

THAILAND'S SYMPHONY OF FLAVOURS

A lover of spice finds his happy place among the destination's cooking schools, street food stalls and Michelin-starred restaurants

By Chris Ryll

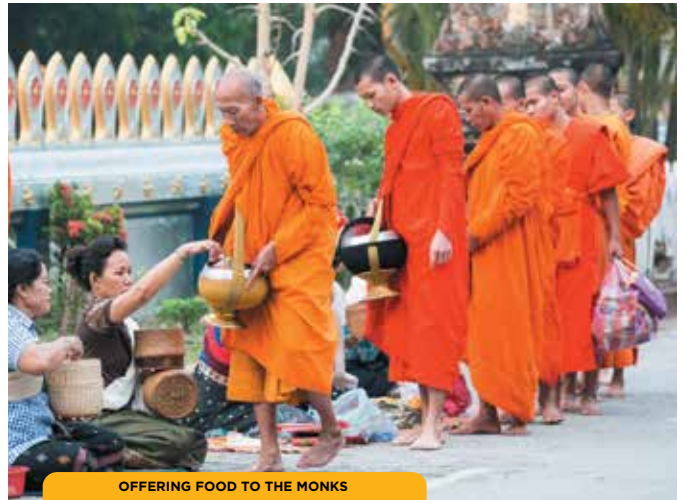






SAAWAAN SERVES A SEASONAL 11-COURSE TASTING MENU

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OFFERING FOOD TO THE MONKS



STREET FOOD STALL



TOM YUM GOONG, A HOT AND SOUR SOUP WITH PRAWNS

Red Hot Chili Peppers, both the band and the spice, inspired my initiation into alternative streams of music as well as my taste sensations. My palate awakened when I started travelling internationally and tried Indian, Cajun, Vietnamese, Italian, Japanese and other global cuisines. Visits to Thailand, however, struck the right chord with a full orchestra of flavour. It was as if my taste buds were playing Beethoven's 5th Symphony.

Sampling Thailand's food scene can be as diverse as its landscapes, with distinct regional cooking differences from the north to the spicier south. My Thai food experiences have spanned the gamut, from street food vendors and Michelin-starred restaurants to eating brunch as elephants frolic in a nearby creek, testing my culinary chops in a cooking class and buying noodles in floating markets.

You don't have to like it hot to enjoy Thai food. Creating the perfect harmony is essential – a balance of sweet, sour, hot and salty – combining fresh herbs like lemongrass and galangal, salty fish sauces cooled with sugars and acidic elements, like lemon, lime and mango. Throw in cilantro, coconut milk and coriander for good measure and peanut sauce for sweet and savoury.

Thai cuisine evolved with influences from China and India. Portugal also brought my loved chili peppers to Thailand in the 16th century. Thailand is considered the street food capital of the world. I've had culinary pleasures by the Victory Monument (Anusawari Chai Samoraphum) and in the Bang Khun Non area where I tasted its pink noodles soup (*yen ta fo*).

One of my favourite pastimes is sitting and observing locals and tourists go about their daily lives. I order my *raison d'être* dish – a simple but flavourful green curry chicken with rice and a chilled Chang or Singha beer. It's love at first bite with the combination of galangal, kaffir leaves, coconut milk, lemongrass, chicken and fish sauce.

Thai cuisine earned respect from the esteemed Michelin Guide when its first Thailand edition was produced in 2017. For the 2022 edition, Thailand restaurants were awarded six two-Michelin stars entries and 26 one-Michelin star entries, including one to Jay Fai, a street food vendor known for his crab omelettes and curry dishes.

I feel nervous entering Saawaan, Bangkok's one-Michelin star restaurant. Its intimate sleek, dark interior features an

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MAKE IT AT HOME

Green Curry Chicken



INGREDIENTS

For green curry paste:

- ½ cup of fresh coriander leaves and stems, packed
- ½ cup of Thai basil leaves, packed
- ¼ cup of fresh mint leaves
- 4 cloves of garlic
- 1 inch piece of ginger or galangal
- 4-6 Thai or other hot chilies
- 2 tbsp of Thai curry powder
- 2 tbsp of water
- 1 tbsp of sugar
- 1 tbsp of fish sauce
- 1 tbsp of lime juice
- Salt to taste

For chicken curry:

- 2 tbsp of oil
- 1 medium onion, thinly sliced
- 1 can (400 ml) of unsweetened coconut milk
- 1 lb (450 g) of boneless, skinless chicken breast, thinly sliced
- ½ cup of zucchini, sliced into thin half rounds
- ½ cup of green beans, halved
- ½ cup of canned baby corn, halved
- Lime wedges, peanuts, sliced red chilies and basil leaves for garnish

PREPARATION

1. To make the curry paste, combine all ingredients in a blender and blend to a smooth paste. Transfer to a bowl and reserve.
2. To make the chicken curry, warm the oil in a deep skillet over medium heat. Add the onions and cook until lightly brown and softened, about 5 minutes.
3. Add ¼ cup of the reserved green curry paste and cook 1 minute until fragrant. Add coconut milk and stir to mix. Cook until it starts to bubble, about 4 minutes.
4. Add chicken and vegetables, cover skillet and bring to a gentle boil. Reduce heat to low and cook covered until chicken is tender and vegetables are tender-crisp, about 10 minutes.
5. Taste the sauce and add another tablespoon of the curry paste or a dash of curry powder if desired. Serve garnished with lime wedges, peanuts, chilies and basil leaves.

Serves four

Recipe courtesy of Smita Chandra. For more recipes, visit smitachandra.com/recipes

11-course seasonal *dégustation* (tasting) menu that elevates a diner's foodie knowledge bar. I like looking at food, but more importantly, I like eating it. That's the sum of my foodie expertise.

Thankfully, my waiter, perhaps sensing a food neophyte in his presence, describes everything in a clear, simple manner – the raw (*amaebi*, cucumber and coconut), boiled (blue swimmer crab, squid, coconut), curried (Iberico pork, banana blossom, southern and northern curry) and other courses, including dessert (water chestnut, gelatinous coconut, smoked ice cream). And the meal covered all the traditional Thai cooking methods – fermented, boiled, stir-fried and curried – while showcasing dishes from northern, central and southern regions. Each course is paired with wines or tea.

To explore my passion for Thai cuisine further, I want to take a hands-on approach. It leads me to Amita Thai Cooking Class, owned by Tam Jantrupon. It's my introduction to how it all comes together. It begins with an adventurous long-tail boat ride to her riverside location through Bangkok's inland waterways.

When I arrive, I say I would love to add peppercorns to any dish we make. Moments later, we were grabbing fresh peppercorns from her garden. Jantrupon proceeds to guide me with gentle, easy-to-follow instructions on how to make four different Thai dishes, including my favourite, a green curry chicken in coconut milk. We also cook a batch of *tom yum goong* (hot and sour soup with prawns), papaya salad and mango sticky rice dessert. She provides me with recipe cards to take home. Sweet.

Then, at my Spice Spoons cooking class, students first accompany the chef to the local market to select fruits, vegetables and proteins for the savoury dishes to be cooked later. Though the chef is impressed with my spatula skills, no such praise is forthcoming for my chopping technique.

I love the fact that Thailand's culinary experiences are not just about eating food but giving it away. You can give alms of either premade packages of food bought in markets or dishes you made yourself. Go to a temple before sunrise and make a solemn gesture of handing them to the Buddhist monks. It fills your heart with goodness.

My varied experiences with Thai cuisine have always hit the right notes on my palate. And as the Spice Girls' hit song says, "Spice up your life." In Thailand, it's easy to do just that.