

## Thai Cuisine

Thai cooking places emphasis on lightly prepared dishes with strong aromatic components and a spicy edge. Thai chef McDang characterises Thai food as demonstrating “intricacy; attention to detail; texture; colour; taste; and the use of ingredients with medicinal benefits, as well as good flavour”, as well as care being given to the food’s appearance, smell and context. Australian chef David Thompson, an expert on Thai food, observes that unlike many other cuisines, Thai cooking rejects simplicity and is about “the juggling of disparate elements to create a harmonious finish”.

Traditional Thai cuisine loosely falls into four categories: *tom* (boiled dishes), *yam* (spicy salads), *tam* (pounded foods), and *gaeng* (curries). Deep-fries, stir-fries, and steamed dishes derive from Chinese cooking.

In 2017, seven Thai dishes appeared on a list of the “World’s 50 Best Foods” – an online poll of 35,000 people worldwide by *CNN Travel*. Thailand had more dishes on the list than any other country. They were *tom yam goong* (4<sup>th</sup>), *pad Thai* (5<sup>th</sup>), *som tam* (6<sup>th</sup>), *massaman curry* (10<sup>th</sup>), *green curry* (19<sup>th</sup>), *Thai fried rice* (24<sup>th</sup>) and *mu nam tok* (36<sup>th</sup>).

### *Regional cuisines and historical influences*

Thai cuisine is more accurately described as five regional cuisines, corresponding to the five main regions of Thailand.

- *Bangkok*: cuisine of the Bangkok metropolitan area, with Teochew and Portuguese influences. In addition, as a capital city, Bangkok cuisine is sometimes influenced by more dedicated royal cuisine. Tastes and looks of food in Bangkok have changed somewhat over time as they have been influenced by other cuisines such as Asian, European or Western countries.
- *Central Thai*: cuisine of the flat and wet central rice-growing plains, site of the former Thai kingdoms of Sukhothai and Ayuttaya, and the Dvaravati culture of the Mon people from before the arrival of Siamese in the area. Coconut milk is one of the major ingredients used in Central Thai cuisine.
- *Isan* or northeastern Thai: cuisine of the more arid Khorat Plateau, similar in culture to Laos and also influenced by Khmer cuisine. The best-known ingredient is probably *pla ra* (fermented fish).
- *Northern Thai*: cuisine of the cooler valleys and forested mountains of the Thai highlands, once ruled by the former Lanna Kingdom and home of Lannaese, the majority of northern Thailand. This cuisine shares a lot of ingredients with Isan.

- *Southern Thai*: cuisine of the Kra Isthmus which is bordered on two sides by tropical seas, with its many islands and including the ethnic Malay, former Sultanate of Pattani in the deep south. Some food based on Hainanese and Cantonese influence.

Thai cuisine and the culinary traditions and cuisines of Thailand's neighbours have mutually influenced one another over the course of many centuries. Regional variations tend to correlate to neighbouring states (often sharing the same cultural background and ethnicity on both sides of the border) as well as climate and geography. Northern Thai cuisine shares dishes with Shan State in Myanmar (Burma), northern Laos, and also with Yunnan Province in China, whereas the cuisine of Isan (north eastern Thailand) is similar to that of southern Laos, and is also influenced by the Khmer cuisine from Cambodia to its south, and by Vietnamese cuisine to its east. Southern Thailand, with many dishes that contain liberal amounts of coconut milk and fresh turmeric, has that in common with Indian, Malaysian, and Indonesian cuisine. In addition to these regional cuisines, there is also Thai royal cuisine which can trace its history back to the cosmopolitan palace cuisine of the Ayutthaya kingdom (1351-1767 CE). Its refinement, cooking techniques, presentation, and use of ingredients were of great influence to the cuisine of the central Thai plains.

Many dishes that are now popular in Thailand were originally Chinese dishes. They were introduced to Thailand by the Hokkien people starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and by the Teochow people who started settling in larger numbers from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, mainly in the towns and cities, and now form the majority of Thai Chinese. Such dishes include *chok*, rice porridge, *salapao* (steamed buns); *kuaitiao rat na* (fried rice-noodles); and *khao mu* (stewed pork with rice). The Chinese also introduced the use of the wok for cooking, the technique of deep-frying and stir frying dishes, several types of noodles, *taochiao* (fermented bean paste), soy sauces, and *tofu*. The cuisines of India and Persia, brought first by traders, and later settlers from these regions, with their use of dried spices, gave rise to Thai adaptations and dishes such as *kaeng kari* (yellow curry) and *kaeng matsumam* (massaman curry).

Western influences, starting in 1511 when the first diplomatic mission from the Portuguese arrived at the court of Ayutthaya, have created dishes such as *foi thong*, the Thai adaptation of the Portuguese *fios de ovos*, and *sangkhaya*, where coconut milk replaces cow's milk in making a custard. These dishes were said to have been brought to Thailand in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Maria Guyomar de Pinha, a woman of mixed Japanese-Portuguese-Bengali ancestry who was born in Ayutthaya, and became the wife of Constantine Phaulkon, a Greek adviser to King Narai. The most notable influence from the West must be the introduction of the chili pepper from the Americas in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. It, and rice, are now two of the most important ingredients in Thai cuisine. During the Columbian Exchange, Portuguese and

Spanish ships brought new foodstuffs from the Americas including tomatoes, corn, papaya, pea eggplants, pineapple, pumpkins, cilantro, cashews, and peanuts.

## *Serving*

Thai food was traditionally eaten with the hand while seated on mats or carpets on the floor or coffee table in upper middle class families, customs still found in the more traditional households. Today, however, most Thais eat with a fork and spoon. Tables and chairs were introduced as part of a broader Westernization drive during the reign of King Mongkut, Rama IV. The fork and spoon were introduced by King Chulalongkorn after his return from a tour of Europe in 1897 CE.

Important to Thai dining is the practice of *khluk*, mixing the flavours and textures of different dishes with the rice from one's plate. The food is pushed by the fork, held in the left hand, which is then brought to the mouth. A traditional ceramic spoon is sometimes used for soup, and knives are not generally used at the table. It is common practice for both the Thais and the hill tribe peoples who live in Lanna and Isan to use sticky rice as an edible implement by shaping it into small, and sometimes flattened, balls by hand (and only the right hand by custom) which are then dipped into side dishes and eaten.

## *Ingredients*

Thai cuisine blends five fundamental tastes: sweet, spicy, sour, bitter, and salty. Common ingredients used in Thai cuisine include garlic, chillies, lime juice, lemon grass, coriander, galangal, palm sugar, and fish sauce (nam pla). The staple food in Thailand is rice, particularly jasmine variety rice (also known as "hom Mali" rice) which forms a part of almost every meal. Other ingredients that feature in Thai cuisine include shallots, kaffir lime, tamarind, Thai basil (redolent of cloves), turmeric, cumin, cloves and cinnamon.

## *Street Food*

The quality and choice of street food in Thailand is world-renowned. Bangkok is often mentioned as one of the best street food cities in the world, even called the street food capital of the world. The website VirtualTourist says "Few places in the world, if any, are as synonymous with street food as Thailand. For the variety of locations and abundance of options, we selected Bangkok, Thailand, as our number one spot for street food. Bangkok is notable for both its variety of offerings and the city's abundance of street hawkers".

There is scarcely a Thai dish that is not sold by a street vendor or at a market somewhere in Thailand. Some specialize in only one or two dishes, others offer a complete menu that rival that of restaurants. Some sell only pre-cooked foods, others make food to order. The foods that are made to order tend to be dishes that

can be quickly prepared: quick stir fries with rice, such as *phat kaphrao* (spicy basil-fried minced pork, chicken, or seafood) or *phat khana* (stir fried gallari), and quick curries such as *pladuk phat phet* (catfish with red curry paste).

Noodles are a popular street food item as they are mainly eaten as a single dish. Chinese-style noodle soups, fried noodles, and fermented Thai rice noodles (*khanom chin*), served with a choice of different Thai curries, are popular. Nearly everywhere in Thailand you will see *som tam* (green papaya salad) and sticky rice sold at stalls and roadside shops. This is popularly eaten together with grilled chicken. In most cities and towns there will be stalls selling sweet *roti*, a thin, flat fried dough envelope, with fillings such as banana, egg, and chocolate. Sweet snacks, collectively called *khanom*, such as *tako* (coconut cream jelly), *khanom man* (coconut cassava cake), and *khanom wun* (flavoured jellies), can be seen displayed on large trays in glass covered push-carts. Other sweets, such as *khanom bueang* and *khanom khrok* (somewhat similar to Dutch *poffertjes*), are made to order.

### *Thai royal cuisine*

Originally, this referred to the food that was cooked or prepared by people living in the palace. Thai royal cuisine has become very well known from the Rattanakosin Era onwards.

Typically, Thai royal cuisine has basic characteristics that are close to the basic food prepared by people in general. However, Thai royal cuisine focuses on the freshness of seasonal products. Other than that, it is crucial that the way in which Thai royal food is cooked, should be complex and delicate.

La Loubère, an envoy from France during the reign of King Narai the Great, recorded that the food at the court was generally similar to villager food. Ways that make Thai Royal cuisine different was the beautiful presentation. For example, they served fish and chicken with the bones removed, and the vegetables were served in bite-sized portions. In addition, if beef is used, it should be tenderloin only.

There are many types of Thai royal cuisine such as *ranchuan curry*, *nam phrik rue*, *matsaman curry*, rice in jasmine-flavoured iced water or *khao chae*, spicy salad, fruit, and carved vegetable.

Thai Chef McDang, himself descended from the royal family, asserts that the difference between royal Thai cuisine and regular Thai cuisine is fiction. He maintains that the only difference between the food of the palace and that of the common people is the former's elaborate presentation and better ingredients.