

The Thai Tabletop and Its Condiments

Depending on the dishes offered by a restaurant, there will be a specific selection of condiments available on the table. It's a given that Thais customize their food before they eat it. Some of my Thai friends are heavy with the sugar shaker, some add a splash of Maggi or soy sauce, some prefer the sour heat of chiles and lime or vinegar, but it is with a dish of noodles that Thais really express themselves through their condiment selections. Every Thai has a personal ritual that they go through by adding these condiments in varying ratios to their noodles, and the noodle cook does not take offense in the slightest.

In every noodle establishment, whether it is a full-blown restaurant, a shophouse café, a boat vendor, or a street vendor you will find *khreuang puang* : literally 'circle of spices'. It's a reference to the standard condiments on the Thai table, especially where noodles are served: *naam plaa* (fish sauce), *phrik pom* (chile powder), *phrik dong* (chile slices in vinegar), and white sugar. The purpose of these condiments is to provide options for diners to modify their food as they wish, following the basic flavor profile of Thai cuisine: hot and sour, hot and salty, hot, and sweet (especially in the Central region).

These four condiments are usually held in some sort of caddy, so that they can easily be passed around the table by diners. It's not unusual for them to be covered by a tightly-woven plastic mesh bowl turned upside-down, to exclude flying insects.

Naam plaa: Thai fish sauce, the salt of the Thai table and kitchen. When used in proper proportion the taste is very subtle with no hint of seafood. It's made from any number of species of small saltwater fish (generally anchovies, especially one called *plaa ka-tak* , *Encrasicholina heteroloba*) which are layered with sea salt in a 2:1 ratio in large casks and allowed to ferment in the tropical heat for several months (or longer for artisanal versions). Occasionally roasted rice grains are added to the mix, but the highest grades are made only from the freshest anchovies and the purest sea salt. Periodically the cover is removed from the cask or vat so that the mixture can get direct sunlight. The accumulated liquid is drained-off, filtered, and bottled; the very highest grade is made from the liquid first drawn from the crock. It does not require refrigeration. Many feel that the inclusion of fish sauce in a recipe adds *umami* (a Japanese term for the "fifth taste"), a mysterious savory taste component often found in fermented protein (especially in fish, and especially anchovies) which seems to add fullness and depth to the flavor of a dish.

Naam tam sai: white sugar; In Thailand white sugar is made from boiled-down sugar cane sap, and is radically different in look and flavor from palm and coconut sugars, which are primarily used in cooking. White sugar is usually included among the common tabletop condiments, especially in the Central region. Since it is granular and white it is often mistaken by foreigners for table salt. Thais will sprinkle some on top to sweeten a dish, or will use it to balance the taste of a dish after adding sour condiments.

Phrik dong (aka: Naam som phrik): sliced green chiles in vinegar; a condiment for the table, especially for noodles. Generally the milder chiles are used, *phrik chii faa* ('sky pointing' chiles) or *phrik yuak* ('banana stalk' chiles). In the States serranos are better than jalapeños for making this condiment, since they stay crisp in the vinegar for a longer period of time. The vinegar used for this dish can be either rice wine vinegar, or vinegar made from fermented coconut water; Thai vinegars are often in the 4.5 to 5% range and are not as acidic as Western vinegars. The condiment is used to add a spicy-sour taste to dishes.

Phrik pon: roasted chile powder; a ubiquitous table condiment made from dry-roasted red Thai chiles which are ground finely. If the chiles were toasted in a dry skillet before they were ground, the powder will have a nice smoky edge to it.

When you move beyond condiments for noodles, other variations and ingredients come into play on the Thai tabletop.

Naam plaa phrik: fish sauce with thinly-sliced *phrik kii nuu* Thai chiles (incendiary 'mouse-dropping' chiles, known in the States as bird chiles, or bird's eye chiles), a table condiment. This combination is revered for adding both salty taste and heat, and is added to just about any dish, from noodles to fried items, to plain rice.

Naam plaa phrik gra-tiem: fish sauce with Thai chile (*phrik kii nuu*) with garlic and lime juice. A condiment used at the table for fish and crab fried rice in particular.

Naam plaa phrik manao: fish sauce with Thai chile slices (*phrik kii nuu*) and lime juice, a table condiment, which is used especially for fish and rice. It is similar to *naam plaa phrik*, with the addition of lime juice for a fruity sour edge.

Phrik phat/pad: chile paste. Fresh red Thai chiles which are sun or oven-dried, roasted and ground, and then sautéed in a little bit of oil to produce a dry, almost paste-like consistency (*phat/pad* means 'stir-fried'). It's used as a table condiment. The flavor is very spicy and smoky, and the taste of this condiment goes with literally any dish. This is one of the few condiments that would ever be added to a curry, and then, only to add more spiciness.

Tua pon: ground peanuts; a common tabletop condiment used primarily on certain noodle dishes, especially noodles or noodle soup with pork.

Naam jiim Siracha: Siracha (Sriracha) sauce: a bottled table condiment originally made in Siracha, a coastal town just north of Pattaya. It's a reddish-orange sauce made from pureed and aged-fermented ripe chiles, salt, vinegar, garlic, and sugar, which is used especially with egg and noodle dishes. Thai brands are preferred, since they have the true Thai taste, which balances sweet and sour with the heat (and there are some Thai brands that also offer a mild version if you prefer less heat). Vietnamese brands, such as the common Huy Fong ('Rooster Brand') are spicier, with more garlic, vinegar, and little sugar. Huy Fong, by the way, is made in Los Angeles,

from ripe jalapeños and garlic powder. 'Sriracha Factory Brand', 'Grand Mountain', and 'Golden Mountain' are all good Thai labels of a proper Sriracha sauce.

Originally Sriracha sauce was made with Thai yellow chiles (*prik daeng*), which many feel results in a richer, deeper-flavored sauce. 'Golden Mountain' brand still produces a version made with these yellow chiles (which can range in color from bright yellow to medium orange), although it is hard to find. You'll recognize the lighter color of the sauce inside the bottle, and if you ever find any on the shelf in your local market, you'd be wise to stock-up. Sriracha sauce is used especially for omelets (*kai jaew*), for general-purpose spiciness with noodles, and grilled and deep-fried items, and, only in the East, with *lard na*.

Phrik naam som: a general-purpose name for any number of variations on the theme of chile sauce, especially those which are home-made. These sauces can be made with red (usually 'sky pointing' Thai chiles), green (either green Thai chiles in Thailand, or serrano or jalapeño in the States), or yellow chiles (*phrik leuang*), and have a consistency of a medium-thin paste. Ingredients vary, but generally they contain chiles, garlic or shallot, fish sauce, a souring agent (lime juice, vinegar, or tamarind), water, and occasionally a bit of sugar or salt.

Maggi: a bottled Swiss sauce made from an extract of corn gluten and soy protein mixed with water. Maggi is very popular in Thailand, and is made for the Thai market in China, under license for the Swiss owners. It is used much like soy sauce (but does not taste like soy sauce), especially in the home as a tableside seasoning, and added to recipes for flavor. It is not used with pork soup, as the tastes conflict. A Thai-produced equivalent is called 'Golden Mountain Sauce'.

Sambal ulek (oelek): a chile sauce of Indonesian origin widely used throughout Southeast Asia. *Oelek* is the Dutch bastardization of the Indonesian term *ulekan*, meaning pestle, with *ulek-ulek*, referring to the mortar. This sauce is usually made from ripe chiles, garlic, salt, and vinegar by commercial bottlers. Sambal is used by Thai restaurants in the States simply because Americans are familiar with its taste; it is not used in Thailand for Thai foods.

Chinese restaurants and vendors will have soy sauce (*naam see-eu*), ground white pepper (*phrik tai khao pon*), salt (*gleua*), and a sambal-like stir-fried chile paste with garlic and a little vinegar, or stir-fried and ground chiles in peanut and/or sesame oil on their tables, as well as a healthy pile of chopsticks and Chinese-style soup spoons. Thai restaurants serving Chinese-derived dishes, such as *phat see-uw*, will also offer soy sauce as a condiment for its diners.

Specific sauces and condiments are used for specific dishes. For example, with *pad Thai*, you would season with green chiles in vinegar and roasted chile paste; beef noodle soup would use a *phrik naam som* made with green chiles; *lard na* would use *naam phrik son dong*; an omelet would use Sriracha sauce. If in doubt as to what would be the appropriate sauce or condiment for the dishes making up your meal, simply ask your server for a recommendation. If there are kitchen-produced sauces meant to be served with a particular dish, they will be served alongside the dish in a small bowl or ramekin.

Mai jim fan: toothpick; There will normally be a dispenser of toothpicks sitting on the table at any Thai restaurant, and Thais will always cover their mouth with the left hand as a shield to block the view while using a toothpick (assuming they are right-handed).

The biggest set-back on the Thai table is their use of a small box of fragile tissue paper, or a covered roll of toilet paper to stand-in for napkins (*kradaat cham-ra*). These tissues are one-ply and often dyed pink, as they are made from recycled paper; the dye hiding the fact that there are small bits of darker paper in the mix. Eat anything the least bit messy and you can go through mountains of tissues and still not get the grime off. Diners will almost always use the tissues to carefully wipe their silverware before use, and no offense is taken by the proprietor. At informal restaurants the tissues are almost always inside a square or round dispenser with a hole in the top, kept in the middle of the table; in a private home the dispenser will usually be heavily decorated, or thicker conventional paper napkins or cloth napkins will be used.

In a casual restaurant there will normally be a drink cart at one end of the table, either positioned there semi-permanently, or wheeled into place shortly after you are seated. It is called a *koa wang kuang durm*, and contains *chut*: a set-up of ice cubes in an insulated ice bucket with a pair of tongs, lime wedges, bottled water (still and carbonated), assorted mixers and sodas, and occasionally unopened bottles of rice whisky. This set-up is found in most traditional Thai restaurants, sitting at one end of the table, usually on a rolling cart. You pay only for what is consumed, and it can be self-serve or serviced. If the cart is staffed, there will be a younger server, called a *dek* ('child'), who operates as your table's, and the surrounding table's, personal bartender. His goal is to fetch your drinks and beers, and top-off your glasses frequently, in hopes that you'll drink more and spend more (and boost his otherwise modest tip).

Thais would never put their lips to the top of a drink can or bottle that's been exposed to the dusty or dirty elements, so a drinking straw (*laawt duut*) is always provided. A beer, for example, is seldom drunk directly from the bottle; it is almost always poured over ice into a glass. If you order a bottled drink from a street vendor, they will pour the drink from the bottle into a clear plastic bag (*thung, thung phalaesatik*) filled with ice and insert a straw, retaining the bottle themselves for the deposit. The bags have loop handles on the top, which provide a dandy means of toting them around.