

## THE COOKING OF THAILAND

### INTRODUCTION

The people of Thailand like to compare the shape of their country to the head of an elephant, The national emblem. Its trunk is the long narrow isthmus dangling southwards until it terminates at the frontier with Malaysia. Its forehead nudges Burma while Laos and Kampuchea are draped around a fan-shaped ear.

You can also compare the country's outline to the intricate fretwork of a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. This might make a better analogy when it comes to talking about Thai cuisine. For although it is a unique cuisine with its irresistible leitmotif of basil, lemongrass, coriander, coconut milk, chillies and a wealth of spices. It is also a synthesis of native traditions and influences from neighbouring countries and further afield. It was the Portuguese, for example. Who first brought the now essential chillies from Latin America in the sixteenth century, while the equally ubiquitous rice noodles originated in China.

One of the reasons that Thai cuisine was able so splendidly to absorb and blend these influences is probably cultural. On an intellectual level Buddhism is a great absorber and synthesizer of currents of religious thought. Another reason may well be that Thailand is the only country in Asia never to have been colonized - the very word Thai means free - so there was no reason to resent or resist the contribution of its neighbours.

Of course, cuisine is basically, denned by the available produce. Southern Thailand with the Gulf to the east and the Indian Ocean to the west offers above all a superb range of fish and shellfish including squid. Prawns, scallops and mussels as well as crabs and lobsters. These are often prepared with milk from the coconuts that grow in profusion on the fringe of the rainforest inland.

The southern region is a melting pot of culinary influences. The Chinese found similar produce. Especially seafood. to that used in their native Canton and prepared it in similar ways: steamed or most often lightly stir-fried with vegetables in a wok. In complete contrast. complex pastes of pounded herbs and spices are the basis of the curries originating in neighbouring Muslim Malaysia. Often prepared with meat. especially lamb, their spiciness is attenuated by

coconut milk. From Malaysia, too, comes the universally popular satay, a kind of miniature kebab of marinated lamb, chicken or fish served with a peanut sauce. In general, the cuisine often south is the spiciest to be found in the country.

Just as Hinduism represents a current in Thailand's native Buddhism, so Indian cuisine exerts an influence, along the way by intervening countries. The north-west of the country, which adjoins Burma, also have its curries. Nowhere in Thailand, however, are curries slowly simmered with a large amount of clarified butter (or indeed any butter) as in India. Instead, they are typically made in the wok with a small amount of vegetable oil and in a surprisingly short space of time.

Both north-west and north-east regions share a preference for glutinous rice. More meat, especially pork, is eaten than in the south, and the city of Chiang Mai is well known for its charcuterie. Recently the cuisine of the north-east, long neglected, has become fashionable. Freshwater fish ranks high among local produce and many dishes are flavoured with lime.

Dishes like Green Papaya Salad and Thai Beef Salad with a spicy dressing illustrate the north east's special predilection for chillies, but the region also features mousse-like preparations of fish or chicken, ground and steamed in pretty banana leaf parcels.

Bangkok, almost needless to say, is a city of dazzling culinary variety. Here the food of the regions vies for attention with the capital's own traditions, based on the produce of the central plains, where the paddy fields produce the best rice, the orchards the best fruit and the gardens a cornucopia of fresh vegetables. It is a supremely gastronomic city, from its myriad - street stalls selling rice noodle stir-fries, though popular restaurants - small or vast and garish - to the most distinguished and sophisticated establishments where Royal Thai cuisine is served.

Royal Thai cuisine originated in the king's palace, a city within a city covering an area of a square mile. Young ladies of good family would go into this private world as ladies-in-waiting. It acted as a kind of finishing school where the arts of flora] decoration, cookery and fruit and vegetable carving were developed to the highest degree. Here each regional fish in the rich spectrum was endowed, with more subtlety and refinement, and its presentation enhanced by delicately

sculptured mangoes, watermelons, pumpkins, radishes, tomatoes, chillies and root ginger. In this way, cuisine was established as an integral part of the national` s high culture.

Today, the tradition of Royal Thai cuisine is maintained and renewed in the very best restaurants. Like French haute cuisine, its roots lie in the rich variety of provincial home cooking. And its standards demand produce of the highest quality prepared with infinite pains to bring out the subtlest of flavours. Inventiveness, too, is common to both traditions, but in the beauty of its presentations, Royal Thai cuisine is unique

### COOKING THAI

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#### Equipment

Very little extra equipment is needed to cook Thai food in the average Western kitchen, but one essential is a wok, the shape of which facilitates stir-frying. A wok should be heavy with a firm base, so that both hands are left free for stirring/tossing ingredients with a pair of wooden spatulas, cooking them rapidly over a thin film of vegetable oil. Stir-frying, if you've never tried it, is a quickly and easily acquired knack and you are certain to enjoy it! It is crucial that the oil in the wok reaches and maintains a high temperature - electric hotplates are not ideal for achieving this. Since the wok is by far the most frequently used piece of equipment in Thai cooking, you might consider buying an electric one with its special element containing base and thermostatic control.

If you have not already got one, a conventional steamer is a virtual necessity. Bamboo steaming trays are an attractive way of serving steamed dishes like Dim Sum but are not really necessary.

Deep-frying, another everyday Thai cooking method, does not require special equipment, although we do recommend the use of an electric fryer for safety, convenience and the possibility of controlling the temperature of the oil accurately with a thermostat. Long-handled sieves are necessary for dipping

ingredients into deep-frying oil or bouillon. You should also have a large, flat, perforated spoon.

We think a small pestle and mortar is essential. Over and over again recipes will ask you to pound garlic cloves, coriander roots and stems and/or other ingredients together in a mortar. The reason we specify this method is not only that it is the most traditional and the best, but also because usually the quantities involved are too small to make using a mincer, blender or food processor a practical proposition. By all means use these labour saving devices when large enough quantities of ingredients are involved to make it worthwhile!

### Thai menus

Generally speaking, a meal in Thailand is not divided into separate courses. All the dishes are brought to the table at the same time and diners help themselves to some of each, picking and mixing! Even the soups are part of the main meal. Indeed, the strong flavours and spiciness of many of them are designed for you to punctuate your meal with the occasional spoonful. Assuming you are working single-handed in an average-size domestic kitchen and wishes to serve a meal in this way, we suggest that your menu include a cold item such as salad that can be prepared in advance, a curry that can be set aside and kept hot for a while after cooking and not more than one stir-fry, one deep-fry, and one steamed dish. Note that dishes like Salmon Soufflé and Thai Chicken Soufflé where the ingredients are wrapped in a pretty banana leaf parcel can be prepared conveniently in advance and simply steamed at the last moment. Plain rice is, of course, an invariable accompaniment to every Thai meal.

Needless to say, you are entirely free to serve your Thai meal in separate courses as in the west

### Pounding, chopping and slicing

We've already talked about the advantages of using a pestle and mortar and the need for sharp knives. When our recipes refer to `coriander roots and stems, we mean the whole root (carefully cleaned) plus about 7 cm/3 in green stem. The leaves are retained for use as a universal garnish.

Unless otherwise indicated, vegetables should always be sliced diagonally to expose the maximum area to rapid cooking in the wok.

Do make sure that all your ingredients are pounded, chopped, sliced or otherwise pre-prepared as indicated before you begin to cook. Thai cooking methods are rapid and simple. The pounding, chopping and slicing is more than half the battle!

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