Thai Egg-Based Sweets
The Legend of Thao Thong Keap-Ma

The Sisters of Thum Rue

The sun has not yet risen when a woman in a crisply ironed white blouse and bright, flowered sarong jumps on her motorcycle and heads to a nearby village to buy fresh duck eggs. She returns a couple of hours later, riding slowly through the gate to guide the motorcycle behind several pickup trucks in the yard. Loosening the thick twine that fastens a turquoise basket brimming with eggs to the back of the motorcycle, she carries the basket over to a water faucet and squats down. One by one she washes the duck eggs and gently places them in a large bowl. Several are cracked, but these she simply wipes with her wet hands and places them in a separate bowl. When all of the eggs are washed, she dries each one with a cloth.

This woman, Chuoy, lives with her older sister, Shun, in Thum Rue, a small village located a few hours from both Bangkok and Ayutthaya, Thailand’s ancient capital. The sisters were born and raised here in their ancestral home in the province of Petchburi, which is famous for palm sugar and coconut. Chuoy is in her late fifties; Shun, in her late sixties. They are the best dessert makers in the region.

Shun now takes the bowl of clean eggs to a large cemented area underneath the house. This airy, open space is used not only for cooking, but also for eating and for receiving guests. Sitting on a low wooden stool, she cracks the eggs one by one to separate the yolks from the whites, with her finger scraping the last bit of albumen from the shells into a separate bowl. The albumen, called nam kai or “egg liquid,” is believed to add resiliency and shine to desserts.

She mixes the yolks and the albumen with her hands until the thick liquid is smooth, then strains the mixture through a thin, white cotton cloth, wringing out each precious drop into a bowl. Next, mounds of sugar—one large bowl after another—are added to the egg yolks. Again, she mixes and blends with her hands until the sugar is completely dissolved and the ingredients transformed into a silken, golden liquid.

Next she fills a large, wok-like skillet of bronze with equal amounts of sugar and water. She lights the propane paddle, drawing wide circles in the skillet until steam begins to rise and large, syrupy bubbles form. Shun lowers the flame, leaving the liquid to simmer, then reaches for a bowl of fresh jasmine blossoms and scatters them over the hot syrup. The air is suddenly heavy with the sweet, intoxicating scent of bruised blossoms. Shun ladles a portion of the perfumed syrup into a metal bowl and sets it aside to cool. She spoons a drop or two of the still-simmering syrup into dozens of tiny white porcelain cups that sit in neat rows on a large metal tray.

A teaspoon or so of the reserved syrup goes into a small saucer. Shun tops this syrup with a few spoonfuls of the thick egg-yolk mixture, which spreads over the saucer. She gently slides the syrup and golden batter into the skillet of hot syrup. It slips into the sugary bath, sinking to the bottom as it hardens and expands, then magically glides to the surface, emerging like a golden sun. Shun flips the disk, then removes it to the bowl of cool syrup. After a minute, she carefully fits each hardened disk into a porcelain cup, gently pushing at the center, which caves into the bottom as the syrup oozes up from the sides. Using a thin bamboo skewer, she tucks and shapes the warm outer rim of the golden disk, transforming it into a blossom with three clover-like petals.

Shun has just made thong yib, or “Pick Up Gold,” one of four Thai egg-based desserts. No traditional Thai ceremony or celebration would be complete without these sweet treasures, whose golden color symbolizes victory and wealth, and whose sugary taste promises sweetness and happiness. At Thai weddings, four out of nine sweets are egg-based. Thong yib helps the newlyweds acquire great fortune by picking up gold and silver; thong yawd (teardrop-shaped golden drops) symbolize a sweet marriage; foy thong (vermicelli-like golden fluff) augurs a long and happy married life; and med khanoon (bean-paste-filled jackfruit seed) portends a life of mutual respect and support (the name is a pun on the word noon, meaning “to support”).
These sweets have not always been made in Thailand. The most traditional Thai desserts were made of rice flour, glutinous rice grains, salt, palm sugar, and grated coconut, and perfumed with jasmine blossoms, pandan (Pandanus amaryllifolius), or scented smoke. Slaked lime was used for leavening, and palm sugar for sweetening, since refined sugar was expensive and available only to wealthy aristocrats and foreigners. Most sweets were given affectionate names to honor simple things in nature, such as “frog egg” or “floating lotus.” But in the seventeenth century Thai desserts began to change as foreigners settled in what was then known as Siam. The foreigners’ new desserts inspired the Siamese to use coconut cream in place of the dairy cream used in the foreign recipes. Until then, coconut cream had mainly been used for making keang (stew-like) dishes. New recipes for sweets often substituted coconut cream for dairy cream and called for a combination of refined sugar and palm sugar. Another innovation the Europeans brought to Siam was the use of eggs in cooking, particularly to make sweets. Baking and deep-frying were also introduced and gradually became a part of the Siamese culinary repertoire.

Egg-based desserts have been made in Thailand for over four centuries now. The sisters of Thum Rue learned how to make them from the women in their family, who have prepared these sweets in the time-honored way for generations. Although the sisters go to market on a motorcycle instead of walking; cook with a gas stove instead of a charcoal brazier; and use unbreakable plastic bowls instead of fragile earthenware, they follow the same methods that were used when these desserts were first introduced to Thailand.

The Tale of Marie Guimard

These exquisite golden sweets have a dramatic history. It is a tale of wealth and influence, torture and execution, slavery and redemption. The story begins in the seventeenth century during the reign of King Narai the Great, who ruled Siam from 1657 to 1688.

In those days Siam was overrun with foreign explorers. Emissaries from Portugal, France, Spain, England, and the Netherlands arrived with a spirit of discovery and a desire to trade, convert, and most of all, to conquer. Siam was considered a magnificent prize. While other Asian countries, such as the Spice Islands and Java, were being swallowed up by the Europeans, King Narai ruled Siam with intelligence and cunning. He was neither repelled by the foreigners’ strange manners nor afraid of their military superiority. He welcomed the foreigners as guests, holding frequent audiences and receptions for envoys, tradesmen, and missionaries in order to better understand their governments and politics. He wisely used trade favors to maintain a precarious political balance among the competing European nations.

During this period Siam was known as Ayutthaya (or Ayuttiya, Ayudya, Judia), the name of its ancient capital where the royal court was located. Shaped like the sole of a man’s foot, the city of Ayutthaya lay near the Gulf of Siam. According to the Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya, the city was fairly large and not heavily populated, with fertile land planted in gardens and orchards. Part of the city’s west side was designated for European settlement. There the Europeans built houses in the manner of their homelands. Along the road toward the royal court in the northern part of the region, and separate from the European area, thrived communities of tradesmen and craftsmen, mostly of Chinese, Indian, and Middle Eastern descent. These foreign communities generally did not mix, although many foreigners intermarried with the Siamese.

Within this international community there lived a woman by the name of Marie Guimard (also variously referred to as Madame Marie Guimard, Marie Gimard, Guyomar de Pinha, and Madame Constance), whose story is closely tied to the history of egg-based sweets in Thailand.

Guimard was born in Ayutthaya in 1664. Her mother came from a Japanese family of “hidden Christians,” who, in order to escape persecution, worshipped Mary disguised as a female Buddha. As some of the first Japanese aristocrats to be baptized by Saint Francis Xavier, the Jesuit priest who introduced Christianity to Japan in 1549, Guimard’s family was highly regarded. But in 1598 a new shogun took power and forbade the practice of religions other than Buddhism. Many Christian feudal lords were deported to Southeast Asia, Marie Guimard’s ancestors among them. Her family settled first in Cuchin (Vietnam) in 1614 and eventually moved to Siam, where commercial prospects were more favorable.

Guimard’s mother, Ursula Yamada, although a devout Christian, reputedly gave birth to several children of mixed races, including one from a relationship with a Jesuit priest. Somewhere along the way, Ursula Yamada married a half-Bengali, half-Japanese man named Master Phanick, Marie’s father. At the age of eighteen, Marie married Constance Phaulcon (also referred to as Constans Hierachy, Phaulkon, and Falcon), a forty-two-year-old foreigner who served as King Narai’s Foreign Minister. Born in Kefalonia, Greece, in 1647, Phaulcon had run away to sea at the age of twelve, working for the East India Company, which brought him to Southeast Asia. When he arrived in Siam, he left the company and tried to make it on his own, but without success. He ultimately entered into the service of the First Minister...
of Siam. Through perseverance, cleverness, and linguistic ability in both the Thai and court languages, Phaulcon worked his way up through the hierarchy to eventually become the most influential foreigner in King Narai's court. In 1683 the King appointed him Foreign Minister, and he was given the Siamese name Vichayen, “Giver of Victory,” and the title of Chaophraya (Lord).

Until meeting Marie Guimard, Phaulcon had a reputation as a rake. But his future bride, a devout Catholic, convinced him to change his ways, and he converted to Catholicism. They were married in May, 1682, in a Portuguese church in Ayutthaya. During their brief, six-year marriage, they were among the most powerful foreign couples in Siam. Phaulcon was the King’s most valued counselor. As for Marie Guimard, she was the only foreigner trusted to enter the inner sanctum of the Princess Queen, King Narai’s only daughter.3

But both the Siamese and the foreigners considered Phaulcon’s displays of wealth and power ostentatious. Phaulcon and Marie Guimard maintained two homes, one in Ayutthaya and another in Louvo (Lopburi), both of which Phaulcon himself had designed. The Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya describe one of the homes as “a large, square, brick mansion with brick buildings and a glass-style wall surrounding the residence…he had various other picu-style brick buildings, brick buildings for elephants, and Western-style buildings built in great numbers nearby, close to the Monastery of the Gun.”4

Like the other Europeans, Phaulcon and Marie Guimard maintained a Western-style household, especially when it came to food. Regular shipments from Europe and Asia brought cooking utensils, metal pots and pans, china, glassware, kegs of wine and ale, cheeses and meats. Attempts were made to raise dairy cattle for milk, butter, and cream, ingredients essential to European and Middle Eastern cookery. Mohammad Ibrahim noted in his journal, “The king, having had much contact with the Iranians when he was growing up, has acquired a permanent taste for our food, and every so often, according to his mood, he will make an exception and be inclined to eat in our style. For this reason he has had a cook brought over from India, whose sole occupation is to prepare real food for him when it is required.”5

As Foreign Minister, Phaulcon also entertained frequently and lavishly at his estates. Describing one of the opulent dinners at Phaulcon’s residence, Tachard wrote:

He kept always two Tables for twelve People apiece, where all things were very delicate and plenty. There we had all sorts of Wine, Spanish, Rhenish, French, Cephalonian and Persian. We were served in great Silver dishes, and the Cupboard was furnished with most lovely Gold and Silver Plate of Japan rarely well wrought, with a great many large Dishes of the Same Metal and Workmanship.6

But Phaulcon’s fortunes were to change. Despite his intelligence and political savvy, he underestimated the power of the Buddhist priests over the King and his court. At the urging of the French emissaries, Phaulcon made it his mission to convert King Narai to Catholicism, but his attempts backfired. In 1688 the King fell ill, and in the ensuing coup Phaulcon was arrested, cruelly tortured, and beheaded. Marie Guimard, already grief-stricken by the loss of their first-born son to illness weeks before her husband’s violent death, was arrested, along with her four-year-old son. She escaped by bribing the jailors and sought protection at the French fort in Bangkok. Fearing that Guimard’s presence would jeopardize his negotiations with the new king, the French commander general betrayed her and handed

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It is likely that the royal kitchen employed foreign cooks. Mohammad Ibrahim noted in his journal, “The king, having had much contact with the Iranians when he was growing up, has acquired a permanent taste for our food, and every so often, according to his mood, he will make an exception and be inclined to eat in our style. For this reason he has had a cook brought over from India, whose sole occupation is to prepare real food for him when it is required.”7

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her back to the Siamese. She was imprisoned and tortured to reveal the location of her husband's hidden treasure. There was, however, no treasure to be disclosed, although rumors and myths of this "treasure" persist to this day.

Guimard was eventually condemned to slavery along with all the women of her family. Ironically, only after the death of her husband was the name of Marie Guimard mentioned in the journals of foreign visitors, who write of her presence in the royal kitchen. A Scottish tradesman, Alexander Hamilton, met Guimard in 1719 and described her as a kitchen slave, noting that she had been granted permission to come and go freely in the royal compound. Impressed with her piety despite her bad fortune, he admired Guimard for her charitable works and devotion to her son and grandchildren who lived on her estate.9

A French priest named Aumont knew Marie Guimard in the years 1719–1720. He described her as an elderly widow who by then had survived four kingships. Those who previously condemned her now honored her. She was given a high position as superintendent of the gold and silver plate, the king's wardrobe, and the fruit served at his table. According to Aumont, more than two thousand women worked under Guimard in the royal kitchen.10

The Creator of Sweets

Marie Guimard is said to have inherited her culinary skills from generations of good cooks, including her mother and grandmother, who cooked the food of their Portuguese and Japanese forebears. "Phaulcon's success owed much to his wife. At the parties she would serve cakes for which the recipe has been passed down by her mother and grandmother, and some of them, such as foy thong, thong yip (or thong yih) and thong yot (or thong yawd) are still popular among the Thai people today,"11 writes Reiko Hada in an article titled "Madame Marie Guimard—Under the Ayudha Dynasty of the Seventeenth Century." Hada believes that the Portuguese introduced egg-based sweets into Japan during the Edo period (1603–1868), when the availability of sugar, along with European techniques, transformed traditional Japanese confectionery. The Japanese used the term namban-gashi ("southern barbarian sweets") to describe these new confections. In fact, ovos moles, a sweet originating in Portugal, and quindim, a Brazilian dessert of Portuguese
origins, are strikingly similar to the Thai egg-based sweets described here. All are made with the same ingredients: egg yolks and sugar.

A Thai cookbook, *Thai Foods From Thai Literature, Book II*, also claims that Marie Guimard was the person who taught the Siamese how to make egg-based sweets:

In the land of King Narai the Great, Than Phu Ying Vichayen or Thao Thong Keap-Ma (Marie Guimard) is renowned as a maker of sweets.

Thao Thong Keap-Ma was able to make *kanum* (sweets) *thong yib*, pleated into the most beautiful shape. Her sweets so pleased His Majesty that he bestowed upon her the honor of a name shaped as the sweets, “Thao Thong Keap-Ma.” [my translation; *thao thong* means “golden foot,” a royal title; *keap-ma* means “horse’s hoof”].

Another book notes that “the lady who was honoured as Thao Thong Keap-Ma would be the head of the Royal Kitchen and she was the first one who taught Siamese women to cook Tong-Yord (or thong yawed), Phoi-Thong (or foy thong), *kanum thong phoun*, etc.” Unfortunately, neither Hada’s article nor *Thai Foods from Thai Literature* includes specific references to their sources. The paucity of written documentation has led some skeptics to doubt that Marie Guimard was the creator of Thai egg-based sweets. They believe instead that it was the Portuguese, the first Europeans to arrive in Siam in 1511, who introduced these sweets.

Today, there remain a handful of elderly sweet-makers in Thailand, like the sisters from Thum Rue, who continue to make these desserts with recipes inherited from their ancestors. Whether or not Marie Guimard created these desserts, one thing is certain: egg-based sweets have become synonymous with her and are honored as Thai national treasures. The real truths of Marie Guimard and the origin of Thai egg-based sweets are not of great importance to the sweet-makers, who still speak of her with affection and gratitude. The Thai people have been given a gift of double good fortune. Not only do these exquisite sweets bring joy to the palate, they also come with a legacy—one that fits the Thai desire to romanticize historical figures and to weave fact with fiction: history, imagined events, and anecdotes all blend together into a delicious story.

NOTES
13. Letter from An Ancient European Country, p. 11. Cited in *Thai Foods From Thai Literature*, Book II, 91. No author is listed for this book, leaving serious questions about this source of information concerning Marie Guimard. Another book cited in *Thai Foods from Thai Literature*, *Thai Law*, was published and printed by the wife of Reverend Dr. D. B. Bradley, an American missionary and physician during the reign of King Mongkut (1824–1851). It states that the name of “Thao Thong Keap-Ma is a royal title of middle rank that entitled her to 400 rai of land” (p. 91). This information is probably hearsay, because the author and her husband were good friends of King Mongkut and were likely to have had friendly interchanges with other members of the royal court. The point here is that even in the early nineteenth century the Siamese had already romanticized the tale of Marie Guimard, so that it was difficult to separate fact from fiction.