

The Thai Home Kitchen

Modern Kitchens:

The kitchens in modern Thai homes are unique, in fact, most have two kitchens: one inside and one outside. When you are cooking highly aromatic curries and sneeze-inducing chiles, and dealing with fragrant shrimp paste and lots of dried seafood, it's desirable to keep those smells outside, where they'll tickle the nostrils of the neighbors and not smell up your own house. All that's really needed is a two-burner portable propane stove (*tao kaet*, although these are much more substantial and higher-BTU than the typical American portable camping stove or table-top burner), a prep counter, and a sink with cold water. Several sizes of mortars and pestle are required, the larger and heavier the better. Usually a mortar and pestle of granite is ideal for general-purpose pounding. A mortar of clay with a pestle of sugar plum or tamarind wood is ideal for salad-making. In some modern homes a food processor or blender might perform some of the duties of the mortar and pestle. It never gets chilly, so working outside in cool temperatures isn't a problem. Indeed, having the main burners outside helps to keep a lot of the cooking heat outside of the house. There is also a cupboard with screened-in doors for storage of food items which are to be cooked.

Inside you have another two-burner (or occasionally a four-burner), possibly with an oven (a modern addition that's more status symbol than kitchen tool, as Thais rarely bake anything), a refrigerator (in all but the lowest-class homes), a double sink, electric rice cooker, a microwave, and perhaps an electric dishwasher. With this, you can cook for quite a large group of folks if you have to.

In many homes you see large gleaming stainless water tanks outside, *thang*, with attached in-line pressure pumps, supplied either from a municipal source, a well, or rooftop-collected rainwater. Water heaters are wall-mounted, in-line, flow-through, 220v electric, which are mounted on the wall (usually there's one at each location where hot water might be needed), with no Western style centrally-located tank to hold heated water and constantly maintain it at a certain temperature. In the tropics there just isn't a huge demand for hot or even warm water, save for dish and clothes washing, and the occasional warm shower. Most of the time, showers are for helping a person cool-off while they're in the process of getting clean; taking several showers daily is the norm. Propane is stored in exterior vertical portable tanks located near the burners, delivered regularly by the gas dealer. Most homes have two: one in-use, and one as a backup.

With fresh and produce markets within walking distance of just about anywhere there is never much of a need for a large amount of refrigerated storage, so huge American-style refrigerators are unusual in all but the wealthy homes (but as in the States, they can be a status symbol). Most Thais shop for a day, at the most a couple of days, when they go to market, and use primarily very fresh ingredients. The majority of what they purchase was normally harvested early that morning, or the day before; the fish caught the previous day or night, or that morning; the animals butchered that day or the day before. Before the advent of refrigeration, the Thais survived just fine, and many of the foodstuffs are preserved, enabling storage during times of glut and a steady

food supply in times of scarcity; consider all of the varieties of dried fish and seafood, for example.

It's not like it is in the States, where there are mega-warehouses of temperature-controlled produce that is gassed with ethylene inside sealed rooms to get it to 'ripen', or huge killing and processing feed lot factories cranking out boxes of frozen chicken parts, pork or beef primal or subprimal cuts, or hamburger patties. Most folks shop at the local wet market on the way home if they work, or they have their live-in housekeeper shop there during the day. There is usually a *raan ahaan* close by, a shophouse food store with non-perishables that caters to the neighborhood.

You just don't see freezers crammed full of ready-to-microwave "convenience" goods like in America, and really, the only place you see much of a freezer section at all is in supermarkets that cater to foreigners. Traditional Thais see this sort of frozen, ready-to-eat food as a novelty (and it can be a status symbol of sorts); deep down, they insist on freshness. Think about it: why would you have a freezer full of microwavable processed food like that when all you have to do is go to the market just down the street to find vendors with a huge variety of batches of curries in every flavor that are freshly-prepared and ready to go. Any of the food hawkers will gladly make a dish to-go. Point and pay, and you have a meal in minutes.

The younger set is a different story. They haven't learned to cook at the side of their moms or grandmothers; they think Western fast food is cool; and their social lives demand so much of their time that fast food and frozen, microwaveable food suits them just fine. In fact, it is preferable; a symbol of their modernization.

Near every neighborhood is an incredible restaurant, or more often a whole range of restaurants, usually with a huge menu of choices (and most of them deliver by motorcycle, so they are a phone call away). Just as close are an amazing variety of food vendors, either on the street or in a shophouse, dishing-out delicious dishes at ridiculously inexpensive prices. You are seldom more than 50 yards away from a food outlet of some sort, especially in the cities. For office workers, salarymen, and professionals there will always be a vendor or restaurant conveniently located along their path between home and the work place, and if they are cooking, most Thai food is quickly prepared.

In a *hawng thaew*, literally a 'row house', but actually what is known as a shophouse, the ground floor often serves as the outdoor kitchen, while there would also be an interior kitchen located upstairs. Think of it as a traditional Thai home on stilts, except it is a two or three-story concrete structure, with the bottom floor predominately open. They are built in blocks, sharing common walls with the shophouse on either side. In many *soi* (small street) neighborhoods, the bottom floor of a shophouse can serve as a small informal restaurant, usually serving one type or style of food to the immediate neighborhood.

Traditional Kitchens:

The traditional Thai home is made of teak (or other hardwoods) and elevated on stilts. The stilts keep living quarters above the seasonal monsoonal floods, and allow

cooling breezes to encircle the house. The area underneath is often used as a covered space for the outdoor kitchen, and for a casual entertainment and dining area. In older country homes the cooking area might instead be in an attached portion of the elevated house, built with small spaces between the flooring so that it's easy to clean and allows good air circulation and a smoke-clearing draft from underneath. Sometimes the kitchen is a separate structure, located behind the house. Windows are usually large, with hinged covers that can be lowered in bad weather, or bamboo slats which roll up and down. Occasionally the wall sections of these cooking areas are made of woven palm or rattan, which also allow good air circulation. The whole point is to keep the interior as cool as possible, and allow cooking aromas to easily evacuate the living quarters.

To ensure prosperity and good fortune the kitchen should always face north, and the position of the stove within the kitchen is determined by the day of the week on which the cook (or home owner) was born. For the popularity of those born on Sunday, the stove should face west; for happiness of a Monday-born, to the northwest; for protection of those on Tuesday, to the south; Wednesday-born cooks gain prosperity with stoves facing south; southwest ensures peacefulness for those of Thursday birth; northwest is beneficial for Friday-born; a cook born on Saturday avoids affliction by facing their stove to the east.

Cooking is done on the traditional Thai firepot: *tao fai*, 'fire stove' or Thai 'bucket stove': a thick-walled ceramic or metal fire pot (often with a 24-inch diameter, but they come in varying sizes). It sits on the floor or on a table on an insulating asbestos mat and it has rings on the top that cradle the wok or pot. Inside is a grate, *rang phung*, which holds the fuel; at the bottom is a large rectangular opening that allows the addition of fuel and the removal of ash. The cook squats or sits on a short stool in order to work the stove and stoke the flames with a bamboo or palmleaf fan, or by blowing through a hollowed-out bamboo tube. The addition of a mesh grate placed over the top converts the stove to a charcoal grill. The fuel is either charcoal, or split kindling (or occasionally the stove will be converted to propane in modern times). The fire is started with shredded coconut husks or similar tinder, then kindling is placed on that, and when the flame gets going well, the charcoal is placed on top. The best charcoal is made from mangrove wood, but this causes ecological destruction along the coasts. Recent moves have been made converting rubber trees which are past their prime into a relatively decent charcoal, thus reducing the impact on the mangrove thickets.

An alternate stove is called the *mae tao*, a large clay elongated, U-shaped counter top with legs, with two holes for woks, and an insulated tray underneath to hold a bed of glowing coals. If it was situated outside, the fire would be built in a firepit, and the coals would be shoveled underneath the *mae tao* when they are ready for cooking.

Thais use a wok, *kra tha*, very similar to the Chinese wok, which was brought to Thailand by Chinese immigrants. Generally it will have either a long handle on one side and a loop handle opposite, or two opposing loop handles, known as *hua*, or 'ears'. Assorted sizes and shapes of cooking pots, called *maw*, are used, made from pottery, brass, iron, or steel. Wide shallow wooden basins function as a sink. There is a wooden cupboard with screen or tightly woven panels in the doors for food ingredient storage,

often with the legs sitting in dishes of water or oil to keep ants away. Cutting boards are usually round and thick, often made of tamarind wood, which is dense, impermeable, and easy to clean.

Large pottery urns with covers, *ohng*, serve as the fresh water supply. They collect water from a well or from rooftop runoff during rains. A block of alum, *saansohm*, is lowered into the water on a string and swished around for 30 seconds or so to 'freshen' the water and clear it by causing particulates to settle to the bottom. The minute pores in the clay vessel allow evaporation which cools the liquid. Large wooden dipping ladles are used to remove the amount of water needed, which is then transported to the kitchen in a bucket.

A coconut grater, *kra taai khuut maprao*, known as a 'coconut-digging rabbit', is an essential piece of equipment in any coconut-growing area. It is a kitchen implement that resembles a heavy wooden stool with a flanged sharp metal tip with teeth which protrudes from one end; the user sits astride the stool, and rotates the interior of a coconut around the flange to remove the interior flesh from the coconut so that it can be used for making coconut milk or desserts; they are often carved into human and animal shapes, especially rabbits, due to their protruding teeth. Again, the array of mortars and pestle would be essential as kitchen tools. Assorted ladles, *tupee*, and knives, *miit*, would round out the essential equipment, apart from the usual plates, eating utensils, and cups.