

DURING the latter part of 2014 spice levels rose across the state. **Longtime Thai** in the heart of Chinatown opened after a much-anticipated wait. Situated down a lane at the top of the Chinatown Mall in Fortitude Valley, a golden Tuk Tuk heralds the entry to the brick-lined, L-shaped dining room.

Buttoned leather banquette seating lines one wall and there are huge wooden tables in the centre of the room for communal seating or big crowds. The kitchen overlooks all this, as does the bar where trays of exotic, tropical cocktails are whizzing their way to tables of revellers. The moodily lit space may make it challenging to read the menu but there are an abundance of enthusiastic staffers who will take you through the multitude of choices.

Not to be missed is the Bangkok taco, a crunchy little cracker folded around a spicy prawn lab, and they are delicious, as is soft shell crab bao - a soft bun hiding crisp fried crab and an apple slaw. Fine and delicate egg nets filled with pork and barbecued cuttlefish are drizzled with red nahm jim, and banana flower salad is tossed with a sweet-sour coconut dressing topped with grilled organic chicken. It's all colourful, fragrant and delicious, and none more so

than the crispy whole fish, this one doused in a salted yellow curry. Fillets have been carved from the fish and are presented alongside, spiced and fried to perfection, making it really easy to eat. There's still plenty to eat on the frame, although much of the flesh almost melts into the smooth curry sauce. The food is spot on and so is the ambience - think very moody lighting, vine-draped candelabras and small, exotic details like elaborately embellished metal water glasses, twinkling votives and gorgeous glassware and flatware. 610 Ann St, Fortitude Valley; phone (07) 3160 3123.


At the other end of the spectrum in terms of fit out is **Happy Boy**, a modern minimalist hybrid Chinese situated on the former site of Brisbane's most enduring Japanese Restaurant, Little Tokyo. For decades local legend **Mrs O'Brien**, a Japanese native, ran the brick-fronted tatami room and tepanyaki bar that was easily the most popular Japanese eatery in town. After her retirement part of the building was repurposed and is now shared creative and professional space, but the back area, once a loading dock, is now home to Happy Boy. The space is about as simply furnished as it gets - a long bar runs down one wall and the other wall has a wooden banquette with scatter cushions at irregular intervals. Larger tables and a polished wood communal table take up the rest of the space, with a little lounge area tucked into one corner.

**Jordan Votan** was inspired to create the space and employ Hong Kong-born chef **Ken Lau** by his travels across China. Lau cooks spice-laden dishes from all across the continent showcasing the vast differences that exist across China. And there's plenty of spice in the small menu (smaller at lunch time), which is designed to share. Classics like Hainan chicken rice and whole crispy snapper in ginger and shallots sits beside regional delicacies like dry fried green beans with pork, salt and pepper quail eggs and slow braised fish-fragrant eggplant, which is absolutely delicious.

Slices of white fish are "drowned" in an uber spicy Sichuan chilli broth, Xingiang lamb is sliced wafer thin then stir fried in cumin, there are layered noodle dishes

like gan mian hot dry noodles, which has a fragrant, spicy oil under the noodles and is topped with crispy chicken wings. Pork and prawn wontons are bathed in ominously red chilli oil and they're soft and moreish.

Pushing against the stereotypical Westernised Chinese restaurant model that exists in just about every suburb in the country where terrible, sometimes pictorial wine lists are the norm, Votan has broken the mould by offering a short blackboard list of non-bottleshop wines from smaller vineyards, specifically from Australia. They're chosen to enhance the spiciness of the food and they do that in spades. 2/36 Mein St, Spring Hill; phone 0413 246 890.

There's some spiciness going on at South Bank as well, albeit redolent of a very different region. **Che Asada** is a spacious, open-air venue, which specialises in the famous barbecues of Argentina. The menu is vast and begins with classic cheese bread then moves into shared starters like ceviche of local white fish, pulled beef cheek empanadas and charcuteria - Argentinian-style cured meats served with house pickles. The menu is divided into several sections but the main event is the asado, which includes carved Cape Grim flank steak, grilled chorizo and morcilla, huge hunks of char-grilled pork belly, a dressed green salad, hand-cut fries and a large bowl of house made chimichurri. Fried cauliflower, crisp florets sitting over a paprika aioli and sprinkled with almonds and pepitas, can be either a share dish or a side, so can crispy brussels sprouts with smoked pork belly and hazelnuts, and charcoal baby fennel with white anchovies and garlic. A little bit like a classic Aussie barbecue, the menu is designed to suit larger groups with varying tastes - there's a section of brochetas from the parrilla grill that feature tiger prawns, octopus and chorizo, pickled veal tongue and crisp morcilla. Beef is a specialty, as you'd expect, and there are grass-fed cuts from Tasmania and grain-fed from Queensland as well as short ribs, all of which also come with green salad and chimichurri. Shop 15, Little Stanley St, South Bank; phone (07) 3846 5555. 



Left: Pork and Corn dishes from Che Asada.