

BY LOUISE THOMPSON

WHEN the new Thai restaurant Sweet Lime opened a few months ago at 2100 Sutter, near Steiner, it had much-loved shoes to fill: It moved into the spot Neecha Thai had held for many years.

But new owner Thassanee Ruthaiwat — or Nee, as she's known to friends and customers — and her business partner, Raungratana "Jamie" Disyamonthon, have met the challenge by combining tradition and creativity — and hard work.

Their vision is to make Sweet Lime a Thai restaurant where fresh flavors star, with a modern spin on the classics. Everything at the restaurant is made from scratch, using organic sources where possible, and no MSG. They even toast their own coconut and roast their own peanuts for the variety of sauces they offer.

"It's extra work, but for us, it's worth it," says Nee.

As a daily ritual, Nee and Jamie whip up recipe ideas together, challenging one another to come up with new takes on seasonal produce. They say great Thai cuisine combines different flavor elements — the interplay of sweet, salty, sour and bitter — in every bite. Family heritage is also important.

"In Thai cuisine, there are endless variations on recipes and ingredients, and every family has their own style," says Jamie.

Some of the most popular dishes at Sweet Lime are ones that are very familiar, such as pad thai and chicken satay. However, Sweet Lime offers a fresh twist on these classics.

"We make our own fresh noodles for



Sweet Lime owner Thassanee Ruthaiwat welcomes diners at Sutter and Steiner Streets.

Showcase for Fresh Flavors

Sweet Lime serves up the tastes of Thailand

the pad thai, when many others use dried versions," says Nee. "We get a lot of customer feedback that our version is the best pad thai they've ever eaten. And one of my employees will only eat chicken satay at Sweet Lime — nowhere else."

The menu is varied and ambitious —

and also reasonably priced. Starters, salads and soups range from \$5 to \$10. Main dishes offering barbecue, curries, noodles, fried rice, wok selections and chef's favorites feature vegetables, lamb and fish, all \$13 and under.

A popular appetizer, miang kham,

encourages diners to combine seven different ingredients — including ginger, lime, jalapeno, toasted peanuts, toasted coconut and onion — onto a fresh spinach leaf, then drizzle it with a tamarind peanut sauce. It's a fun way to eat, and one that wakes up the palate.

With a family that owns both a restaurant and a curry paste factory in her native Bangkok, it was perhaps inevitable that Nee would follow in their footsteps. Just over a decade ago, after realizing that her law studies weren't providing the inspiration she was looking for, Nee was working at various Bay Area restaurants, including Sausalito's acclaimed Sushi Ran, and also San Rafael's Royal Thai, where she met Jamie.

The two immediately hit it off and stayed in touch over the years. When Nee was ready to strike out on her own, she called Jamie, and the idea for Sweet Lime was born.

While Nee was eager to realize her vision, she was also keen to honor the legacy of the corner spot at Sutter and Steiner. In fact, it seemed like fate: Jamie had tried to buy the premises years earlier when it was a Chinese restaurant whose owners were looking to sell. So the two of them knew and loved the area, and when the owners of Neecha were ready to retire, they found eager buyers in Nee and Jamie.

"Jamie is a mentor for me, and I gain such a lot from her," Nee says. "And of course, it's wonderful to be able to work with your friends."

Sweet Lime is open for lunch Monday through Saturday and for dinner every night. It also offers catering for special events.