

A Thai Restaurant in Middletown, with No Fish in the Fish Sauce

— Mark M. Braunstein, 3.1.2025



Aroy Thai Gardens in Middletown, CT (Courtesy of the author)

MIDDLETOWN – [Aroy Thai Garden](#) was a conventional Thai-American restaurant until two years ago when it was purchased by chef Lapat Watrous, who created a menu like no other in Connecticut.

Thai-American restaurants are common in our corner of New England, but with fish sauce included in the base of dishes, much like tomato sauce is ubiquitous in Italian-American food. Aroy Thai instead has no fish in the fish sauce. In fact, no fish in the fish. And the beef, chicken, duck, pork, shrimp,

and crab, too, are all mock meats.

"Aroy" in Thai means delicious.

Once, after Aroy had been an all-vegan restaurant for nearly a year, I witnessed a dramatic scene. Two middle-aged married couples walked in, sat down together, and engaged in animated conversation until a waiter appeared with menus in hand. "How are you?" he greeted them before asking a more relevant question, "Do you know that this is now a vegan restaurant?"

Nope, none of the four people knew. With no discussion and almost no hesitation, in perfect unison, as though choreographed, they all stood up and walked out the door. I asked the waiter if that had ever happened before. He admitted, "Almost once a day." Apparently, the word "vegan" still strikes fear in the hearts of some Americans.

For vegans, vegetarians, and curious meat-eaters, it may be comforting to know that two all-vegan restaurants now reside in the middle of Middletown, both right on Main Street a half a mile apart. Comforting, but also puzzling.

As the legacy vegan eatery, ION Restaurant has been a Middletown landmark for 38 years. As the new kid in town, Aroy is the upstart. Competing for an exclusive clientele, might one soon disappear down the tubes of restaurant history? Or might both end there? Somehow, in defiance of the financial odds, both continue to draw crowds.

Much like ION, at Aroy deep-fried foods and mock meats abound. But unlike most fried foods and mock that are so processed that they bear little resemblance to the foods from which they were derived, at Aroy, what is nutritious can also be delicious. And its menu offers a bounty of wholesome foods that are not fried, including an array of vegetable main courses.

If you're keeping score, there are 28 appetizers, 9 soups, 11 curries, 7 rice dishes, 11 noodle dishes, 11 stir-fry veggie dishes, and 8 desserts. Plus, another 8 specialty dishes that defy any category. Spice levels range from merciful 0 to fiery 5. Excluding the mock meats, protein can be added to any entrée with tofu — steamed not fried. Varieties of rice include jasmine, butterfly (a Thai specialty made with bright blue-colored butterfly pea flowers), riceberry (a Thai purple rice), sticky (also called sweet rice), and whole-grain brown rice (my personal gold standard).

Shunning the deep-fried foods and mock meats, I have tried nine different entrées just from among the vegetable options. My favorites include the decorative bok choy with teriyaki sauce, the eggplant with basil, pad prik khing, a dry curry with green beans, and the stir-fried vegetables. And let's not forget the veggie appetizers such as spring rolls, avocado or mango.

The restaurant has two distinct halves, even two front entrances. The northern half seats individuals and small groups. The southern half (depicted in the photo) for large dinner parties features two enclaves lined with banquette benches reserved for special occasions. Or maybe only for special guests and celebrities. When she is not busy in the kitchen, Lapat sometimes occupies an enclave as her office from which she circulates to greet customers. Once you've eaten there, you will count her as one of Middletown's newest celebrities.

Mark Mathew Braunstein, a vegan since 1970, is the author of *Radical Vegetarianism*, the first book to espouse veganism. You can download a free PDF of the Lantern Books 30th anniversary revised edition [here](#).