

Khao Chae - Essential of Thai Summer Dishes

Every Summer it seems as though everybody in Thailand is sweltering in the hot sun and getting ready for the Songkran water throwing festival. Gourmet Thai cooks are busy preparing their special cool-off dish called "Khao Chae", rice soaked in scented water and topped with ice.

Eating rice in cold water may sound just as appealing to people, not so accustomed to eating rice, as eating bread soaked in orange juice. It is an acquired taste and one is hardly expected to like it at the first try.

Connoisseurs, however, cannot wait to eat their first "Khao Chae" of the year. This dish usually appears on the menu around the end of March and disappears at the arrival of the rainy season. It is strictly a luncheon dish which makes it doubly popular because lunch time in Bangkok is every working man's and woman's highlight of the day. One can almost feel the sweet state of anticipation in the restaurants that put up their signs a week before, announcing the forthcoming arrival of this summertime specialty.

As the preparation which goes into the making of the side dishes to be eaten with this rice is very time consuming, few restaurants serve it, and the ones that do can make only a limited amount a day. For this reason people who set their hearts and souls upon eating Khao Chae usually reserve it in advance in order not to be disappointed should they arrive at the restaurant and find it all sold out. Otherwise, the thing to do is to arrive really early before the other customers spill out of their offices into the restaurant.

This rice is so special because it is a seasonal dish, something you have to wait for and before you get a chance to get tired of it the season is already over. Also, people who like to try out different kinds of food realize that something as refined and difficult to make as Khao Chae will eventually disappear from the eating scene, leaving room for dishes that can be churned out fast. In private homes, unless you have a fully equipped kitchen, nobody will bother to sit down and make it. What's more, if you order it in - restaurants (hotel coffee shops don't have it) it is reasonably priced. One set of Khao Chae which includes rice served in scented water with jasmine and rose petals floating in it plus six or seven side dishes fried onions stuffed with flaky white fish, green pepper stuffed with pork wrapped in a light net made of eggs, shredded crispy beef, shrimp paste mixed with fish and ginger and formed into little balls then dipped in batter and fried, fried salted egg, and shredded preserved cabbage stir-fried with eggs -- costs only between 40 to 60 baht (US\$2-\$3) depending on how elaborate and generous the portion.

Nobody knows for sure who actually thought up the idea of eating rice in cold water. Perhaps someone accidentally knocked over a glass of iced water into his rice, ate it, and decided that it was quite refreshing after all. As far as I can remember, it has always been there in the summertime just like the Songkran water festival.

About the Author

Vipp Rongsit is an editor specialize in Thai food & Thai recipes.

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