

How Thais Eat:

The Thai diet is fresh, varied, and healthy, with a broad range of vegetables, meats, seafood (*lots* of seafood), and fruits consumed. Menus are harmonious, made up of dishes that compliment each other yet provide contrast, and will almost always include rice, or noodles made from rice. Thais prefer tastes of as many dishes as possible at a single meal, rather than a large portion of a single item. To this end, they love to dine with friends and family, so that an array of dishes can be shared and sampled.

Thais don't have a set course of certain foods to be eaten at specific times of the day. Breakfast is just as likely to be a savory rice or noodle soup topped with chiles, a spicy curry over rice, Hainan chicken with rice, or hot Chinese crullers with warm soy milk, as it is fruit and coffee. Any item can be eaten any time of the day or night; the rule is that there *is* no rule. Thais eat multiple meals a day (4 or 5 meals is not uncommon), with frequent snacks in between. Hawkers line the sidewalks of any area that has foot traffic, knowing full well that their customers will stop for a brief taste. A late night meal or snack is almost always required to finish a night of drinking or partying.

Rice is eaten at least twice a day, and putting on the rice pot or electric rice cooker is often the first order of kitchen business in a Thai home. Oddly, as popular as rice is at the Thai table, in Thailand you must request rice to be served with your meal at many cook-to-order restaurants, unless you're in the North, where small baskets of sticky rice are served automatically. To eat much curry with little rice is symbolic of prosperity, the reverse indicates less prosperity, so to order multiple courses at a dinner and not order any rice to accompany might impress the impressionable. A Thai would never mix an entrée and their serving of rice all-together in one fell swoop. Instead, they will alternate bites of entrée with bites of pure rice. Rice is perfectly worthy as a stand-alone item, and to mix the two together would deny variety. Bites of pure rice also tend to moderate the effects of extreme spiciness when a dish is very hot by absorbing the capsaicin oils from the surface of the tongue.

Meals in Thailand are served family-style, with diners dispensing small amounts of food onto their individual plates and into cups from common serving platters and bowls. A priest is always served first (should any be in attendance), followed by the eldest and the most important. In a multiple course dinner, salads and *kap klaem* (drinking snacks) are consumed first if they are present. Unlike the majority of the rest of Asia, a plate is used by diners in Thailand, rather than an individual rice bowl into which small amounts of accompanying dishes are spooned (the most common method in Asian cultures using chopsticks).

Plates are passed to the person closest to the serving platter, rather than passing the platter from person to person. Often the hostess will dispense the food to each plate, and don't be surprised if your dining neighbor serves food onto your plate without asking; it's assumed that you are too polite to ask for more. Many Thais have dining

tables with a Chinese-style lazy-susan built in at the center, so that serving platters can be placed there, and rotated around the table as needed by the diners. It is considered impolite to clean your plate; a sign that the hostess did not provide enough food for the meal. In contrast, if you leave a bunch of food on your plate and it could indicate that the food was not that good. It is also considered greedy and impolite to tip a platter to scrape remaining bits of food onto a plate.

In restaurants, dishes are brought to the table as soon as they are cooked, so don't expect to receive your food in Western-style staggered courses unless you are dining in a foreign or formal restaurant. If a meal of staggered courses is your goal, order the courses in sequence, shortly before you want them to arrive at the table. Thai dishes are cooked quickly and served immediately, so it's no big deal if one person at the table gets his dish before the others, since everyone will share every dish anyway.

Thais are also not very picky about a dish arriving at the table piping hot, in fact, many prefer that some of the dishes cool off slightly before they are eaten. An exception is a noodle dish, which should be eaten as soon as it arrives at the table, while it's still hot. Other items that should be eaten piping hot are usually served on sizzling cast-iron platters (*thaat lek*), or in tureens with canned fuel-style burners underneath (*muo fi*; in the old days the heat would have come from burning coals). Soups are usually eaten spooned over rice, or dispensed into your soup spoon for small tastes using the ladle. Having separate soup cups is acceptable these days.

It's considered uncouth to dive into plates of food the minute they're placed on the table, proving that you are both ravenous and uncivilized. A truly respectful guest will take a spoonful of rice as their first bite, acknowledging the role of importance that rice has in Thai cuisine, and as a nod to the gods that provide repast.

In the mid 1800's King Rama IV (King Mongkut) introduced the concept of eating Western-style to the palace court, using spoon and fork; previously, food was consumed with the hands. In the late 1800's Mongkut's son, King Rama V (King Chulalongkorn), made it accepted practice to eat with the spoon and fork. In the early 1900's Bangkok restaurateurs introduced the Royal dining method of eating with utensils as a show of refinement, and it gradually spread throughout the country. In certain remote corners of the country, utensils either were never introduced, or were never adopted. In areas which consume sticky rice (*khao niaw*), traditional foods are still eaten with the right hand, using small balls of sticky rice as a scoop and to absorb liquids (although utensils are almost always available when requested).

The Thais are one of the most sensible societies when it comes to a method of transporting food to the mouth. The primary tool is a large spoon (*chawn to*), held in the right hand, used to cut, dissect, and scoop. It can also be used as a mini-bowl, where small tastes of an item are spooned from the serving unit into the individual diner's spoon. A fork (*sawm*) is held in the left hand, used primarily as a 'pusher' to get food

onto the spoon, to pry meat away from bones, to spear single item foods, or to cut larger items into portions. Knives are only found at Western restaurants in Thailand; Thais consider knives as food preparations tools and weapons, neither of which have a place at the table. Traditional older Thais are leery of placing a sharp utensil such as a fork directly into the mouth, and don't see the sense in it; in any case, the fork is never inserted beyond the lips. For soups, Thais use a Chinese-style, deep, ovate, flat-bottomed spoon (*chawn soap*) made of porcelain, plastic, or pressed steel. Items eaten out-of-hand are always eaten with the right hand (the left hand is used for toilet duties...no pun intended). Chopsticks (*ta kiap*) are used almost exclusively for eating noodles and smaller self-contained items like spring rolls, and of course, for eating Chinese food. Noodle soups are eaten with a soup spoon in the left hand for the broth, and chopsticks (or a fork) in the right hand for the noodles. Certain types of street food will be provided with a disposable wooden skewer with which to spear your food. Spoons, forks, chopsticks, and soup spoons are often kept in a sectioned tabletop caddy on one end of the table, and restaurant diners serve themselves. At a table in a home, conventional place settings are used.