

## **An Introduction to Thai Cuisine:**

This series of articles is intended as a learning resource for customers of Austin's fabulous Sap's Fine Thai Cuisine restaurant, and readers of the website. Our theory is that the more the diner knows about traditional Thai cuisine, the better they will appreciate the efforts that Sap and his kitchen undergo to bring Austin-area Thai food aficionados the finest and most authentic Thai cuisine possible. These are not dumbed-down versions of Thai food aimed at Westerners, but authentic dishes of a caliber found only in the homeland. When you eat at Sap's, you'll experience true *tamrap kap khao*, or treasured, handed-down family recipes. You will understand the meaning of the Thai phrase: *im jai*, or 'full heart', an expression signifying complete culinary satisfaction and overall contentment. You'll also want to know how to say: '*Arawy maak*' pronounced: ah-LOY mock, meaning 'very delicious'.

## **Rot Jat: 'birth flavor', or The True Taste of Thailand:**

The cooking of Thailand is unique from its neighbors and from all other Asian cuisines, and can truly be called one of the world's great cuisines (ranking fourth in a recent popularity survey among the top 25 cuisines of the world). What makes Thai food so distinctive is its acceptance of outside influence. Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia that was never colonized or governed by a foreign power. It has also always been a country that has been completely self-sufficient when it comes to food production, with a culture built around agriculture; it is referred to as 'The Food Basket of Asia'.

Throughout history Thailand has been a central trading point between many regional cultures, by marine and land routes, both near and far. The Thais have always taken a pragmatic approach towards what they could glean from those trading relationships. Thais accept the unfamiliar, but don't worry that new influences will somehow compromise or corrupt the central core of their cuisine. This pragmatism has included adoption of foreign culinary ingredients and methods, willingly incorporating these influences into the existing cuisine. When the tomato was brought back to Europe from the New World, it took over 200 years to be fully adopted; when the Portuguese introduced the chile pepper to Thailand in 1529, it took less than 100 years to be embraced countrywide (or 30 years, depending on whom you choose to believe).

Thai cuisine is an amalgam of the cooking of India, Burma, Malaysia, Laos, Cambodia, China, Japan, Portugal (New World vegetables and sweet desserts), the Mon and Khmer cultures, and many endemic ethnic tribes, yet it is completely unique and distinct from its contributors and neighbors. Just so you don't get the impression that Thailand's culinary heritage was delivered by foreign traders, many culinary historians, and these aren't crackpot weirdo's, but learned, respected academics, believe that Thailand was very likely one of the original cradles of civilization.

Evidence of agricultural remains has been found on the Thai-Burmese border which dates to 10,000 BC; rice cultivation was occurring in the Khorat area of Central Thailand by at least 4000 BC, if not earlier. Ban Chiang bronzeware from 3600 BC predates bronze discoveries in Mesopotamia by 500 years. The world's earliest socketed iron axe was made here in 2700 BC., and the development of iron ploughs increased the area a farmer could work by a factor of seven. There is confirmation of permanent habitation sites 37,000 years ago near Krabi, and proof of the earliest domestication of plants in the world in Northern Thailand, beginning in 9,700 B.C. Evidence further suggests that legumes and chickens were encouraged around dwellings as early as 10-20,000 years ago. Thailand is also thought to be the ancestral home of today's domestic chicken.

Thai cuisine and cooking (and eating) is so ingrained in the culture of Thailand that it has to be considered an indistinguishable element of Thainess (*khwaam pen tai*). It is a pivotal component in all social functions, whether it is a family dinner, a daily offering of merit to the Buddhist monks, lunch for the salarymen, a celebration or ceremony, snacks to accompany drinks, or just day-to-day life. Thai culture revolves around its food, and Thais love to eat...and eat often. Thais can argue enthusiastically and endlessly over the finer points of a dish, or the merits of one restaurant or street vendor over another. Where a Westerner might consume two to three meals a day, it's very typical for a Thai to plan their day around four or even five meals a day, with almost constant snacking in-between included. Dining is a social function, and like Thai life itself, it must be *sanuk*, or fun. Dishes are often portioned in amounts geared for more than one diner, and are meant to be shared among friends and family.

### **Geographical Influences:**

Thailand is a land of incredible geographic diversity. Mountain ranges are found all over the country, especially in the north, and they moderate the growing temperatures in a tropical environment, allowing the cultivation of a huge variety of cool weather vegetables and fruits that normally could not be grown. Drop down in elevation, and you find the more typical complex range of tropical Southeast Asian herbs, vegetables, and fruits that one would expect. The cool weather crops combined with the tropical bounty provide Thailand a culinary palette unmatched by any of its neighbors.

The massive central plain of Thailand is a large drainage basin, comprising a fertile, wet environment which is perfect for the production of rice, Thailand's staple crop and main agricultural export. The southern Thai climate is ideal for the production of coconuts, another critical component in Thai cooking. The Southeast is known as Thailand's fruit basket, with countless plantations producing well over a hundred different tropical fruits. All regions of Thailand are known for their particular agricultural specialties, and all contribute to the overall culinary wealth of the country.

Thai cuisine is heavily influenced by the seafood harvested from 2000 miles of coastline (the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea), and hundreds of picturesque islands, some 425 plus. Add to that a large variety of freshwater aquatic species harvested from a vast interior network of rivers, lakes, creeks, ponds, marshes, rice

paddies, and canals. If it lives underwater, salt or fresh, Thailand catches and enjoys it. If eaten fresh, it's as fresh as it can possibly be, but Thais also relish dried seafood, even when the freshest is so readily available.

### **The Thai Flavor Profile:**

The Thai flavor profile is fresh, vibrant, complex, and rich, created by a balanced blending of salty, sour, sweet, pungent, and bitter tastes. Varying the individual proportions will yield different results that can be surprising, and Thai cooks are very particular about customizing traditional dishes to their own tastes. An overlooked flavoring element in Thai food is the dual role that fish sauce (*naam pla*) plays. It is the salty flavor component in Thai cooking, but it also adds what the Japanese have labeled *umami*, a savory fullness which contributes significantly to the overall taste of a dish.

Meals are meant to be balanced: spicy with non-spicy, sour with sweet, crisp with soft, heavy with light, seafood with meats, vegetables with fruits, etc. As with most Asian cultures, texture is a major component of the cuisine. Thais have a term for the blending and balancing of flavors in a properly planned meal: *kurn jao tong pai doey kan*. This effect is critical in Thai cuisine, and a meal is judged by the qualities and harmony of each individual dish, as well as how the dishes compliment each other to make a balanced, satisfying whole.

### **Spice is Nice:**

A false image is created in the States by Thai restaurants that try to out-spice each other with a barrage of ever-increasing chile icons on their menus. Somehow, one-dimensional heat is considered true Thai by the macho crazed diners at these pseudo-Thai venues. Heat has its place, but only as long as it's balanced and harmonious with the overall flavor of a dish. Especially surprising for Westerners is the fact that a very significant portion of traditional Thai cuisine is not spicy in the least.

Spiciness, or pungency, isn't really a taste, but scientifically, is actually a chemical irritation of the trigeminal mouth nerves caused by capsaicin, the active ingredient in chiles. It's similar to the subtle irritation caused by piperine in pepper, gingerol in ginger and its relatives, and isothiocyanates in garlic, shallots, and onions; minor irritants which trigger the production of endorphins in the brain, and endorphins produce a sense of well-being. All of these ingredients, by the way, are aromatics and seasonings used heavily in Thai cooking. In short, Thai food makes you, and your brain, very happy and content.