

## Thai Food and Unique Flavours

Awag Once described Thai food as "having three tastes: hot, hotter, and hottest." As anyone who has ever inadvertently bitten into one of the tiny green or yellow chillies that lie concealed in many dishes can attest, there is a degree of truth in the observation. But only a degree. True connoisseurs would quickly add that it also has an infinite variety of other flavours, both assertive and subtle, which collectively make it one of Asia's most distinctive cuisines.

China, India, Java, even far-off Portugal have exerted an influence on Thai cooking over the centuries, bringing with them certain spices and herbs and other ingredients. Some of these, mainly Chinese, were incorporated almost unchanged: most, however, underwent gradual alteration to meet local tastes, ultimately emerging as something uniquely Thai.

Once known only to a comparative handful of travelers who came to the source. Thai food is currently enjoying an international vogue. There are reportedly more than 200 Thai restaurants in Los Angeles alone, and numerous others are to be found in London, New York, Paris, and almost every other major city in the world where Thai students gather. The cuisine has been "discovered" by various food magazines and articles written in praise of its exotic flavours.

What produces the wide range of tastes that one perceives in the assorted curries, soups, salads, snacks, and sweets cooked Thai style? For the answer, let us look at the extraordinary array of herbs, spices, and other ingredients that the average Thai cook would regard as essential, some bought from the nearest market but many picked fresh from the garden. Of the fresh seasonings, undoubtedly the most celebrated are the chillies. These are not, a novice might suppose, limited to one or two varieties, scarcely distinguishable from each other. In fact, perhaps a dozen different kinds of chillies play a part in Thai cooking, varying considerably in both flavours and potency.

The most explosive is the smallest, a yellow-orange bombshell known as "phrik khi nu luang". closely followed by a green variety called "phrik khi nu" ( which, translated literally, means "rat dropping"; the name deriving from its shape.) An encounter with one of these half-inch terrors can make a strong man rush for the nearest glass of beer, but no true lover of Thai food would dispense with them in certain dishes. A number of larger chillies, several degrees milder, are also used when a less aggressive flavour is called for. Green peppercorns find their way into some mean dishes, particularly those involving game.

Equally ubiquitous are the aromatic leaves of the coriander plant (phak chi) sprinkled lavishly on just about everything from soups to curries. One foreign resident, less addicted to the flavour than most Thais, swears he was once served a coriander garnished bowl of ice cream: but this experience, if true, must be regarded as an aberration.

Numerous other fresh plants are also added to Thai food for flavouring purposes. Lemon grass (takhrai) lends a delicate citron taste to several of the most distinctive soups as well as to some salads, and the leaves of the Kaffir lime (bai makrut) are used for a similar purpose in certain curries. For a long time, these two basic Thai seasonings were virtually unobtainable in Western countries, and countless travelers carried a leaf or two to homesick friends living abroad; now, thanks to the growing popularity of Thai restaurants, they can frequently be found in specialty markets in many of the world's major cities.

## About the Author

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