

Thai Street Food

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Extract

Introduction

It's all about the food. Even a fleeting visit to Thailand can leave you in no doubt of this. Walking down the street – almost any street in Thailand – you can only be struck by the variety of stalls (sometimes literally) and amazed at the variety of food. Thais are obsessed by food, talking and thinking about it, then ordering and eating it. Markets brim with produce and snacks. Streets often seem more like busy restaurant corridors than major thoroughfares for traffic.

Much of Thai culture expresses itself through food. It sits happily at the centre of all occasions and celebrations: births, weddings, making merit, dispensing generosity and repaying obligations. Food is integral to the Thais.

Its diversity and profusion clearly shows the importance of food and eating in their daily lives.

There are two distinct parts to the Thai culinary repertoire. Firstly, there is food eaten with rice (arharn gap kao), which forms the basis of the meal proper. This encompasses the largest variety of Thai cooking: salads, curries, soups and relishes, all of which are eaten with rice, the heart of the meal. Several dishes are put on the table along with rice and are shared, family style. Thais consider this style of food to be traditionally Thai: it is what is served and eaten in the home, and is what they mean when they talk about food.

The other main component is single-plate food (arharn jarn dtiaw), which is literally just that, with the dish normally plated in individual portions intended for one person. Although once it arrives, it might well be shared by friends. Unlike regular Thai food, this food may be eaten by itself – that is, it is not always eaten with rice. Originating in the markets and then later finding its way onto the streets as an occasional meal or snack, these noodles, pastries and other complex desserts, deep-fried and braised dishes are unlikely to be prepared at home. And it is this diverse and distinctive food that is the subject of this book.

Thai Street Food offers a glimpse into the vibrant world of Thailand's streets and markets, following the sweep of time as day slips into night, and the people and food change accordingly. It contains a small selection of a few of my favourite recipes – it is by no means an exhaustive survey. It depicts the beguiling Thai food culture at its source, in the markets. There is a nod to history as the development of street food in Thailand is tracked. For me, it is vital to understand the past in order to make sense of the culinary mosaic that comprises street food. It may not help you cook better or yield tastier results, but it will give more meaning to what you do.

The book traces the traditional rhythm of the day, from morning to night, a progression that is often refreshingly different from the pace of modern life. Each chapter contains the food you are



likely to find at that time. But like so much of Thai culture, these dishes are not easily confined and many can be found throughout the day, much as food stalls spread beyond the market out onto the streets and into the night.

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In many ways, food from the markets and streets is the most accessible of all Thai food. Stalls and vendors fill the street, making it a delicious obstacle course. It is also the easiest of Thai cooking to enjoy and eat – not just for the Thais but for the stumbling visitor too. Even though it is prepared fresh every day and packed up every night, such vending feels as if it has withstood the test of time.

Pervasive as it now is, street food is a relatively recent addition to the Thai culinary landscape. Despite the prominence of hawker food among Chinese migrant communities in Bangkok in the early twentieth century, it was really only in the 1960s, perhaps slightly earlier, that street food came to the fore, gradually spilling out onto the streets as Thais left their family homes and farms and moved to the cities in search of new, more lucrative jobs in emerging industries.

Traditionally Thais ate at home, staying within the orbit of the family and its food. As farmers working the land they had little need or desire to leave their farms. Only when it was necessary did they eat outside the home – at markets, during temple festivals and village celebrations. Sometimes itinerant hawkers came to them, plying their wares: necessary items that could not be made or grown, such as salt, shrimp paste (gapi), charcoal, simple pieces of equipment, plates and the like, as well as some prepared food.

While farmers rarely strayed from home, women often did – and headed towards the market to barter and trade surplus produce for required items. Along the way some of the more enterprising traders sold food, portable snacks to those who gathered at the markets. Women have always played a large role in the markets and on the streets. Rarely have men intruded – they were farmers, soldiers, bureaucrats and monks, and often regarded such financial acumen with disdain, thinking it somehow improper. Historically and culturally women have always had a greater freedom to pursue trade.

These women of the market (mae khaa) banter to barter! They are full of character and sass, and love nothing more than to have a chat, bitch and play – with each other and with passing trade. Polite Thais modestly decline such rambunctious fun but smile inwardly, possibly considering a response but constrained by convention. A hallmark of Thai culture is the delight in a well-turned phrase, a graceful aside, incisive good-humoured repartee – and it is in the markets and on the streets where this is most freely expressed. It's enjoyed as much as the transaction itself. Sometimes more so, it seems.

Thai markets are as vivacious as the Thais and their food. They provide pleasure and materials for living. You can pick up food at every stage of preparation: from raw and straight from the fields (live, cleaned, cut and sliced), through assembled packages of raw ingredients, to finished dishes to take home or to eat then and there. But the market is more than a place that feeds the body. There is always a coffee shop where men will sit, read the newspapers, talk about affairs and, naturally, gossip. Women, on the other hand, go to the markets to shop, spending more time than they ought and as much time as they like, having a chat and maybe even a gossip too.

Traditionally the market was the place where people met, talked and exchanged information. Until recently people, if they lived within walking distance, went to the market once a day, sometimes twice. It was an important centre in society, second only to the temple. It was a lifeline

to the outside world. Sadly this role of the marketplace is changing. Fewer people shop there now, and Bangkok's burgeoning middle class often prefers the newer supermarkets with their Western ways. While the supermarkets are doubtlessly more hygienic, they contain little of the atmosphere, the welcome or the quality of fresh ingredients.

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Within the market there is a strong bond between the stallholders, who spend much of their day – most of their life – with their neighbours, chatting, sleeping, selling, occasionally working and always looking forward to eating, safe in the knowledge that the food will be good and robustly flavoured: real Thai market food. They can be certain of its quality.

Often the finest food comes from the most humble operations, such as one veteran noodle-seller I first encountered in Phetchaburi, to the southwest of Bangkok. Surrounded by bamboo baskets in which she totes all her food, and a few small stools on which her customers sit, eat and chat, she sells only one dish, kanom jin noodles dressed with pineapple and dried prawns, a dish she has been selling for the last 30-odd years. She's never used a fridge, let alone a freezer – there's simply no need. Her dish is based on local ingredients, with everything freshly purchased each day from the nearby market: good pineapples, dried prawns, green mango and chillies. She starts about 5 a.m., going to the market before returning home to do the simple preparation necessary. She'll probably offer some food to passing monks on their dawn alms collection, then at about 9 a.m. she'll head back to her street corner. She opens about 10 a.m. and generally runs out of food in the early afternoon. She knows all of her customers, some of them for years – they've grown old together. Most come at least once a week, but they'll often stop by for a chat on a daily basis. They are attuned to each other, as she is to the market and its food. That's why her noodles are so good. She, and a legion of hawkers like her, face their customers every day, so they can ill afford to obtain a poor reputation. And that's why the good people of the market can expect a satisfying meal.

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The other major influence on Thai street food has been the wave of Chinese migration that accompanied the transformation of the Kingdom of Siam into modern Thailand. There have been Chinese merchants, adventurers and coolies in Thailand for hundreds of years, but during the nineteenth and especially the early twentieth century, the development of Bangkok was fed by Chinese coolies. Seeking to escape the hardship and poverty that was afflicting the south-eastern seaboard of their country, they came to try their luck in a new land. Some stayed for only a few years, but others settled, finding work on the wharves, in factories and in market gardens. Housed in communal accommodation, the Chinese could not eat at home, so they ate on the streets or canal-side, in the fields and the factories. Their food was the basic, peasant food of their home regions: noodles, rice congee, pork offal and braises infused with five-spice powder. Among the Chinese there was less demarcation of roles, with men often becoming involved in food and its commercial preparation. There was often little choice for these immigrants and their off spring as many occupations were closed to them.

The Chinese brought with them hawkers, mendicant sellers of food. They carried their wares in two baskets supported by a bamboo pole slung across their shoulders. Most of the food they carried was prepared and cooked, as it was easier to serve and would keep more successfully in the tropical heat.

They walked the streets and tracks and patrolled the land. Their sweep was small, determined by the weight of their baskets. They really could only carry enough for half a day – besides, the food would only last that long.

As the pace of modernisation accelerated, canals were dug to open up new areas and allow produce, rice, charcoal, sugar, to be brought easily into the city and its merchants. Main roads were non-existent and the tracks that did wind their way through the land became unusable during the rainy season. Small communities settled along the canals, and boats plied the waterways, supplying people with ingredients, household goods and simple prepared food. On board might be noodle soups, snacks and sweets, together with the equipment to prepare and serve them: a small, smouldering charcoal stove beneath a pot of simmering stock, and some bowls and utensils, which would be washed in the canals.

But as Bangkok grew, the modern city was established and streets began to supersede the waterways. Bamboo poles and baskets fell by the wayside, replaced by a cart (plaeng loy) that was better equipped to serve large communities, factories, building sites. Late one afternoon in Suphanburi, a small town in the heart of the central plains, I encountered the perfect example of such an operation. I had sought shelter in an old wooden market – a dark, cool and quiet place seemingly overlooked by time as it sat half in the shade, lapsing into disuse. But with the appearance of a woman of perhaps sixty slowly pushing a large rickety trolley, the marketplace came back to life, restored by the prospect of something to eat. Her cart was filled with pots and bowls full of curries and noodles, rice and a large wooden pestle and mortar for making salads.

At first I was a bit dismissive, thinking decent food unlikely in such a forgotten place. Having already had lunch, I could afford such indifference!

Gradually people emerged from the surrounding shop-houses and ordered their meal: one had a green curry with some left over kanom jin noodles, another had some crunchy and still-warm spring rolls. Intrigued, I sampled a red curry spooned over rice and a green papaya salad (som dtam) with some salted beef on the side. Everything was exemplary, wonderful and richly seasoned – she'd been cooking these dishes every day for some forty years and it showed. Uncommonly good though this food was, I don't think her talent was unusual; there are just so many fine cooks preparing food in Thailand. She stayed and chatted, longer than she ought, seeing the delight in my eyes and possibly sniffing another sale (she had some desserts, you see – and yes, she was right, I succumbed to a few little dainties) before moving on to continue along her route.

About forty years ago, around the same time as this market woman and her trolley started out, 'made to order' (dtam sang) stalls began to appear, where raw food was cooked in woks over charcoal burners – or, later, gas jets. These stalls catered to the needs of an influx of Thai workers who had left their homes and paddy fields to move into a newly developing world of factories and workshops. In the city, they were housed in communal dormitories with few facilities. Lacking the means to cook for themselves but having the cash to pay for meals, these uprooted people looked to the streets for simple, portable and affordable food. The ready availability of cheap ice allowed the more established hawker to set up shop and chill raw produce through the afternoon into the night: trays were filled with food to tempt a tired Thai and make a worthwhile and happy conclusion to a long day's work. Plastic bags also became available and this meant that a greater variety of food, including soups and curries, could be taken away. Sometimes these stalls became so successful that the operator bought a nearby property, turning in his or her wheels and setting up shop.

Curry shops started up in much the same way, although some authorities believe that the dishes offered by these stalls mirrored the offerings made to monks: from such a meal, enterprising women began to provide similar dishes to passers-by. These stalls sprang up near thoroughfares, crossroads, markets and large communities, wherever customers were likely to be. Some became more permanent while others remained ad hoc, set up in front of the cook's house.

As the Chinese and their descendants moved out of their enclave in Chinatown and into the wider community, they brought noodle shops with them – and the popularity of these stalls among the Thai paralleled Chinese integration into Thai society and culture. The first generation of hawkers became ensconced and now a second generation has followed, staking their claim on the streets as they begin their rise to more established businesses.

Increasingly over the last twenty years, traditional Thai dishes, such as *naam prik* relishes, hot and sour soups and salads of all kinds, are finding their way onto the streets and into night markets. Such food was once the preserve of home cooks and was seldom seen on the streets, but its appearance reflects the fact that Thais are working longer hours and are increasingly relying on prepared food. Who can blame them? The food is good, fresh and so convenient. The streets cater to modern Thais – everything that was *à la carte* is on the carts now.

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When I first went to Thailand in the 1980s there was a certain opprobrium surrounding people who regularly brought dinner home for their families, rather than cooking it themselves. They were considered irresponsible, and their family was considered quite unfortunate to have to rely on the cooking of strangers. The women were referred to as 'plastic-bag housewives', since they returned home after work laden with a multitude of plastic bags filled with dinner. However, times have changed and now there are few people, at least in Bangkok, who spend all day at home preparing food. Most urban

Thais work outside the home and have little time to prepare food as their grandparents once did. But few are to be pitied as they partake of the bounty of the streets.

In any provincial town, and in many crowded areas of Bangkok, there is always a place – a corner or two, a few blocks or a square – that is brightly lit well into the night. These are the night markets of Thailand and they are filled with people, food and noise, as flames lick around woks and wood smoke from charcoal grills lingers in the still night air. *Dtarn sang* stalls are among the brightest and busiest, but there will also be noodle stalls offering their wares in steaming soups or briskly stir-fried, and curry shops with an array of colourful curries in trays. Other stalls will be selling Muslim pastries, *madtarbark* and *roti*; elsewhere, fish cakes will be fried to order. Cooks develop different dishes to attract customers. A good place is always busy, with tables clustered around the cook and his or her stand. These precincts are all about eating and pleasure. They contain everything that lures a Thai out: good food, people, atmosphere and laughter – the Thai world on a plate. It really is all about the food.