



*This might not be life or death, but Chicago stewards proceeding prudently and with an acute vision. redevelopment decision-making can't be underestimated--witness Taste of Thai Town as a home run i respect.*

## Adaptive Reuse: Catalyst to Create Cultural Destinations

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By Todd Vanadilok



When you take a guided tour in Chicago, your docent may take you to places where you can walk, drink or dine where Al Capone and other mid-20th century mobsters did.

Places like the Green Mill in Uptown and the Renaissance Blackstone Hotel in the South Loop allow you to live this experience. Now there is a place in Chicago where you can dine where criminals--some who may or may not have been mobsters--were once jailed, all thanks to a truly unique adaptive reuse in the Albany Park neighborhood.

Drive or take the #53 CTA bus to 4461 N. Pulaski Road on the city's northwest side, and there you will find Taste of Thai Town, which opened in July 2015 as a new restaurant in the former 17th District Chicago Police Station.

Originally built in the 1930s, the Chicago Police Department operated its 17th District unit out of this building until 2005, when it moved two blocks north to its new station. After sitting vacant for a few years, a visionary concept was crafted to pursue an adaptive reuse of the site, which was led by renowned Chef Arun Sampanthavivat and Alderman Margaret Laurino's 39th Ward office.

With a plethora of Thai restaurants dotting Chicago's culinary landscape, what makes this venture different than any other? Chef Arun and his development team envisioned Taste of Thai Town to be the catalyst for creating the only cultural and commercial complex for the Thai community in Chicago.

Albany Park was the perfect location for the proposed Thai Town, as it is often touted as one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in Chicago. Moreover, the vacant police station provided a readily available site. From the city's perspective, filling the vacant police station with a new use had the added benefit of replacing a formerly tax exempt use with a tax-generating business. In addition, Taste of Thai Town was envisioned to be more than just a restaurant, with plans for the former police station to provide shared space for a wellness spa and offices for a Thai American organization.

Chef Arun's team worked with the 39th Ward to secure Tax Increment Financing (TIF) funding assistance to support actions, such as

leveraging private investment, assisting with significant renovation to bring the property back into productive use, and supporting sustainability efforts like a green roof and stormwater management.

Brought on by Chef Arun to assist with advancing the concept to construction, community planning and design firm Teska Associates, Inc. assembled the TIF assistance application and prepared the property's site design, while architect Richard Kasemsarn took inspiration from Thai architecture and culture to transform the former police station into a remarkable gem of a building that genuinely piques intrigue as people pass along Pulaski Road. Of interesting note, both the architect (Richard) and project planner (the author of this article) are Thai American, which brought an additional level of fulfillment in completing this project.

With the support of other Thai business people in Chicago and abroad in Thailand, this initial project for the proposed Thai Town Center would be the first piece to a larger puzzle to spur additional economic development in Albany Park and prompt the evolution of a new, dynamic cultural destination in Chicago.



True cultural districts—including iconic Chicago institutions like the Mexican-inspired 26th Street corridor in Little Village, the Indian and Pakistani business community along Devon Avenue, and Chinatown—take time to evolve and gain traction in the minds and hearts of residents, businesses, visitors, and investors.

However, with the continued support of the 39th Ward, customers, and the Thai community locally and internationally, Taste of Thai Town has the capacity to evolve into a destination that celebrates culture and advances economic development in Albany Park.

All of this came to be through a successful collaboration steered by a creative vision to pursue adaptive reuse to convert a vacant building into an inventive culinary space, with potential for more to come.

Check out Taste of Thai Town the next time you're in Chicago. You can tell your friends that you dined in a police station.

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