

IT'S NOT NUTS

At **Amala Restaurant**, you'll discover that vegetarian cooking is brimful with surprises.



"It's OK, don't worry," says the chef as he nips past the table bearing a pair of very sharp-looking scissors. He doesn't seem to be displeased and isn't about to stab a troublesome diner or anything like it. He cheerfully beheads a rocket lettuce that's growing by the side of the restaurant, one of many sprouting from a long plastic pipe, part of the hydroponics project here. Freshness is obviously important to the chef and you couldn't get any fresher than the lettuce he's taking back into his kitchen.

The restaurant which is simply called Amala is to be found at Prana Resorts & Spa on the beach road between Fisherman's Village, Bo Phut and Bangrak Beach. Amala is unique on the island as it is the only hotel restaurant to be completely vegetarian.

The word 'vegetarian', for many people, is virtually synonymous with 'to be avoided'. For many years, the concept of vegetarian has been something that suggests rather dull food. Is this just a prejudice or is there an element of truth here?

Ask Jonny Goodall, the executive chef at Amala – he with the scissors – and he'll tell you that many people, when they cook vegetarian, envisage the same kind of dishes as they normally eat, but without the meat or the fish. And it's the meat or fish that's usually the centrepiece of the dish. So the focal point of the dish has gone – along with the very reason for eating it. Not surprisingly then, it's easy for such vegetarian dishes to risk becoming a culinary turn-off.

"Cooking vegetarian makes you look at food in a very different way," says Jonny. "With no meat or fish centrepiece, you have to be more creative. The flavours become incredibly important and need to stand out more. Wrappings become very important, too."

Jonny uses various wrappings, with ravioli being a popular choice, "You

can wrap so many things in it," and nori seaweed, which, he says, both adds texture and looks good. But it's the flavours themselves which are the foremost consideration; no matter if you wrap something in rice paper or tortilla, it needs to taste as good as it possibly can.

And this can often lead to food having not just one but multiple tastes. "Think of the tastes as musical instruments in a symphony orchestra," explains Jonny. "Just as you have many different instruments playing, so you can have different tastes, each playing their part for a time." He goes on to provide an example; he makes a dish, he says, simply called 'ravioli smoked chili'. The ingredients come from all over the world and also include mushrooms, raclette and white truffles.

"When you eat this dish," says Jonny, "the idea is that you first experience the smoked chilli, just a little, and this comes from the ravioli paste. Then comes the taste of the mushrooms, then the raclette I use. Meanwhile the white truffles remain, so to speak, 'on the outside' but it's the smokiness of the chili that fuses all the tastes together."

Sounds good, huh? It certainly doesn't sound typically 'vegetarian', does it? When you eat like this there's no hint that you're depriving yourself of anything at all; there's nothing that you miss. Above all, you never catch yourself thinking that, well, just a bit of meat or fish would improve the taste of the dish. And there's no need to use substitutes for meat either. Jonny says, "Vegetarian food isn't all about nuts and nut roasts – there's a very wide range of tastes that means you don't have to use stand-ins and so on."

You might think a vegetarian restaurant wouldn't do very well on Samui. Most restaurants are offering meat-and-fish treats, even if they're also including an ever-growing number of vegetarian dishes. But none of them has gone the whole hog and declared themselves to be 100% vegetarian



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– except for Amala. A bold move? It's certainly one that's worked out well and that's because the food you get here isn't your typical fare. It's tasty and healthy, never dull. People are recommending the cuisine here by word of mouth and it's attracting a diverse clientele. This includes, of course, meat-eaters who enjoy the new tastes that Amala offers.

Amala styles itself as 'vegetarian with a twist', stressing that the food isn't something absolutely new-fangled and outlandish, but rather that the restaurant offers something different from usual. And the recipes haven't been plucked from obscure cookbooks, but instead have been very much influenced by Jonny's own personal knowledge of cooking. "I fell in love with cooking when I was four years old," he says. "It's been a passion all my life and I'm always learning as much as I can." Much has come from cooking experience – he used to work in a restaurant in London that offered Persian-style food – but just as much has come from his travels. And when cooks travel, they don't just lounge about on beaches but actively check out all the local food they come across and learn how to make it for themselves. Jonny got a lot of ideas from his time in Tamil Nadu and since he's also travelled all over South-East Asia, he's savoured thousands of tastes that are probably fairly unfamiliar to most of us. "Travel is essential," says Jonny. "You have to visit lots of places and be open to different ideas. Once you've stopped learning, you might as well have stopped living."

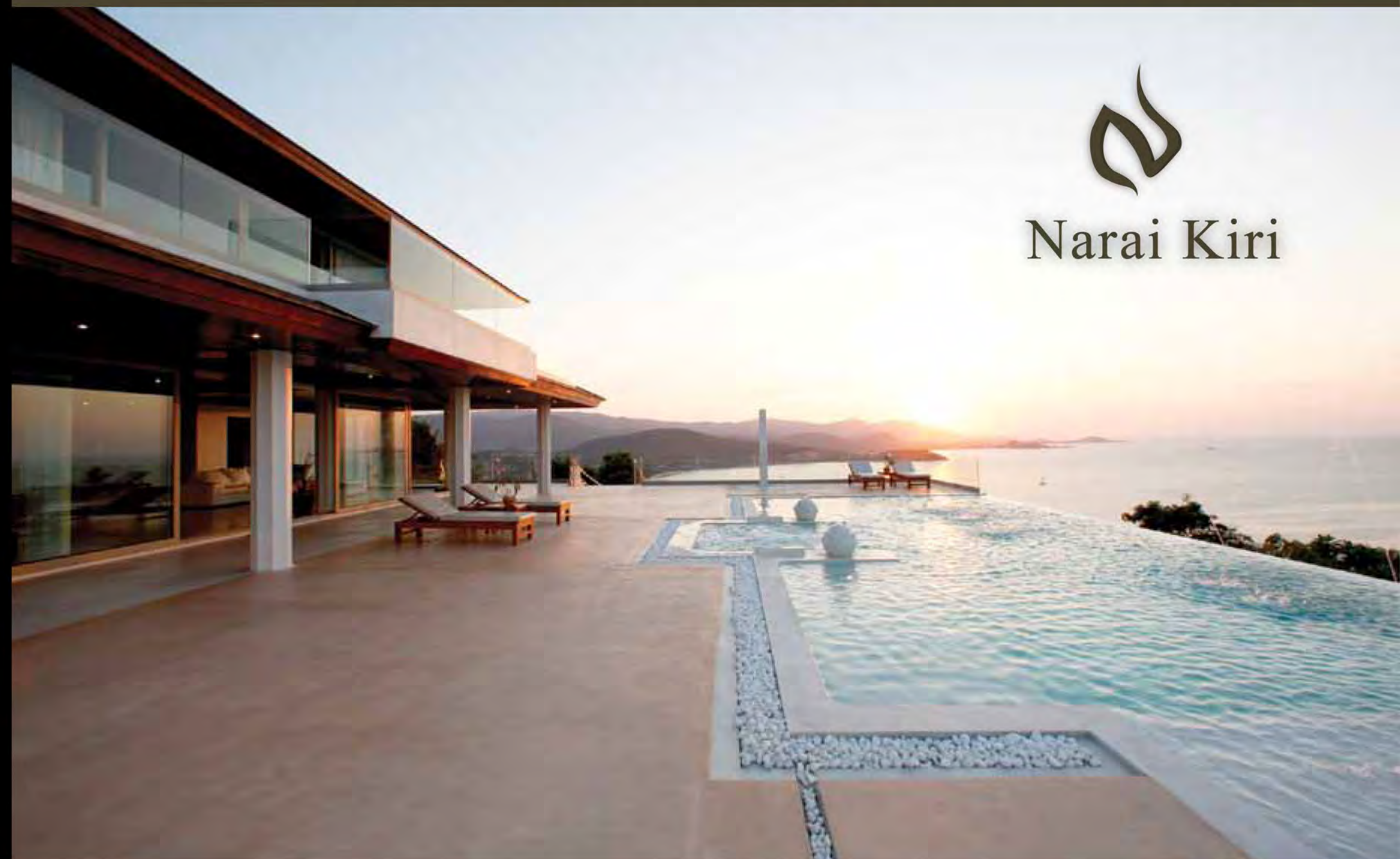
His attitude goes well with Amala's concept of a different kind of vegetarian cooking. And to get that 'twist' you need to think in new ways and leave the staid behind. Jonny's dishes tell the story of his journeys and probably that's why they succeed so well; his creativity and passion shine through. They certainly light up your taste-buds. Going vegetarian certainly isn't going nuts, not in the hands of Jonny, but rather a cornucopia of different ingredients that he transforms into amazing dishes.

Dimitri Waring

For further information please phone 0 7724 6362.



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