

Regional Styles of Thai Cuisine:

Thailand is comprised of four main culinary regions, each with their own specialties, and each having slight deviations in flavor profile from that of the Central region, which is considered by most to be the 'classic' Thai culinary style. The variations are caused by differences in ethnicity, cultural background, geography, climate, and to some extent, politics. Each ethnographic group can lay claim to dishes which are known nationwide, whether they originated with the Chinese immigrants from Hainan, Fujian, Guangzhou, or Yunnan, the Sunni Muslim Malays or animist Moken sea gypsies in the South, the Mon of the west-Central, the Burmese Shan in the North, the Khmer in the East, or the Lao in the Northeast. Geography and climate determine what can be grown and harvested, and whether the aquatic species consumed in the region are derived from the sea or freshwater.

The cuisine of Northeastern Thailand: *Aahaan Issan:*

Issan (also written as Isaan, Isarn, Esarn, Isan) is Thailand's poorest region, both economically and agriculturally. It is plagued by thin soils, with an underlying layer of mineral salts (mineral salt is harvested and exported country wide). The weather is a limiting factor in agricultural production: it is hotter and dryer during the dry season, and rains can easily become floods, since it is basically a large flat plateau (the Khorat Plateau), hemmed-in by mountain ranges to the west and the south. Watersheds are limited and flow into the Mekong, which serves as a transportation link for trade. Marshes and temporary lakes appear during the rainy season.

Issan is one of the oldest-inhabited regions in the country: Ban Chiang bronze ware from 3600 BC predates bronze discoveries in Mesopotamia by 500 years, and the area is known for its ancient pottery and primitive tools. The name 'Issan' comes from *Isana*, a Sanskrit name meaning 'flowing with wealth' or 'northeast', depending on which you believe, and is also another early name for Shiva. Early inhabitants were the Mon and Khmer, joined in the 900's by the Tai and the Lao. The area has had strong Lao and Khmer influences through the years, and was a hotbed for Communist insurgency between 1960 and 1982. Today there are greater numbers of people of Lao heritage in Issan than there are in Laos. Older customs have remained intact here longer than in any other Thai region, since the area has been relatively isolated until modern advances in road building and transportation. Only 2% of the international visitors to Thailand ever venture into Issan today, even with relatively inexpensive means of getting there.

Partly due to the mass migration of poor workers to the Central region seeking jobs, Issan flavors are relatively well known throughout the entire country. Although at one time, the area was heavily forested and fairly lush, it is not a diverse or complex cuisine since the forest disappeared. With few trees remaining on the plateau compared to the original state and comparatively little firewood, many food items are raw or cured (pickled). Pickling is a means to stave off the uncertainty caused by unreliable weather and harvests. Most cooked foods are grilled or boiled, and little fat is used in cooking.

There is an ethnic dividing line midway between the Chi and Mun rivers: Lao peoples predominate to the north of that line, with Khmer to the south. Coconuts are used in the southern half by the Khmer, but not in the northern half by the Lao. Sticky rice is preferred in the countryside, especially in the north; long grain rice is eaten in the cities. Historically *plaa raa* (a thick fermented fish sauce made with salted freshwater fish and rice) and *tua noa* (a cake of fermented soy beans, toasted and ground before use) were the primary flavoring agents, and they still are in the countryside, but they are now slowly being replaced by fish sauce and shrimp paste due to the relative ease of transportation in modern times. Aquatic species used are primarily freshwater, with the exception of seafood imported into the cities.

Issan food can be very hot and pungent, meant to be eaten with large amounts of rice; economic conditions dictate the ratio of dish to rice. When eaten in this manner, the overall taste is less piquant. The chiles used are small, dried, and red. Flavors are bright, clean, tart and spicy. Herbs are widely used (many harvested from the wild), and dill is utilized. Pulverized roasted raw rice is used as a thickener and to add a roasted savory flavor component to salads. Soups and curries are simple, thin, and stock-based. Relishes are hot and salty, and sour flavors come from pickled ingredients, lime, hog plum, red ants, tamarind, and a large array of minor fruits. Issan folks like to eat water buffalo, unlike the rest of Thailand, and insects, frogs, lizards, etc. are also enjoyed.

Some classic Issan dishes are: *gai yang* (grilled chicken), *som tam* (green papaya salad), sticky rice, *laab* (minced meat salad), *num tok* (grilled meat salad), a variety of *naam jim* (dipping sauces), pickled bamboo shoot curry, and Mekong giant catfish (the world's largest freshwater fish, endangered, but now being farmed).

The cuisine of the North: *Aahaan neua*.

The north is a series of upland valleys, situated between tall mountain ranges and the basins of the Mekong River to the east and the Salween River in Burma, with many streams draining into the central Chayo Phraya river basin. The weather, especially at altitude, can get surprisingly cool during the brief winter (December-February). Cool weather crops are grown and exported countrywide, and the Royal family has been very successful in getting the hilltribes to convert from opium production to new crops, such as peaches, cherries, macadamia, avocado, cut flowers, coffee, etc.

The Lawa were the original inhabitants, displaced over time by the Mon from the south and the Tai from the north. The North was the central point in trade routes between Burma, China, Laos, and Thailand, and Sukkothai, Lanna, Chiang Mai, and Chiang Rai were some of the earliest Thai city-states. *Khon mueang* refers to inhabitants of Chiang Mai, or 'people of the principalities' and *chao neua* are Northerners. The Shan (from Southern China and Yunnan), Burmese, and native hilltribes have all influenced the cuisine of the North. Haw Chinese traders came here for centuries, but began to relocate here after the Muslim Rebellion of Yunnan in 1855. The area has a very strong regional identity in all aspects: culinary, political, cultural, etc. It wasn't until 1927 that a Central Thai monarch ever visited the North.

The area is known for utilizing a wider assortment of herbs, vegetables, and fruits than any other area, including many indigenous forest species. Northerners prefer sticky rice to jasmine rice or white rice. Rendered pork fat is the common cooking oil, and seasonings tend to be milder than in all of the other regions. Curries in the North, called *naam kaeng* ('curry water'), are stock-based and boiled (few are fried). They tend to be thinner than those in the south, and are often made without coconut milk and tend to be spicy.

The flavor profile is predominantly hot and salty, with spice coming from chiles, dried and powdered spices, peppercorns, and Sichuan peppercorn. Saltiness comes from soy sauce and salt; fish sauce and *pla raa* are also used, as is a salted and preserved land crab reduction (*naam puu*). Sugar is seldom used, with any sweetness come from the sugars found in fruits or from honey. Sourness is obtained by lime, rosella or tamarind leaves, mango shoots, hog plums, madan (sour cucumber), sour orange tomatoes, and red ant larvae and eggs. Bitter flavors are especially appreciated, obtained from a wealth of indigenous leaves, shoots, and twigs harvested from the forest (i.e., acacia leaf, sawtooth herb, etc.). Deep fried foods are common, and cooked food is preferred to raw, even in salads. There is an abundance of fuel wood, so grilling and braising (or any other long-cooking techniques) is common.

Pork is the most common meat, augmented by chicken, deer, wild boar, etc. Aquatic species eaten are freshwater (catfish, prawns, eels, etc.), and cattle have replaced water buffalo in the Northern diet. Wild mushrooms are eaten, especially just after the rainy season: turmeric mushrooms, earthstar puffballs, chanterelles, *khone* (the king of Thai mushrooms), etc. In the countryside *aahaan paa*, 'forest food', wild game, whether endangered or not, is eaten and sold by the hilltribes.

Classic Northern dishes include: *nam phrik* chile dips, *khao soi* (red curry soup noodles), *haeng taleh* (Burmese curry), *sai ua* sausages, *naem maw* (fermented sausages), *khanom jiin nam ngiaw* (pork and black bean sauce over thin rice noodles), *mii pan* (rice paper rolls), Sukkothai-style noodles, *som tam* (green papaya salad, eaten here as a snack, rather than a meal), forest food of the Hilltribes, insects, etc.

The Cuisine of Central Thailand: *Aahaan phaak klaang*. 'The Rice Bowl of Thailand'.

The Central area is primarily composed of seasonal alluvial flood plains of the massive Chayo Phraya River basin; a broad fertile plain crisscrossed by countless canals, which serve to drain floodwaters and as a means of transportation of agricultural product to market by barge and long-tail boat. This area is known for rice, vegetable, and fruit production on a grand scale.

Bangkok is the true melting pot of regional Thai styles. The food is considered by most as the 'classic' Thai cuisine, and it is also the area most influenced by immigration from other regions of Thailand. Bangkok is a magnet for the poor seeking work, it is the center of higher education for students from other regions of the country, and is the business capital of the nation. Most cooking ingredients, even those from other regions, are generally available, since Bangkok is the major market center and shipping point for the entire country, as well as the focus and home of international foreign culinary

influence (especially Italian, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian). Chinese influence is strong (immigrant workers who eventually became merchants), as is Issan (immigrant workers seeking jobs). Chinese influence has been responsible for the many stir-fries and noodle dishes. The western portion of the region has a large population of ethnic Mon, who have contributed their unique style of cooking.

The Central is also the most influenced by Royal or Palace cuisine. In the old days the King's friends and extended family, *chao wang* ('people of the palace') all lived in the palace compound, and privileged supporters would send their children to live there so that they could get an education (while learning to cook the Royal style). After political change in the early 1900's, much of the Royal entourage dispersed to the surrounding area, spreading Royal cuisine throughout the Central region. To further the influence, in 1960 King Bhumipol decreed that the Royal Cookbooks were to be made available to everyone in the country. To a large extent, much of Royal cuisine is a refined version of Central cooking, made with choice ingredients, presented in an elaborate manner.

The cuisine of the Central is the most complex of the country, and the foods used are the most varied. It is the home of the Big Three curries: *gaeng phet* (hot curry), *gaeng khiaw wan* (green curry), and *panang* (red curry), but this region has the most curries of any; many are boiled and stock-based, while others are fried, cooked with separated coconut milk/cream. Curries often use a base of coconut milk, and tend to be sweeter here than in any of the other regions, typically using palm sugar.

The Central has a preference for strong rich flavors, with a balance between hot and salty (the two predominate tastes), sour, and sweet. Fish sauce and shrimp paste prevail, with *naam pla* (fish sauce) being the main salty component. Souring elements are composed of vinegar and many fruits: lime juice, tamarind, green mango, madan (sour cucumber), hog plum, etc. Common aromatics are galangal, lemongrass, makroot, mint, coriander, Thai, holy, and lemon basil. All types of chiles are used, with the food being less hot than that of Issan or the South, but hotter than the North. Both salt and freshwater aquatics species are enjoyed. Long grain and jasmine rice (and noodles made from rice) are the principal starches.

The Central is the home of *kuay tiew reua* (boat noodles), *suki* (hot pot, cooked at the table), *haw mok* (curried seafood custard), *phat phet* (spicy stir-fry w/basil), *nam phrik kapi* (rice w/shrimp paste), *tom khaa*, *tom yum*, *khao laam* (sweet sticky rice cooked in pandan leaf or bamboo), *si racha* chile sauce, *khao chae* (iced fragrant rice), crab fried rice, one-day sun fish, and many, many more.

The cuisine of Southern Thailand: *Aahaan phaak tai*.

The land is a long peninsula, which at its narrowest point is only 25 miles wide. It has a spine of mountains running down the middle, with coastal plains on both sides. The South is the wettest region of Thailand, with the western side getting rain from May to October, and the eastern side getting it between October and December. The eastern side is broader, while the western side has abrupt cliffs interspersed with shallow bays, scalloped beaches, and mangroves. Major crops include pineapple, rubber, coconuts, and bananas.

The South has been influenced by the rule of the Sriwijaya empire, who governed parts of Southern Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia around 500 years ago. The four southernmost Thai provinces, Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and Songkhla (the four contiguous provinces immediately north of the border with Malaysia), are the victims of periodic violent Muslim insurgency, brought on by what the Muslims view as unequal treatment from the overwhelmingly Buddhist Thai government when it comes to allocation of governmental resources and financial support.

This is a dispute that has been going on for more than three centuries (the area was part of the Sukhothai dynasty in the 13th and 14th centuries, and has continuously been part of Thailand since the 16th century). In 1902 Pattani was formally annexed as part of Siam, and in 1933 the region was formally divided into the provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala. The Muslims of the area feel more affinity with the Muslim populations across the border in Malaysia and want the bottom four provinces to secede to Malaysian control. The situation has intensified of late, partly due to the perceived success of armed Islamic guerilla insurgencies in the Middle East, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

Large minorities of ethnic Chinese live in the cities running the commerce, with Thai Buddhists farming the interior, while Muslims tend to fish the coasts. The culinary influences are Sunni Muslim, Malay, and Hokkien (Hakka, from Fujian, China). The population is 34% Muslim, and in the bottom four provinces many Thai Muslims speak Yawi, an ancient Malay language.

There are three main culinary styles: Thai Buddhist: spicy versions of Central Thai dishes using turmeric and coconut milk; Muslim: using ghee and palm oil, and yogurt instead of coconut milk, and a much wider range of fragrant dried spices (i.e. cardamom, cloves, etc.); Indo-Malay: popular dishes such as satay, roti, matsaman. Muslim curries are boiled and thick, and use a lot of cardamom and cumin; Indo-Malays prefer mutton and beef.

The flavor profile combines Malay, Chinese, and Thai influences, and is salty, very spicy, and moderately sour, with very little sweetness. Fish is the main protein source, but they are also fond of chicken and goat. Buddhist and Chinese eat pork, while Muslim law forbids eating pork. Seafood is harvested from both coasts, while much of it is preserved for selling: fermented prawns, salted shrimp, fish sauce, shrimp paste, pickled fish kidney, etc.. The South is known for their steamed *pla tuu* (a small mackerel) which is sent overnight to every market in Thailand. Shrimp paste predominates over fish sauce, and it provides a depth of flavor present in most dishes.

Dried and fresh *phrik kii nuu* chiles are used for heat, which is considered the spiciest regional cuisine in Thailand. Turmeric is widely used, causing the predominant color of the cuisine to be yellow. Coconut milk is prevalent in most dishes, and coconut oil is used for stir-fries. Fresh vegetables (or vegetables simmered in coconut milk) often accompany meals in the form of crudités in the South, either as a side dish or salad, or to eat with chile and shrimp paste dips (*nam phrik*). The richness of coconut cream and coconut oil are cut by the use of astringent turmeric, orange chiles, unripe and sour fruits (unripe pineapple, dried and fresh green mango, tamarind, madan (sour cucumber), and salted and fermented relishes.

Soups tend to be either coconut-based or in the tom yum style, both including turmeric. Stir fries are very spicy, and most curries are boiled, typically seafood-based, with a souring agent for balance. Strongly flavored herbs and ferns are gathered from the forest: dill, lemon basil, chaplu, etc.

Typical Southern dishes include the following: *gaeng tai plaa* (fish kidney curry), *gaeng leuang* (fish curry w/ green papaya), *gaeng ka-yuu* (curry w/ fresh cashews), *khai pla mok* (Southern version of *haw mok*), *matsaman curry*, *pla khluk kha-min* (turmeric-rubbed grilled fish...turmeric reduces fishiness), *khanom jiin*, flaky *roti*, *sataw*/stink beans, *khao yam* (rice salad), *khao mok kai* (Southern chicken *biryani*), hot and sour yellow curries with green papaya or pickled bamboo shoot, etc.