



Thai Food 101

Description



The easiest way to find “Old Siam” is through your stomach.

On my first trip to Thailand, I couldn't stomach much of any Thai food. But over the years I have learned to love this strange cuisine. In fact, some of my favorite foods are now Thai dishes that I crave while I'm away from Thailand.

I am no expert on Thai food. But having a Thai wife (and family) and Thai business mandates that I eat a lot of Thai food on a regular basis. I've come to know Thai cuisine

very well.

First off, let's get something straight. Thai restaurants in the U.S. serve very Westernized "Thai" food. Your response is probably that the Thai restaurant you go to is the real thing. Be assured it is probably not.



Red Ant Eggs



Corn Som Tom

Isaan Cuisine

Issan (Northeast Thailand) has its own regional Thai cuisine. Over the years, I have come to love the
When in Rome, eat like a Roman!

If your U.S. Thai restaurant served traditional Thai food, they'd quickly be out of business because no farang (White person) would eat there. The education of the Western palette to accept actual Siamese cuisine takes years. In my case decades.

There are many restaurants throughout Thailand that serve Westernized Thai food. They're easy to spot. They have big tour buses or vans parked outside, the menus are in English and the patrons are white (except for the tour guides). The food served is bland because the basic Thai flavors have been muted or changed so a farang will like it.



Salim. Sweet noodle in coconut milk & ice.

Then just what is real Thai food? First, Thai food is not the same across Thailand. Every region has its own provincial fare. A simple overview is that Thailand has 4 regional cuisines: Bangkok and the Central Plains; the South; the North and Isaan (Northeast Thailand).

Our Thai pillow is in the Isaan region and their food was the one I first fell in love with. Rice sausage, som tom (spicy green papaya salad), roast chicken, fish sausage, sticky rice and a wonderful red chile and tamarind dipping sauce are just a few of the Essan specialties.

The North (our home base) has its own unique sausages; winter melon and tofu soups; eggplant dishes; kao soy (a simple curried soup that's a regional staple) and a variety of colorful curries for pork, beef or chicken and a wonderful mash of green chiles for dipping or spooning called *nam prik noom*.

These are just a fraction of the staple of dishes that Thai folk eat daily. Almost none of which you'll find in a Westernized Thai restaurant either inside or outside The Kingdom. And if you do find some of these Thai staple dishes, the chef will have held back on the fish/squid sauce and other ingredients so you'll not turn your nose up at it.



Northern Sausage drying in the afternoon sun.

Thai cooks often season their creations with lots of fish and squid sauce, curry pastes, kafir leaves, tamarinds, a variety of chiles (the smaller the hotter), garlic, ginger, and more fish sauce.

There is no quicker way to find “Old Siam” than to eat traditional Thai food. So how do you find the same Thai food that Thai people eat? Well, that can be a problem especially for the first-time visitor.

The biggest obstacle is that the menus are almost always in Thai. So unless you can read Thai or have a Thai friend, you may have no idea of what the restaurant offers. The second obstacle is your

perception of cleanliness. Thais often eat at places that farang tourists would never dream of eating. A restaurant looks dirty (and often is) and so an assumption is made that you'll get sick if you eat there. Lastly, tourists tend to dine where they see other tourists dining. So farang tourists tend to stick to restaurants that serve Westernized Thai food to their Western patrons.



Som Tom. A very popular Thai dish that's made from shredded green papaya, peanuts, tomatoes, and other vegetables. Som Tom can be very spicy.

If you ask a farang tourist where's a good place to eat, you'll just be led to another Westernized Thai restaurant. (Did you really come all the way to Thailand to do that?)

But wait...even the most novice tourist can easily find authentic Thai food if you choose to do so. First, look around. If the patrons are mostly Thai and the menu is in Thai you're at an authentic Thai restaurant-duh! If it's crowded, you're probably at a place that serves good Thai food. The menu riddle. Thai food, especially lunch dishes, are often prepared in the open at the front of a restaurant. Go look and see what's cooking.

Most Thai restaurants specialize in just a few dishes so you can see very quickly what's on the menu. The cleanliness issue: Use common sense! Again, with many Thai restaurants you can watch them prepare the food. And if lots of people are eating there, that's a good indicator that people aren't

getting sick. Just make sure the food is well cooked and your chances of getting sick are about the same as in the U.S.



Hamoke Talay is a traditional seafood entre made with coconut milk.

Street Vendors

Street vendors are an easy way to try traditional Thai food. I've eaten at countless vendor stands all across Thailand and I've never gotten sick. You can easily see what they offer so the Thai menu issue is solved. You can usually watch them cook your food. And the price is always right.

Like everything in life, some vendors are good and some not so good. Whether you're hungry or not, you should get in the habit of walking up to the food vendors and looking at their fare. You'll see some very interesting dishes and learn a lot about the traditions of Thailand.



A street vendor stall in Chinatown, Bangkok serving up an array of deserts.

A Last Thought

Nothing will endear you more to a Thai person than trying and liking their food. This love to stare at us farangs while we eat. I've gotten used to it. The easiest way to pierce the cultural veil and enter "Old

Siam” is through the stomach.

Category

1. Thai Food is Thai Culture

Tags

1. thai food
2. Thailand
3. Thai Culture

Date Created

April 2016

Author

jeffcgallagher

default watermark