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## Flavors of Fusion

Asian bites are popular choice for happy hour and beyond

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Photo by: JOSH STEPHENSON/Herald

A Hand Grenade at Golden Triangle begins with shrimp and rice rolled in seaweed, then is

topped with a scallop and their signature TNT or Dynamite sauce and is later finished with scallions, sesame seeds and a reduced sweet soy sauce, all on a slice of orange. Ezric Villafuerte, who prepared this one, recommends eating it in a single bite, then folding the orange in half and biting it as a chaser.

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**By Karen Brucoli Anesi**  
**Special to the Herald**

Durango has a reputation for offering as many dining options as cities two and three times its size. That's arguable, but few would disagree that we have a number of restaurants offering bites of tasty morsels that pack lots of flavor into small packages. Classic examples include hearty soups, sushi and appetizer dumplings, which diners are choosing over traditional multi-course meals.

Durango's East by Southwest couples with year-old Golden Triangle to share a kitchen and a reputation for sophisticated food and drinks, thanks to owner Sergio Verduzco's confident hand when it comes to fusion creations.

Verduzco has cooked internationally and frequently combines Latino and Asian influences in adaptations that work. He applies principles of sweet, sour, salty and spicy, either to meld flavors in a delicate balance or to allow them to follow in sequence. Poor examples of fusion are train wrecks on a plate. But when Verduzco is in the driver's seat, diners know they're in for a tasty adventure or two, right around the next bend.

That was certainly the case last week, when I ordered a Hand Grenade while dining at Golden Triangle with Herald Food Editor Beth Holland. This single-bite sensation is offered on the small hot plate section of East by Southwest's menu, and guests at either restaurant may order from both menus. To make a Hand Grenade, shrimp encased in a ball of jasmine rice and minced scallops is broiled with Dynamite sauce, a spicy aioli of sesame oil, chipotle chili and togarashi, a Japanese seven-spice seasoning that includes several peppers, roasted orange peel and sesame seed. The Hand Grenade is wrapped in seaweed, drizzled with a sweet soy sauce, then displayed on a single orange slice, which acts as "a chaser," explained Brittany Ervin, front-of-the-house manager for East by Southwest.

I can take no credit for having discovered the \$3 treat, which is the restaurant's most popular appetizer. Ervin estimates that she sells about 150 Hand Grenades on an average Friday or Saturday night. An unidentified diner across the aisle, hearing me query the wait staff about appetizers, leaned over and whispered that her favorite was the Hand Grenade, "But you have to pop it whole in your mouth, then slowly savor the flavors. Don't talk, because you'll miss the whole sweet, spicy, citrus sequence."

This is exactly what she said and possibly is why I became curious enough to avoid the good advice. Instead I used my chopsticks to poke it apart, unraveling the inner works. Beth, on the other hand, ate it correctly as a one-bite morsel, saying the orange slice added a refreshing citrus twist.

Golden Triangle's menu offers a very generous bowl of chicken coconut soup for \$9 that is very similar to Tom Kha Gai, a chicken-broth-based Thai soup that incorporates many aromatic rhizomes, herbs and plants grown in Thailand. Just as a good Caesar salad is often used as a benchmark for continental restaurants in the United States, Laotian and Thai restaurants are often measured by the quality of their soups, specifically their Tom Kha Gai, which translates to

“chicken galangal soup.”

Galangal, a hard, sliced disk of rhizome, offers a citrusy, pine-like aromatic flavor that pairs well with ginger and, like lemongrass, is not meant to be eaten. It floats on the surface of the soup. Coconut milk tempers the smoky flavor of fried chiles, and lemongrass, kaffir lime and cilantro add to the complex balance of flavors. Golden Triangle’s chicken bites are juicy chunks rather than slivers of chicken. Scallions, shiitake mushrooms and a wedge of fresh lime brighten the blend of flavors.

Both Beth and I picked up a slightly, sweet richness that is atypical of Tom Kha Gai. Chef Verduzco attributed that variation to an addition of chili jam made with shrimp paste, a fermented product that offers a bit of glutamic acid. Naturally-occurring glutamates are in some meats and vegetables, fish and shellfish, notably cured meats, mushrooms and fermented or aged foods such as cheeses, shrimp paste and soy sauce. The Japanese refer to this complex flavor as umami.

“Umami is a mouth-watering sensation,” Verduzco said, “a mild-but-pleasant savoriness that is lasting.”

Dim sum, small portions of steamed food that the Cantonese historically and traditionally served with tea, has become synonymous with savory steamed and lightly fried appetizers that are sampled often during the happy hour. Dim sum can be any four or five small bites served in a basket, but many contain pork, beef and shrimp often encased in a wonton wrapper or thin wheat flour skin that is usually steamed, but occasionally fried. Most Asian, Indonesian and some Himalayan cuisines offer a version of steamed buns or dumplings that fall under the category of dim sum.

Golden Triangle dim sum includes a \$7 plate of steamed pork and shrimp dumplings. These wheat-flour-wrapped morsels come five to a steamer, in a very light chili and garlic oil and garnished with julienned scallions. The menu indicates that the soy glaze has a hint of mint, but neither of us detected it. I could detect the garlic, jalapeno, sesame and soy, and initially I was disappointed that the dumplings didn’t have the al dente bite I associate with a pan-fried, steamed dumpling. Verduzco attributed the much softer texture to the steamed preparation method.

Golden Triangle and East by Southwest host a popular happy hour from 5 to 6:30 p.m. daily. Specialty drinks, including mojitos and martinis, are discounted \$2 from regular menu prices, and pints of Ska Brewing Co.’s Pinstripe Red ale are just \$2 each. Happy hour food specials include 16 food items such as tuna and jackfruit ceviche, a maguro tuna ceviche made with sliced green grapes, lemongrass, red onion, scallion, orange segments and fresh lime and served in a chilled martini glass. Popular sashimi items include white fish (shiromi) tiradito prepared with yuzu (a sour Japanese citrus fruit), fresh lime juice, cilantro, chili, kaffir lime and volcanic sea salt. A tribute to classical Peruvian ceviche, the tiradito is adapted to reflect the Asian fusion flavors of East by Southwest.



Photo by: JOSH STEPHENSON/Herald  
Golden Triangle's Hypnotic Seabreeze includes Hpnotiq liqueur, coconut, pineapple and cranberry.



Photo by: JOSH STEPHENSON/Herald

Golden Triangle's Katoï Martini includes vodka, pineapple, Canton Ginger liqueur, fresh lemon, ginger and cilantro.



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A pair of Hand Grenades at Golden Triangle begin with shrimp and rice rolled in seaweed, then are topped with a scallop and signature TNT or Dynamite sauce and later finished with scallions, sesame seeds and a reduced sweet soy sauce, all on slices of orange. Ezric Villafuerte, who prepared this one, recommends eating a hand grenade in a single bite, then folding the orange in half and biting it as a chaser.

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