

THAI CUISINE

Introduction

Thailand is probably one of the most diverse and complex countries in Asia. Geographically it is halfway between India and China and so it is hardly surprising that the cultures of its neighbours have influenced the development of its national cuisine.

Thailand is divided into five regions that have distinct geographical and cultural differences; from dense jungles and mountains retreats to vast plains of paddy-fields, untamed rivers to brilliant white sandy beaches and the warm clear ocean.

The climate is tropical so there is an abundance of fruit, vegetables and flowers. The carving of fruits and vegetables into exotic sculptures, decorated with flowers and foliage, has become an art form in Thailand. It also boasts over one thousand varieties of orchids and the orchid has become an emblem for the country.

The cooking is a source of pride and wonder. A Thai cook will always strive for a balance of flavour, texture and colour in a dish. Presentation varies from simple plastic bowls at pavement stalls to beautifully decorated china and artistic displays in the finer restaurants, but the complexity of taste and flavour in their culinary magic is consistent.

The most prevalent flavour in Thai cooking comes from the chilli, which surprisingly was introduced to the country by Portuguese missionaries in the 16th century. It didn't take the Thais long to make good use of it, believing that chillies cool the body, stimulate the appetite and bring balance and harmony to their food.

Food is a celebration. To have to eat alone ranks high on the Thai scale of misfortunes. A Thai meal offers a combination of flavours; sweet, hot, sour, salty and sometimes bitter. Usually, in addition to the obligatory bowl of rice, there will be a variety of dishes including a soup, a curry, a steamed dish, a fried one, a salad and one or two sauces. The portion size will depend on the number of people eating. All the dishes are placed on the table at the same time shared. They are not eaten in any particular order.

Water and tea are the most common liquid accompaniments served with a meal. Thai whisky is often drunk at festive gatherings.

In days gone by Thais ate with their fingers, pressing rice into small balls, which were then dipped into other dishes. Today Thais eat with a large spoon to scoop up sauces and a fork to mix and push food on the spoon. Knives are rarely used because meat is usually served in small pieces and chopsticks are only used to eat Chinese-style noodles.

Thais tend to cook by 'feel', taking into account the tastes and preferences of their family. You should always taste and adjust the seasoning to your own taste. If you find something is too salty or too sweet and, even more importantly, if you are not used to the hotness of chillies, add a little at a time until you get a balance that you like. In short, Thai cuisine is light and fresh with delicately balanced spices and a harmony of flavours, colours and textures designed to appeal to both the eyes and the palate.

Serving

Instead of a multiple main course with side dishes found in Western cuisine, a Thai full meal typically consists of either a single dish or rice KHAO with many complementary dishes served concurrently.

Rice is a staple component of Thai cuisine, as it is of most Asian cuisines. The highly prized, sweet-smelling jasmine rice (Khao Hohm Mali) is indigenous to Thailand. This naturally aromatic long-grained rice grows in abundance in the verdant patchwork of paddy fields that blanket Thailand's central plains. Steamed rice is accompanied by highly aromatic curries, stir-frys and other dishes, incorporating sometimes large quantities of chillies, lime juice and lemon grass. Curries, stir-frys and others may be poured onto the rice creating a single dish called Khao Rad Gang, a popular meal when time is limited. Sticky rice (Khao Neow), is a unique variety of rice that contains an unusual balance of the starches present in all rice, causing it to cook up to a sticky texture. It is the daily

bread of Laos and substitutes ordinary rice in rural Northern and Northeastern Thai cuisine, where Lao cultural influence is strong.

Noodles, known in much of Southeast Asia by the Chinese name Kwaytiow, are popular as well but usually come as a single dish, like the stir-fried Pad Thai or noodle soups. Many Chinese cuisine are adapted to suit Thai taste, such as Khuaytiow Rua , a sour and spicy rice noodle soup.

There is a uniquely Thai dish called Nam Prik which refers to a chilli sauce or paste. Each region has its own special versions. It is prepared by crushing together chillies with various ingredients such as garlic and shrimp paste using a mortar and pestle. It is then often served with vegetables such as cucumbers, cabbage and yard-long beans, either raw or blanched. The vegetables are dipped into the sauce and eaten with rice. Nam Prik may also be simply eaten alone with rice or, in a bit of Thai and Western fusion, spread on toast.

Thai food is generally eaten with a fork and a spoon. Chopsticks are used rarely, primarily for the consumption of noodle soups. The fork, held in the left hand, is used to push food into the spoon. However, it is common practice for Thais and hill tribe peoples in the North and Northeast to eat sticky rice with their right hands by making it into balls that are dipped into side dishes and eaten. Thai-Muslims also frequently eat meals with only their right hands.

Often Thai food is served with a variety of spicy condiments to embolden dishes. This can range from dried chili pieces, or sliced chili peppers in rice vinegar, to a spicy chili sauce such as the Nam Prik mentioned above.

Equipment

You don't need specialist equipment to produce a Thai meal. In fact you will probably have most of the things already. The basic items are listed below.

A sturdy chopping board with a cleaver or a large chef's knife to use for the heavy cutting and chopping, and a small paring knife for the little jobs.

A wok is essential - for most meals this is the only type of pan you will need. Perfect for stir-frying, cooking curries and simmered dishes as well as for deep frying and steaming.

A large steamer basket is useful. The most useful are those made of bamboo that can be purchased quite cheaply from Oriental stores.

A large granite or heavy pestle and mortar for grinding spices and pounding curry paste to give the sort of texture required for Thai food. Although a coffee grinder or blender can be used instead, do bear in mind that the pungent flavours may linger.

If you eat rice regularly, you could think about investing in an electric rice cooker. It does the job well and frees up the stove top as well as making burnt rice pans a thing of the past.

Ingredients

Aubergines

A vegetable fruit with mildly sweet flavour. Many varieties of aubergine are used in Thai cooking, from tiny pea aubergines, which are added just before the end of cooking, to white, yellow or green aubergines. When these types are unavailable, substitute with purple variety.

Bamboo Shoots

The edible young shoots of the bamboo plant. Pale to bright yellow when bought fresh. Fresh shoots need some preparation and take quite a long time to cook. When buying canned shoots, look out for the whole ones as they seem to be better quality than the ready-sliced canned bamboo shoots.

Banana Leaves

Glossy, dark green leaves of the banana tree are used to line steamers or to wrap foods such as chicken or fish prior to grilling or baking. They impart a vague flavour of fine tea.

Basil

A pungent herb much used in the Mediterranean regions and in South East Asia. Three varieties of

basil are used in Thai cooking - Bai Mangluk (hairy basil), Bai Horapa (sweet basil) and Bai Grapao (Thai or holy basil), which tastes hot and slightly medicinal. Bai Horapa is the most popular. It has small, dark leaves with reddish-purple stems and flowers. Its flavour is reminiscent of aniseed and somewhat stronger than that of the western sweet basil

Bean Curd

Most often used in soups and Chinese dishes. It is made from soy beans and is rich in vitamins and minerals. It is usually sold in square blocks packed in water. Bean curd comes in many forms - fresh, fried and dried.

Beansprouts

Sprouted from mung beans, they are used in salads and stir-fried dishes. Rich in vitamins, protein and iron, beansprouts are widely available in supermarkets. Look for crisp, firm sprouts with little scent.

Bean Sauce

Made from salted, fermented soy beans, this sauce is a popular flavouring agent in oriental dishes. It is also called yellow bean sauce.

Chilli

There are many different kinds of chillies. The small, red and green fresh chillies, known as Thai or bird's eye, are extremely hot. Larger varieties are slightly milder. The 'fire' comes from the seeds so discard them if a milder flavour is preferred. Chillies contain volatile oil that can irritate the skin and cause eyes to burn. Always wash your hands immediately after using them.

Coconut Milk

This unsweetened liquid made from grated coconut flesh and water, is an essential ingredient of many Thai dishes. It is available in cans, compressed blocks or in powder form.

Coriander

The leaves and seeds of the coriander plant are one of the most essential in Thai cooking. The root is also used, often pounded with garlic and other ingredients, to make a marinade.

Curry Paste

This is traditionally made in a mortar by pounding together fresh herbs and spices. There are several kinds. Home-made curry pastes take time and effort to prepare but they taste wonderful and keep well. Ready made pastes, which come in packets or tubs, are a good alternative and enable cooks to make tasty curries quickly.

Fish Sauce (Nam Pla)

The most commonly used flavouring in Thai food. Fish sauce is used in Thai cooking the same way soy sauce is used in Chinese dishes. It is made from salted anchovies and has a strong salty flavour.

Galangal

A member of the ginger family that looks similar to fresh root ginger, but with a more translucent skin and a pinkish tinge. It has a wonderful sharp, lemony taste and it is prepared in a similar fashion to root ginger. Best used fresh, it is also available dried or in powder form.

Garlic

Garlic is indispensable in Thai cooking. Heads of the Asian variety are quite small. Look out for fresh shiny heads of garlic with no soft, dusty or mouldy cloves. Jars of pickled garlic can be bought from Oriental stores.

Ginger

A root of Chinese and Indian origin. It is always used fresh rather than dried and should be peeled and chopped or crushed before cooking. It is available in supermarkets. Look for shiny fat roots that aren't wrinkled or shrivelled. Though not used as frequently as galanga in Thai cooking, ginger makes a good alternative to galangal.

Kaffir Lime

This is similar to the common lime but has a knobbly skin. The zest of the fruit is often used and the dark glossy green leaves from the tree impart a pungent lemony-lime flavour to soups, curries and other dishes. You can buy them fresh in Oriental stores. They keep well and can be frozen. Dried Kaffir limes are also available.

Lemon Grass

Also known as citronella, lemon grass has long pale green stalks and a bulbous end similar to a spring onion. Only the bottom 12cm/5in is used. It has a woody texture and an aromatic lemony scent. Unless finely chopped, it is always removed before serving because it is so fibrous.

Palm Sugar

Strongly-flavoured, hard brown sugar made from the sap of the coconut palm tree. Available in Oriental stores. If you have trouble finding it, use soft dark brown sugar instead.

Roasted Ground Rice

Raw glutinous rice grains are dry-fried until brown, then ground to a powder. A traditional ingredient in salads.

Salted Eggs

A traditional way of preserving duck eggs in Asia. You can find them in most Oriental stores, often sold covered in a thick layer of charcoal-grey ash. Rub off the ash with your finger under running water and then hard-boil the eggs.

Shallots

Thai shallots have a lovely pinkish-purple colour and are used extensively in Thai cuisine instead of onions.

Soy Sauce

Made from fermented soy beans, soy sauce is available in light or dark versions and can be quite salty. It is the background seasoning to many stir-fried and noodle dishes.

Tamarind

An acidic tropical fruit that resembles a bean pod. It is usually sold dried or pulped. To make tamarind juice, take 25g of tamarind or about 2 stock cube-size pieces and leave to soak in 150ml cup warm water for about 10 minutes. Squeeze out as much tamarind juice as possible by pressing all the liquid through a sieve and use as in the recipes.

Vinegar

Thais use a mild, plain white vinegar. Cider or Japanese rice wine vinegar can be used instead.

Famous Dishes

Many Thai dishes are familiar in the West. In many dishes below, different kinds of protein can be chosen as the ingredient, such as beef, chicken, pork, duck, tofu or seafood.

Breakfast dishes

Jok - a rice porridge very commonly eaten in Thailand for breakfast. Similar to the rice congee eaten in other parts of Asia.

Khao Tom - a Thai style rice soup, usually with pork, chicken or shrimp.

Individual Dishes

Khao Pad - One of the most common dishes in Thailand, fried rice, Thai style. Usually with chicken, beef, shrimp, pork, crab or coconut or pineapple, or vegetarian.

Pad Thai - rice noodles pan fried with fish sauce, sugar, lime juice or tamarind pulp, chopped peanuts, and egg combined with chicken, seafood, or tofu.

Rad Na - wide rice noodles in gravy, with beef, pork, chicken, shrimp, or seafood.

Khao Pad Naem - fried rice with fermented sausage (typically from the Northeast).

Pad See Ew - noodles stir-fried with see ew dum (thick soy sauce) and nahm plah (fish sauce) and pork or chicken.

Pad Kee Mao - noodles stir-fried with Thai basil.

Khao Khluk Kapi - rice stir-fried with shrimp paste, served with sweetened pork and vegetables.

Khanom Chin Namya - round boiled rice noodles topped with various curry sauces and eaten with fresh leaves and vegetables.

Khao Soi - crispy wheat noodles in sweet chicken curry soup (a Northern dish).

Khao Pad Gai - fried rice with chicken.

Gai Pad Grapao - minced chicken with garlic, chilies, and Holy basil.

Gai Pad Med Mamoung Himaphan - juicy chunks of chicken with cashew nuts and chilies.

Central Thai Shared Dishes

Tom Yam - hot & sour soup with meat. With shrimp it is called Tom Yam Goong or Tom Yam Kung, with seafood (typically shrimp, squid, fish) Tom Yam Talae, with chicken Tom Yam Gai.

Gai Pad Khing - chicken stir-fried with sliced ginger.

Tom Kha Gai - hot sweet soup with chicken and coconut milk.

Saté - grilled meat, usually pork or chicken, served with cucumber salad and peanut sauce (actually of Indonesian origin, but now a popular street food in Thailand).

Red Curry (Gaeng Phet Lit. 'hot curry') - made with copious amounts of dried red chillies.

Green Curry (Gaeng Khiew-Waan) - green curry, made with fresh green chillies and flavoured with Thai basil, and chicken or fish meatballs. This dish is one of the spiciest of Thai curries.

Massaman Curry - an Indian style curry, usually made by Thai-Muslims, containing roasted dried spices, such as coriander seed, that are rarely found in other Thai curries.

Pad Prik - usually beef stir fried with chili, called Neua Pad Prik.

Pad Kaphrao - beef, pork or chicken stir fried with Thai holy basil.

Pad Pak Ruam - stir fried combination of vegetables depending on availability and preference.

Panaeng - dry curry with beef (Panang beef), chicken, or pork. It includes some roasted dried spices similar to Massaman curry.

Tod Man - deep fried fishcake made from knifefish (Tod Man Pla Krai,) or shrimp (Tod Man Kung).

Boo Jah - crab cakes with pork, garlic, and pepper served with a simple spicy sauce, such as Sri Rachaa sauce, sweet-hot garlic sauce, nahm prik pao (roasted chili paste), or red curry paste and chopped green onions.

Choo-Chee Plah Ga-Pong - snapper in choo-chee curry sauce (thick red curry sauce).

North Eastern Side Dishes

The cuisine of Northeastern Thailand is shared with the cuisine of Laos, as Isan people are of Lao heritage and speak a language that is mutually intelligible with the Lao language.

Som Tam - Grated papaya salad, pounded with a mortar and pestle. There are three main variations: Som Tam Poo - With salted black crab, and Som Tam Thai - with peanuts, dried shrimp and palm sugar and Som Tam Plara from north eastern part of Thailand (Isan), with salted gourami fish, white eggplants, fish sauce and long bean.

Larb - sour salads containing meat, onions, chillies, roasted rice powder and garnished with mint.

Nam Tok - made with beef and identical to larb, except that the beef is cut into thin strips rather than minced.

Yam - general name for any type of sour salad, such as those made with glass noodles (Yam Wun Sen), or with seafood (Yam Talae).

Tom Saep - Northeastern-style hot & sour soup.

Gai Yang - marinated, grilled chicken.

Sticky Rice

Nam Prik Num - dipping sauce made from roasted eggplant, green chillies, and garlic ground together in a mortar and pestle.

Desserts and Drinks

Kao Niao Ma Muang - Sticky rice and ripe mango.

Kao Niao Durian - Sticky rice and durian in coconut milk.

Gluay Buad Chee- Banana in coconut milk.

Foi Tong, Tong Yib, Tong Yod - Different forms of egg yolk mixed with sugar and other ingredients. Some believe this is European in origin, particularly through the influence of Maria Guyomar de Pinha in the 17th century.

Kanome Maw Gaeng - sweet potato pudding.

Fried Banana with Ice Cream.

Cha Yen - Thai Iced Tea.

Kah-Feh Yen - Thai Iced Coffee.

Coconut is a main ingredient in desserts, in particular the milk and the shredded coconut pieces. The coconut milk is used in a lot of dishes as the soup or base and some of the desserts are rolled in shredded coconut for taste and look. These are some of the desserts that contain coconut:

Lod Chong Nam Ka Ti – Pandan flavored rice flour noodles in coconut milk.

Kanom Tan – Palm flavored mini cake with shredded coconut on top.

Ruam Mit – Chestnuts covered in flour, jackfruit, tapioca, and Lod Chong in coconut milk.

Kanom Chun – multi-layers of pandan-flavored sticky rice flour mixed with coconut milk.

Kanom Bua Loy – taro root mixed with flour into balls in coconut milk.