

# The Vibrant Art of Thai Cooking

Sparkling fresh flavors, textures, and colors make a Thai dinner shine

BY ARUN SAMPANTHAVIVAT



*Bright, pungent ingredients unite in Hot and Sour Soup, yet they retain their distinctive flavors, colors, and shapes. Lemongrass, galangal (Thai ginger), kaffir lime leaves, cilantro, and pickled plum make the soup tart, lemony, and aromatic.*

Photos: Suzanne Roman

**A**t its heart, Thai food is about the interplay of distinct flavors, colors, and textures. Each dish is composed from a palate of fresh herbs, crunchy vegetables, pungent spices, subtle flavorings, and tender meats and seafood. Like a gallery, the meal itself displays a beautiful variety of dishes. Artful presentation makes the first impression, then follows a balance of distinct and delicate flavors. The meal for six people that I present here demonstrates the principles of balance and variety so important in Thai cooking. It includes a light, crisp salad, a tart soup, nourishing stir-fry noodles, grilled meat, and sautéed vegetables.

### WHY THAI FOOD IS SO POPULAR

The rapid growth in popularity of Thai food in the United States doesn't surprise me. American diners are now looking beyond Chinese food and other familiar ethnic cuisines. America's growing taste for spiciness, shown by the popularity of Cajun and Mexican food, has helped prepare Americans for the bold flavors of Thai food. The growing emphasis on freshness makes Thai food all the more appealing because central to it are fresh herbs and vegetables. Finally, authentic Thai cookery is now possible in America because Thai ingredients are becoming more available (see Sources on p. 22). The recent influx of Southeast Asians into American cities has created markets for exotic herbs, vegetables, and condiments that you couldn't find before. As a foreign student studying in America ten years ago, I had to grow a potted kaffir lime tree in the window of my small apartment because the leaves, needed in many Thai dishes, were simply not available. Today the kaffir lime leaves I use in my restaurant are grown in Florida and California.

### DISTINCTIVE THAI FLAVORS

The vibrant character of Thai food comes from carefully balancing hot, sweet, sour, and bitter flavors both within a dish and within a meal. Thai cooks rarely use recipes; instead they taste and make adjustments as they go.

Thai cooking glories in the use of fresh herbs. Fresh herbs have delicate overtones of flavor that are lost when the herbs are dried. With fresh herbs, the flavors not only permeate the dish, but also remain in the tissue of the leaf itself—you get a burst of flavor when you bite into the herb. Cilantro, also known in the U.S. as fresh coriander or Chinese parsley, is cooked in some dishes and used raw in salads and as a garnish. Its flavor is prominent in the Spicy Shrimp Salad, accompanied by fresh mint (recipe p. 23). Fresh basil is also important in Thai cooking. While the Roasted Eggplant with Shrimp and Basil (recipe p. 24) tastes the most authentic

when made with Thai basil, which has an anise flavor, the more readily available sweet basil used in Italian cooking is a good substitute.

Lemongrass and kaffir lime leaves both have an aromatic, lemony flavor that perfumes many Thai dishes. Lemongrass is a long, slender, multilayered, pale-green stalk usually as thick as a finger (see photo on p. 22). Only the first couple of inches near the root end are juicy enough to use. If the outer layers look dry and brown, peel them off to reveal the green layers inside. Since lemongrass is fibrous and tough, you need to slice it extremely thin before adding it to dishes in which it will be eaten raw, like the Spicy Shrimp Salad. When you're going to steep it in liquids, like the broth for Hot and Sour Soup (recipe p. 24), you can cut it into thicker slices because it isn't meant to be eaten. Kaffir lime leaves impart a pungent, lemon-lime flavor. Often packaged in plastic bags by the branch, kaffir lime leaves are sold both fresh and frozen. These tough leaves are sliced fine to toss in the Spicy Shrimp Salad or just torn to simmer in the Hot and Sour Soup.

Two kinds of ginger are used in Thai cooking: common ginger (the ginger usually found in supermarkets), and a type that's harder to find, called galangal, Thai ginger, or laos (see photo on p. 22). Though cousins, galangal and ginger have different flavors and shouldn't be used interchangeably. Galangal has a more aromatic, almost medicinal flavor and has none of the bite of common ginger. I use thick slices of galangal in Hot and Sour Soup.

Most Thai dishes incorporate fresh chiles. Thai chiles are red, small, and very hot. If you can't find them, serrano peppers are more commonly available in American supermarkets and are a good substitute. If serranos aren't available, use the larger jalapeño chiles. Much of the hotness of chiles is in the seeds, so leave them in to produce hotter dishes, or remove the seeds to moderate the heat.

Coconut is the backdrop of many Thai dishes, especially curries. In this meal, I use coconut milk in the marinade for the Pork Satay and in the Peanut Dipping Sauce (recipes pp. 23–24), where it is mixed with Massaman curry paste, one of the many pastes

### MENU

*Spicy Shrimp Salad (Sang-Wa)\**



*Pork Satay with Peanut Dipping Sauce and Cucumber Salad (Moo Satay)\**



*Hot and Sour Soup (Tom Yum Kai)\**



*Roasted Eggplant with Shrimp and Basil (Makhua Song Kruang)\**



*Bangkok-Style Glass Noodles (Phad Wunsen)\**



*Jasmine Rice (Khao Horm Mali)*



*Sliced Mangos (Mamuang)*

*\* recipe follows*

used to flavor Thai dishes. Canned coconut milk is easy to find and fine to use for this dish because it's one ingredient among many, so absolute freshness of flavor is less important.

Fish sauce and soy sauce supply a salty flavor. Made from fermented fish, fish sauce, or *nam pla*, can take some getting used to. Use a high-quality Thai brand, such as Tipparos, because lower-quality fish sauces tend to be overly salty. Along with the regular type of soy sauce commonly found in the U.S., Thai cooking also uses a dark soy sauce, called *see-wee dum*, and a dark, sweet soy sauce, called *see-wee wan*. (Dragonfly is a good brand for both types.) I like to use these darker soy sauces to enhance the color of a dish and to give it a slightly sweet overtone. You'll notice that the transparent noodles in the Bangkok-Style Glass Noodles (recipe p. 25) take on the color of the dark soy sauce.

### SOURCES FOR THAI INGREDIENTS

#### Anzen Importers

736 N.E. MLK Jr. Blvd., Portland, OR 97232  
503/233-5111

#### K. Kalustyan's

123 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10016  
212/685-3451

#### Oriental Food Market & Cooking School

2801 W. Howard St., Chicago, IL 60645  
312/274-2826

#### The Oriental Pantry

423 Great Rd. (2A), Acton, MA 01720  
800/828-0368

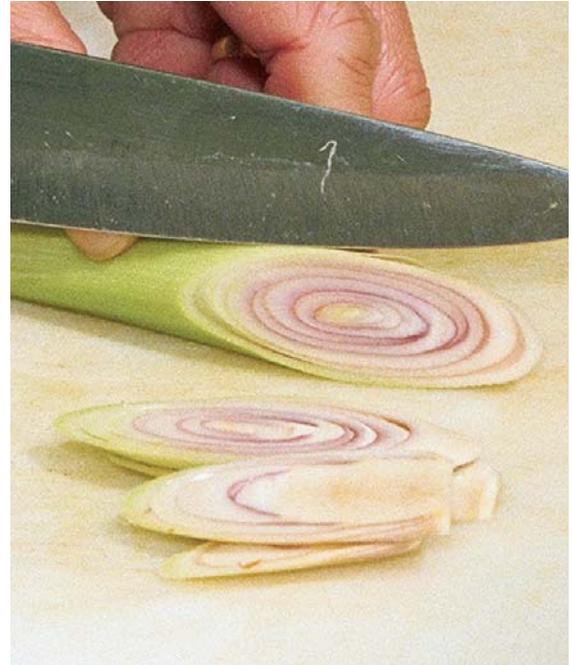
#### Spice Merchant

PO Box 524, Jackson Hole, WY 83001  
800/551-5999

In Thailand, street vendors sell pickled plums, pickled mangoes, and other pickled fruits special to the region from their pushcarts. Though Thais don't use pickling as a means for preserving food as extensively as the Japanese or Koreans, we do like the sweet and sour dimension pickled fruits and vegetables add to a dish. Pickled plum gives the Hot and Sour Soup a little more tang, while cloves of pickled garlic are delightful to bite into in the Bangkok-Style Glass Noodles.

Lime juice and tamarind juice also contribute a tart and sour flavor to many Thai dishes. Tamarind juice is made from the sticky pulp inside the pods from a tamarind tree. Sometimes you'll find these light-brown, papery pods at Latin American or Asian markets, but more often you'll find dark-brown blocks of compressed tamarind pulp from the pods. To make tamarind juice from tamarind pods or blocks of tamarind pulp, dissolve the pulp in hot water and strain out the seeds to get a liquid the color and consistency of soy sauce.

Many ingredients used in Thai cooking are becoming increasingly available in large supermarkets and specialty food stores in the United States, particularly in large urban areas. Asian markets are, of course, a good source for many Thai ingredients. There are mail-order sources for dried and canned ingredients (see Sources above), but for the fresh



*The flavor of lemongrass is subtle, but the texture is tough. Thickly sliced lemongrass, above, is too tough to eat, but when steeped in the Hot and Sour Soup, it imparts a delicate lemon flavor. To make lemongrass easier to chew, cut the fibers short by slicing the stalk into thin rounds.*



*Galangal looks similar to common ginger, but the taste is pure Thai. Its aromatic, menthol flavor gives a distinctive character to Thai dishes.*

ingredients, you'll have to see what you can find locally. If you can't find an ingredient or a good substitute, prepare the dish without it and adjust the other flavorings to compensate. There are no rules in Thai cooking—taste and adjust the ingredients according to what's at hand and to suit your tastes.

### PUTTING TOGETHER A THAI MEAL

Fresh, bright flavors, balance, variety, and pleasing presentation are the keys to a satisfying Thai meal. The dishes I've chosen for a six-person dinner have a good mix of flavors—hot, spicy, sour, bitter, sweet; and a lot of contrasting textures—crisp, soft, and

### **Straight shrimp.**

For a nicer presentation, keep the shrimp from curling as it cooks by inserting a bamboo skewer through its length.



**Strong-flavored herbs and vegetables strike a balance with mild shrimp.** Cilantro, mint, and kaffir lime leaves mix with slivers of lemongrass, ginger, scallions, and chile pepper to form a Spicy Shrimp Salad (recipe at left).

chewy. The Pork Satay, with its accompanying curry-flavored dipping sauce and cucumber salad, is the one dish that is predominantly meat. In the Spicy Shrimp Salad, the big, bright flavors of chile peppers, fresh mint, and cilantro balance the mild shrimp, which are doused with a sour marinade. The tart, aromatic broth in the Hot and Sour Soup makes your mouth tingle, while the Bangkok-Style Glass Noodles have a milder, more soothing flavor. Finally, the Roasted Eggplant with Shrimp and Basil has a tender, saucy, smoky quality not found in the other dishes.

Serve all the dishes at the same time, presented family-style in platters and bowls. Have the diners serve themselves small tastes from each dish throughout the meal, rather than larger portions at the beginning. Serve plenty of rice with the meal—my favorite is fragrant Jasmine rice, which you can also find in Asian groceries. Forks and spoons are the preferred eating utensils in Thailand.

Though not really served as a separate course, desserts are also eaten at the end of a meal in Thailand. I like to serve fresh fruit, such as mango, nicely sliced and arranged. Thai custards and dessert soups, lightly sweet and delicate in flavor, are also wonderful.

### **SPICY SHRIMP SALAD**

The sweet shrimp balances brightly flavored herbs and vegetables and hot chile peppers. The dish comes together quickly once the vegetables are chopped. *Serves six.*

**3 Tbs. lime juice**

**2 Tbs. fish sauce**

**Salt**

**Sugar**

**12 raw jumbo or colossal shrimp, in their shells, heads off**

**2 Tbs. thinly sliced lemongrass**

**2 Tbs. peeled and finely julienned ginger (common)**

**3 to 4 chile peppers (Thai, serrano, or jalapeño), seeded and cut in fine julienne**

**2 scallions (white parts and some green), in julienne**

**½ cup loosely packed cilantro leaves**

**¼ cup finely julienned red bell pepper**

**¼ cup coarsely chopped fresh mint leaves**

**4 shallots or 1 medium onion, sliced thin**

**4 kaffir lime leaves, in extremely fine julienne**

**Paprika (optional)**

**1 Tbs. chopped chives**

**12 bamboo skewers**

Heat a small pot of water in which to poach the shrimp.

In a large bowl, combine the lime juice and fish sauce and add a pinch of salt and sugar. Set this dressing aside.

To keep the shrimp from curling during cooking, pierce each one lengthwise from tail to head with a bamboo skewer (see photo above left). Poach the shrimp in barely simmering water until the shrimp is just cooked through and opaque, about 3 min. Remove the skewers and peel the shells off the shrimp, leaving the last segment of the shell near the tail and the tail itself intact. Slice the back of each shrimp and remove the dark intestinal tract by scraping it out with the tip of a knife. Place the shrimp in the dressing and toss to coat.

Add to the shrimp the lemongrass, ginger, chile peppers, scallions, cilantro, red pepper, mint, shallots, kaffir lime leaves, and, if you like, a dash of paprika. Toss well to combine the ingredients and garnish with the chives.

### **PORK SATAY WITH PEANUT DIPPING SAUCE AND CUCUMBER SALAD**

Except for the final grilling of the marinated meat, this dish can be prepared in advance. Serve the skewers of meat on a plate with the peanut dipping sauce and cucumber salad in separate bowls on the side. *Serves six.*

#### **PORK SATAY:**

**1 pork tenderloin, about 1½ lb.**

**½ tsp. ground coriander**

**½ tsp. ground cumin**

**1 Tbs. melted butter**

**1 Tbs. unsweetened coconut milk (canned is fine)**

**1 Tbs. vegetable oil**

**1 tsp. paprika**

**1 tsp. ground turmeric**

**½ tsp. curry powder**

**1½ Tbs. fish sauce**

**1 tsp. sugar**

**12 bamboo skewers, 6 in. long**

Cut the tenderloin in half so that you have two pieces about 5 in long. Trim off the fat and square the edges. Slice



**Tender pork satay to dip in peanut sauce.**

Lean pork tenderloin is sliced and marinated in curry spices and then grilled until golden brown (recipe begins on p. 23). Cool, sweet-and-sour cucumber salad is a nice foil.

To slice pork tenderloin evenly, apply light pressure on top of the meat, and be sure to keep the knife horizontal to the cutting board. Chilling the meat first will make it even easier to slice.



the meat lengthwise into ¼-in.-thick strips (see photo above). The pork will be easier to slice if you first chill it in the freezer for about an hour.

Prepare the marinade by thoroughly blending all the ingredients except the pork in a large bowl. Add the pork, toss until well coated, and marinate in the refrigerator for 30 to 60 min. Meanwhile, soak the skewers in cold water so they don't burn when you grill the meat.

Insert a skewer lengthwise through the middle of each piece of meat. Cook the skewered pork either on a grill, under the broiler, or in a frying pan over high heat until the outside is lightly charred but the inside is still tender and moist.

**PEANUT DIPPING SAUCE:**

Massaman curry paste gives the peanut dipping sauce a wonderful curry flavor. My favorite brand is Mae Sui, though other good brands are available at Asian markets. If Massa-

man curry paste isn't available, you can use a red curry paste instead, but don't substitute a curry powder. I like to use smooth Jif peanut butter in this sauce. *Makes 1¾ cups.*

- 1 Tbs. Massaman curry paste
- ½ cup smooth peanut butter
- 1½ cups unsweetened coconut milk
- 1 Tbs. sugar

In a small saucepan, mix together all the ingredients. Simmer over low heat for 20 to 30 min. until the flavors are well blended. Serve warm or at room temperature. This sauce will keep for several weeks in the refrigerator.

**CUCUMBER SALAD:**

- ¼ cup sugar
- 1 tsp. salt
- ½ cup rice vinegar
- 4 pickling cucumbers (or 2 regular cucumbers), quartered lengthwise, seeded, and sliced thin
- 1 shallot, sliced thin
- A few whole cilantro leaves
- A few strips of finely julienned red bell pepper (½ in. long)

In a small saucepan, simmer the sugar and salt in the rice vinegar until dissolved, about 5 min. Let the mixture cool to room temperature and stir in the cucumbers and shallot. Sprinkle cilantro leaves and red pepper on top to decorate.

**HOT AND SOUR SOUP**

This soup is full of contrasting flavors and colors (see photo on p. 20). Look for pickled plum, lemongrass, galangal, kaffir lime leaves, and tamarind in Asian markets. If you can't get some of the ingredients, make the soup without them. *Serves six.*

- 3 skinless, boneless chicken breast halves
- 6 cups chicken stock (homemade or canned low-salt)
- 2 to 3 chile peppers (Thai, serrano, or jalapeño)
- 2 shallots
- 1 in. galangal, peeled and cut into ⅛-in. slices
- 1 stalk lemongrass, sliced thick
- 2 tsp. tamarind pulp dissolved in 1 Tbs. hot water
- ¾ cup canned straw mushrooms, halved; or sliced fresh mushrooms
- 2 pieces pickled plum
- 3 to 4 kaffir lime leaves, torn halfway through
- 2 cherry tomatoes, quartered
- 1 cup loosely packed cilantro leaves
- 2 tsp. minced scallion (white only)
- 2 Tbs. freshly squeezed lime juice
- 2 to 4 Tbs. fish sauce

To help the chicken pieces hold their shape in the soup, first sear the whole breasts on both sides in a nonstick frying pan over medium-high heat. Cut the chicken into 1-in. cubes.

Bring the chicken stock to a boil in a saucepan over medium heat. Crush the chiles and shallots just enough to release their oils by pressing them against a cutting board with the flat part of a chef's knife. Add them to the stock, along with the galangal, lemongrass, tamarind juice, mushrooms, pickled plum, kaffir lime leaves, cherry tomatoes, and chicken. Bring the stock to a boil and let it simmer until all the ingredients are heated thoroughly and the chicken is cooked (about 4 min.).

Right before serving, if you like, remove the tough lemongrass, galangal, kaffir lime leaves, and chile peppers. Add the cilantro, scallion, and lime juice. Season to taste with the fish sauce.

**ROASTED EGGPLANT WITH SHRIMP AND BASIL**

The smoky, roasted flavor of the eggplant is a nice foil to the basil in this dish. Long, slender Thai or Japanese egg-

plant work best because they cook quickly, have fewer seeds, and taste less bitter than the more common plump eggplant. *Serves six.*

**6 Thai or Japanese eggplant, 6 to 8 in. long**  
 1/3 cup vegetable oil  
 1 Tbs. minced garlic  
 4 shallots, sliced thin  
 1/2 cup chopped cilantro  
 9 small raw shrimp, peeled, deveined, and halved  
 1/2 cup water  
 1 tsp. brown fermented bean sauce or miso  
 2 Tbs. soy sauce or fish sauce  
 3 to 4 chile peppers (Thai, serrano, or jalapeño), seeded and cut in fine julienne  
 1 small red bell pepper, julienned  
 1 Tbs. sugar  
 2 cups loosely packed basil leaves (Thai or sweet)

Char the skins of each whole eggplant under a broiler, on a grill, or in a frying pan, turning the eggplant as each side blackens. When cool enough to handle, pull the skin off. Slice each eggplant lengthwise halfway through. Spread open the sides of each eggplant to form a container and arrange them on a serving plate.

Heat the oil in a wok or large, heavy frying pan over medium heat. Add the garlic and stir until it just begins to color. Stir in the shallots and 1 Tbs. cilantro. Add the shrimp and water and stir well. Stir in the fermented bean sauce, soy sauce, chile peppers, red pepper, sugar, and basil. Lower the heat and simmer briefly, until the shrimp is cooked, about 2 min. Pour the shrimp and sauce over the eggplant. Garnish with the rest of the cilantro.

### **BANGKOK-STYLE GLASS NOODLES**

The dried glass noodles called for in this recipe are thin, brittle, milky-white noodles made from mung bean starch. They're usually sold in small bundles. The lily buds, cloud ear mushrooms, and pickled garlic add an authentic note to this popular Bangkok dish, but by all means make this stir-fry even if you can't find these ingredients. *Serves six.*

**6 oz. dried glass noodles (also called cellophane noodles, mung bean thread noodles, or Chinese vermicelli)**  
 1/2 cup dried lily buds (also called golden needles)  
 1/2 Tbs. dried cloud ear mushrooms  
 1/2 cup vegetable oil  
 1 Tbs. minced garlic  
 1 cup thinly sliced raw chicken breast (about 1/3 lb.)  
 Salt  
 3 eggs  
 1/2 cup julienned celery, cut 2-in. long  
 1 cup finely shredded green cabbage  
 1/2 cup finely julienned carrots, cut 2-in. long  
 1 Tbs. dark soy sauce (see-ewe dum), or sweet soy sauce (see-ewe wan)  
 3 heads sweet pickled garlic or 3 heads roasted garlic, sliced thick horizontally  
 1/4 cup soy sauce  
 1 tsp. white pepper  
 2 tsp. sugar  
 2 cups chicken stock (homemade or canned low-salt)  
 1/4 cup thinly sliced scallion (white and green parts), sliced on an angle  
 Cilantro sprigs for garnish  
 A few strips of julienned red bell pepper for garnish

Soak the dried glass noodles and lily buds separately in warm water, and the cloud ear mushrooms in hot water, for 30 min. Drain well.

Heat the oil over high heat in a wok or large, heavy frying pan. Add the garlic and stir until it begins to color, then stir in the chicken and a dash of salt. After a minute, push

the chicken to the sides of the wok and crack the eggs into the center of the pan. Scramble the eggs briefly, and then spoon the runny eggs onto the sides of the pan so that they cook thinly and quickly. Once the eggs have set, scrape them down and add the soaked noodles (cut them in half if they're very long), lily buds, cloud ears, celery, cabbage, carrots, dark soy sauce, pickled garlic, soy sauce, white pepper, and sugar, stirring well after each addition.

Stir in the chicken stock and mix well. The stock should be absorbed fairly quickly, within 2 to 3 min. Continue cooking and stirring until the noodles are clear and glossy.

Remove from heat and stir in the sliced scallion. Place on a serving plate and garnish with cilantro sprigs and red pepper.

*Arun Sampanthavivat, originally from the southern peninsula of Thailand, paints and writes poetry when he's not busy running his Chicago restaurant, "Arun's." ♦*



**Carrots and squash become roses in hands skilled in the Thai art of vegetable carving. Because "food meets the eye before it meets the mouth," Roasted Eggplant with Shrimp and Basil is even more appealing when presented with these decorations.**

**Bangkok's favorite noodles.** After a half-hour soak in water, dried glass noodles, lily buds, and cloud ear mushrooms are quickly stir-fried with chicken, eggs, slivered vegetables and pickled garlic to make Bangkok-Style Glass Noodles (recipe at left).

