisine.

**Food** Thai

**Where** 125 Flinders Lane, city

**Phone** 8663 2000

**Cost** Typical small dish, \$14; large dish, \$24; dessert, \$11

**Licensed**

**Wine list** Accessible and all-Australian; house wine on tap

**We drank** Crittenden "Los Hermanos" (Mornington Peninsula, Vic), \$49

**Owner** Chris Lucas

**Chefs** Andrew Gimber and Ben Cooper

**Vegetarian** Two small and two large dishes

**Value** Very good

**Outdoors** No

**Service** Holds up admirably under pressure

**Parking** Street or paid

**Wheelchairs** Yes

**Web** chinchinrestaurant.com.au

**Cards** AE MC V Eftpos

**Hours** Daily, 11am-late

**Score: 1-9:** Unacceptable. **10-11:** Just OK, some shortcomings. **12:** Fair. **13:** Getting there. **14:** Recommended. **15:** Good. **16:** Really good. **17:** Truly excellent. **18:** Outstanding. **19-20:** Approaching perfection.

**A**RE WE there yet? Are we there yet? Has Melbourne finally caught up with Sydney in the Thai food stakes, matching it nahm prik num for nahm prik pla yang, doing the sweet-salt-sour-heat smackdown and taking out an apprehended violence order against the one-dimensional coconut curries that have blighted our reputation for too long?

Chin Chin was a slow train coming (to borrow a line from one of the stalwarts of its nostalgia-soaked soundtrack) but it arrived with the power of a runaway locomotive. Simply pushing open the heavy glass door from Flinders Lane is a sensory experience — like stepping out of sterile Bangkok airport straight into a heaving night market, the steamy air ripe with the nasal whack of fish sauce and lemongrass.

The place itself is no less a shrinking violet. Drinkers are piled several deep at the bar, while the queue snaking out the door thrums with expectation and disappointment, depending on the glass half-full/half-empty leanings of its constituents. The no-bookings policy has once again proved its worth to the modern restaurant business model.

To pay proper due, Cookie got the ball rolling, showing how to meld a frenetic pop-cultural vibe with some authentically belligerent yet balanced flavours. Gingerboy and Longrain have done their bit, too, and Easy Tiger was a recent notable. But Chin Chin is a zoo.

It's a big barn of a place — an Asian cafeteria is the savviest description I've heard — decked out with posters and the requisite arty mish-mash of stylistic influences. The tables aren't communal but they're closely packed and noise levels imi-

tate an A300 readying for take-off. Owner Chris Lucas (he of Pearl fame) beams among the chaos that's almost miraculously kept in check by a savvy bunch of floor staff led by John Kanis and sommelier Neil Prentice (he's the one in the "Wine Guy" apron dispensing sage advice about the accessible Oz wine list).

Chin Chin doesn't take itself too seriously — it's one helluva fun place to eat — but the food is far from a joke. It isn't strictly Thai; more of a modern mash-up between Thai, Malay and Chinese with a bit of Laos and India thrown in for good luck. Some of it is very traditional and will be instantly recognisable; some of it is very traditional and won't be known to an Australian audience but plenty of it is the result of a couple of chefs with the talent and experience (both Andrew Gimber and Ben Cooper have worked with David Thompson, the pope of Thai food) to make it new.

The value is pretty keen. You could, for example, prop at the bar and have the omelet stuffed with whole oysters and bean shoots and finished with a punishing chilli sauce. It sure beats a pre-packaged sandwich for the \$12 office lunch. Chinese-style dumplings (\$11) are similarly straightforward — minced chicken textured with sweet corn and shiitake, the net result swimming in a sweetish ginger-soy dressing.

Slices of suckling pig (\$16) braised in masterstock arrive with a tasty pile of herby slaw, soft pancakes and a sweet plum sauce that's simply blah in the absence of any discernible vinegar.

But kingfish sashimi (\$14), cut against the grain for more heft, is fiery and vivid with the heat of garlic and lime, soothed by a measure of



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coconut cream. It's a great take on the dish that ate Melbourne.

When it comes to bigger dishes, Chin Chin excels at the kind of tumbled multi-elemental dishes that zing with sensory overload. Under "green stuff" you'll find the barramundi salad (\$24) — thickly caramelised, chewy chunks of flesh with an acid-bright salad of mint and green apple matchsticks and shredded kaffir lime leaves, while over yonder there's a separate glossy pile of molar-sticking pork cubes with crushed peanuts and fried shallots. It's one of those improbable yin-yang dishes that's pitch-perfect. Order it.

But it's something as simple as the flash-fried whole sardines (\$18) that has our table pondering the evolution of south-east Asian flavours in this town. The accompanying Thai relish, based on smoked eggplant, mushroom and white fish, is pungent and intense, salty and fresh and complex all at the same time. Would this have flown five years ago? Probably not. Not too sure that crudites wouldn't have worked better

than lightly steamed vegetables but it's still a corker of a dish.

There's too much else to go into great detail: a massaman curry (\$18) that's softly fragrant, rich and earthy and does everything expected of it. A kingfish head (including the delectable collar of the fish, \$15) swims in an aromatic sour orange curry owing its joys to tamarind and citrus juice balanced by the earthiness of daikon and betel leaf. Everyone orders the mandarin duck (\$33) and ought to go away happy.

"Ethnic" eateries can induce a sense of numbing sameness once tipping point is reached with menu familiarity but Chin Chin's 40-plus dishes and the experimental nature of the chefs means you can have an entirely different experience each time. Only desserts are kept to a neat trio of things that sound like Thai slants on Western creations. I'm not at liberty to comment because I haven't made it that far yet. There's simply been too much diversion on the rest of the menu. Are we there yet? I reckon so, kids.



The barramundi salad with pork

