Finding Pad Thai

For many westerners, pad Thai—or, more accurately, kway teow pad Thai (stir-fried rice noodles Thai-style)—symbolizes Thai cooking, thanks in large part to the Thai government’s ongoing efforts to introduce the country’s food to the rest of the world. The campaign has been resoundingly successful: according to the Web site www.thaikitchen.org, at least 11,600 Thai restaurants (many bearing the name Pad Thai) operated worldwide in 2007. As a result, pad Thai is served everywhere from Moscow to Toronto to Wichita. Some diet plans modify the dish for the calorie- and fat-conscious, while the foodservice industry mass-markets pad Thai for the heat-and-serve generation. Pad Thai stars in at least 2.2 million Google entries and even merits its own definition in the Random House Unabridged Dictionary (2006) edition: “A Thai dish of stir-fried rice noodles, fish sauce and other seasonings, usually tofu, shrimp, bean sprouts, and peanuts.”

If Westerners believe that pad Thai symbolizes Thai cooking, many Thais agree. “Whenever we try Thai food,” says Nick Srisawat, a native of Thailand who now oversees a large Thai restaurant group in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, “we try pad Thai first, because that is a way to judge how good a restaurant is. That’s true all over the world—except in Thailand.”

The Origins of Pad Thai

Pad Thai is really nothing more than a regular noodle dish, one that is not even native to Thailand. Its full name, kway teow pad Thai, hints at its possible Chinese origins; kway teow, in Chinese, refers to rice noodles. It is likely that some early version of the dish came to Thailand with settlers crossing from southern China, who brought their own recipe for fried rice noodles. Certainly the cooking style—stir-frying—is Chinese, and most food historians credit the Chinese with the invention of noodles. And, as Chombhala Chareonying, former Minister-Counsellor at the Royal Thai Embassy in Washington, D.C., points out, Thai food is basically Indo-Chinese in origin. The cooked meats and vegetables in pad Thai resemble dishes prepared by the Cantonese and Tae Chiew (Chao Zhou in Mandarin) from China’s eastern Guangdong province. Nevertheless, the flavors and textures are pure Thai.

If the Chinese migration theory holds, Thai ancestors may be the Chinese T’ai (phonetically, “Dai”) people who migrated from southwest China in what is now the Yunnan province. In fact, today’s Thai can find many similarities in language, dress, and cooking with the Chinese T’ai. “We have always called ourselves Thai or T’ai,” notes His Excellency Nitya Pibulsonggram, Thailand’s former ambassador to the United States and former Minister of Foreign Affairs. “And there are a lot of us living in what is now known as China. T’ai is the largest ethnic minority there still.” Nitya Pibulsonggram’s father, Prime Minister Pibulsonggram (also known as Field Marshall Plaek Pibulsonggram, or Phibun) is universally credited with having popularized today’s pad Thai recipe by codifying, and perhaps even creating, it.

As Thailand’s Prime Minister from 1938 to 1944 and again from 1948 to 1957, Phibun was passionately Thai, yet he wanted to modernize and westernize the nation in a distinctive way. For starters, in 1939 he changed the name of the country from Siam to Thailand, or “Land of the Free.” (“Besides, it would not sound right to call the dish pad Siamese, would it?” quips his son.)

But Phibun also had other objectives, maintains Penny Van Esterik, a nutritional anthropologist specializing in Southeast Asian cultures. In her book Materializing Thailand, Van Esterik writes that “[p]art of Phibun’s nation-building strategy was to develop ‘Thai-ness’ and impose a ‘Thai Great Tradition’ to demonstrate the strength and unity of the Thai nation. His series of decrees from 1939–1942 suggested what could be done to strengthen the Thai
WINTER 2009

GASTRONOMICA

Or an elderly aunt? “My parents made it popular in their own household, thinking that it was good for Thais...The government then thought it would be useful to popularize it because it is so nutritious.” By adding bean sprouts, onions, peanuts, eggs, and meats to the noodles, the dish could dramatically improve the Thai diet and shift people away from the more traditional dietary staples of rice with nam prik (chili paste), leaves, and salt, Van Esterik believes. However, no formal dietary study of pad Thai has ever been conducted.


Economy, to instill national image and pride—and to improve the national diet. Popularizing a noodle dish was one means to that end.” Why these particular noodles? They differed from the then-popular Chinese dishes of either wet or dry noodles. Van Esterik considers pad Thai a clear culinary invention.

“Phibun was not being anti-Chinese,” says Pibulsonggram. “He was perhaps being pro-Thai and trying to help the farmers who were and are predominantly Thai and are the poorest among us still. My parents actually made pad Thai popular during the War [World War II].” He remembers that the dish had been served in his family but does not remember who actually invented it. Perhaps a family cook?
The Prime Minister found other sound health reasons for promoting this cooked dish. “In the 1940s,” notes Pibulsonggram, “there were huge floods in Thailand and all over Bangkok. There were numerous diseases, and the people were afraid.” By promoting a steaming hot noodle dish cooked in clean pans, the Prime Minister simultaneously was promoting sanitary foods and cooking conditions (although, his son notes, the bean sprouts used as a garnish are practically raw). Phibun further urged Thais to include pad Thai in their meal planning to help Thai farmers and to keep money circulating in the economy. “It cost three pennies a day, and there were eighteen million Thais in those days. It was interesting the way he presented the dish to the people,” Pibulsonggram says, adding that his father also encouraged frugality on another level: he wanted Thais to start their own kitchen gardens and grow their own vegetables.

To help popularize the new noodle dish, the government supplied people with a basic recipe for pad Thai, then encouraged vendors to make use of wheeled noodle carts—like mobile cook stalls equipped with a heat source and compartments to hold ingredients and cooking utensils—to sell the dish on Bangkok’s streets. Because the carts could move easily, pad Thai became a convenience food. It may be the original fast food in Thailand, Pibulsonggram notes. The dish became a lunchtime favorite, a Thai stir-fry that provided an alternative to a bowl of Chinese noodles.

From Bangkok’s city streets the recipe spread to rural villages, where locals enjoyed the dish. Chef Nongkran Daks of Thai Basil restaurant in Chantilly, Virginia, recalls growing up in a southern Thai village, where her big treat was to buy a very spicy pad Thai from a local vendor, who wrapped the serving up in banana leaves and newspaper and tied it with a string for easy carrying. “It was a special treat with rice that cost about 1 baht [40 baht equaled $1 at that time],” she recalls.

The Classic Elements of Pad Thai

Deconstructing the basic recipe for kway teow pad Thai reveals a cluster of ingredients that in themselves are not memorable. It is only in their particular combination that the sum of the parts equals the finished product that has captured the world’s gastronomic fancy. To Thais, of course, the explanation lies in pad Thai’s balance of flavors and textures—the three primary Thai flavors of salty, sour, and sweet, and a fourth, spicy, added to taste in the form of chilies. The bean sprouts and peanuts add a desirable, though subtle, crunchy, a foil for the soft rice noodles and chewy prawns. A successful Thai cook keeps this balance in mind when composing a recipe or a full menu of complementary flavors and textures. Pad Thai succeeds on every count, explains Chombhala Chareonying. “The combination of spices and seasonings produces a taste that is tasty to Thais,” he says. Pad Thai suits Western palates “because it is not spicy. Many Europeans and Americans like it because it has every taste: sour, sweet, and salty. The palm sugar [the traditional Thai sweetener] smells much better [than granulated sugar], and makes the sauce so thick.”

For a country of cooks who had not generally followed written recipes—Van Esterik believes that pad Thai really was the one of the very first codified recipes—what Phibun did was revolutionary. “With the fixed recipe, pad Thai became a dish that didn’t change that much,” she says, adding that there was no real right or wrong way to prepare it. But what really fascinates Van Esterik as an anthropologist is the fact that pad Thai is a condensed symbol or summary of all Thai noodles in particular, and of the cuisine in general.

Much like today’s recipe, the original configuration of pad Thai included meat such as shrimp, pork, or chicken; tamarind; palm sugar; fish sauce; eggs; dried shrimp; garlic; tofu; salted radish; peanuts; slender rice noodles; and bean sprouts. These ingredients and the manner of preparing the dish qualified it as “new” to some, particularly since the noodles were not boiled but pad, or stir-fried, explains Pibulsonggram.

“Pad Thai is one basic recipe, with no specific quantities of ingredients,” agrees Robert Halliday of Bangkok, the former restaurant critic for the Bangkok Post. “It’s all interpreted; you are supposed to know how it tastes and what you should look for before the next stage of cooking. In old Thai cookbooks there is no such thing as quantity. That’s why you never get the same dish.” Bangkok natives often garnish the dish with something crisp, like raw sour fruit or raw mango, or even sour star fruit, banana blossoms, or another small, very sour fruit called madan, he says. But one element of pad Thai is a constant: the medium-slimier dried rice noodles. Cooks can choose between sen lek or the chewier sen chan noodles from the Chantaburi region. For Pad Thai aficionados like Halliday, the sen chan noodles are preferable for their sturdier mouthfeel.

Hunting for the best pad Thai in Bangkok may be an eternal quest. Many Thais agree that the no-name noodle stand by the Ghost Gate in the old part of the city was once immensely popular. “I remember lines about two blocks long,” says Srisawat. “The cook made it one order at a time; it was not mass-produced.” But Nittaya Maphungphong, a native of Bangkok and chief of the Thai Service at the
Voice of America in Washington, D.C., cherishes memories of another restaurant located in the Chinese quarter on Rajawong Road. “This was a typical Chinese restaurant with three rooms,” she says. “It was near a movie house, so after the late show people would stop and eat pad Thai and durian ice cream. The treat was to get the pad Thai. At Seefah [the restaurant] the noodles were served on a piece of sundried banana leaf shaped into a box and then over-wrapped with newspaper for carrying and eating at home.” What made this version so memorable were the generous amounts of pickled radish, meat, Chinese chives, vegetables, and tofu. “The noodles were almost an afterthought,” she recalls.

Most noodle cognoscenti advise the hungry to wander through the sois, or side alleys, or to ask a taxi driver for directions to a good pad Thai stall. Many street vendors park their carts along the Soi Trok Kaptan that runs parallel to the Chao Phraya River, near the popular tourist hotels. One in particular sets up his stand in the evening near the Wat Leap. “You can find yourself sitting next to school girls or construction workers, or Sikhs in turbans, all sitting around eating noodles,” Halliday says. Most good Bangkok restaurants, even hotel coffee shops, offer the dish, and some of these versions are exceptional. “The really terrific versions are prepared by vendors who make nothing else. They become artists, specialists.”

As Thai food goes truly global, with an anticipated twenty thousand Thai restaurants in operation overseas by 2008, pad Thai fanciers can expect that their favorite dish might well become as ubiquitous as the Mexican taco or Italian spaghetti. But diners should be wary of pad Thai wannabes who carelessly break all the rules. One Internet recipe, for example, calls for using oyster sauce; others call for such oddball (and some non-Thai) ingredients as snow peas, sweet green and red peppers, soy sauce, teriyaki sauce, maple syrup, almond or peanut butter, curry powder, shredded coconut, olive oil, spaghetti or linguine, and ketchup. Apparently one New York City restaurant even used to serve something called “pad Thai spring rolls.”

As long as cooks and noodle packagers leave well enough alone, Thailand’s most recognizable dish will continue to attract Western converts to Asia’s hottest cuisine — and pad Thai will maintain its place as the country’s premier noodle dish. After all, as Foreign Minister Nitya points out, “Pad Thai is familiar to look at and it has that distinctive taste — fresh, lemony, hot — and it looks very nutritious… It’s all there. Like the hamburger, everything is on it with all the toppings.”

Notes
1. All interviews for this article were conducted either in person, by phone, or by e-mail throughout 2006 and 2007.
3. This prediction is by Yuthasak Suphasorn, deputy director of the National Food Institute, as quoted in the Bangkok Post in late 2005. See www.bangkokpost.net/yearend2005/page191.html.

Nongkran Daks’s Kway Teow Pad Thai

SERVES 2

Few cooks take the time to make this dish the old-fashioned way, with water, palm sugar, fish sauce, and tamarind juice that have been cooked down into a thick syrup to give the final dish its rich, amber sheen and fulsome flavor, says Thai cook and restaurant owner Nongkran Daks, whose local fame has spread thanks to this signature recipe. For an authentic dish, she advises, don’t take any shortcuts and don’t leave out any ingredients. Don’t double the recipe to save time — the noodles are done quickly enough to feed a crowd within minutes. Salted, or preserved, radish is sold in cellophane packets at Asian markets; after opening, it lasts almost indefinitely in the refrigerator. Look for the Thai brand of rice sticks, or rice noodles labeled sen lek; rice vermicelli, Chinese egg noodles, and fettuccini are not a substitute. Be sure to have all the ingredients within reach because you have to work fast and remain at the stove throughout the cooking time. After several mouthfuls of this pad Thai, you will discover noodle heaven.

INGREDIENTS
3 tablespoons vegetable oil, plus more as needed
1 teaspoon chopped garlic
1 tablespoon dried shrimp (optional)
1 tablespoon chopped salted radish (optional)
½ cup sliced pork
½ cup whole shrimp, cleaned and shelled
½ pound medium rice-stick noodles, soaked 60 minutes in cold water and drained
¼ cup water
½ cup pad Thai sauce (see recipe below)
2 eggs, slightly beaten
½ teaspoon crushed hot chile peppers, or more to taste
2 tablespoons ground roasted peanuts
½ cup chopped garlic chives or scallions (optional)
2 cups bean sprouts, rinsed
1 lime, quartered

Heat the oil in a wok. Add the garlic and stir-fry until golden brown. Add the dried shrimp and salted radish, and stir a few times. Add the pork and whole shrimp and keep stirring until the shrimp turns pink. Remove the shrimp to prevent overcooking and set aside.

Heat 2 tablespoons of the oil in a wok over medium-high heat. Add the garlic and stir-fry until golden brown. Add the dried shrimp and salted radish, and stir a few times. Add the pork and whole shrimp and keep stirring until the shrimp turns pink. Remove the shrimp to prevent overcooking and set aside.
Add the noodles. They will stick together, so stir quickly and try to separate them. Add the water, stirring until it is absorbed, then add the pad Thai sauce and keep stirring until everything is thoroughly mixed. The noodles should appear soft and moist. If they look hard, add more cold water and stir again. Return the cooked shrimp to the wok.

Push the contents of the wok up around the sides to make room to fry the eggs. If the pan is very dry, add 1 more tablespoon of oil. Add the eggs and spread the noodles over the eggs to cover. When the eggs are cooked, stir the noodles until everything is well mixed—this should result in cooked bits of egg, both whites and yolks, dispersed throughout the noodle mixture.

Add the chiles, peanuts, garlic chives or scallions, and 1 ½ cups bean sprouts. Mix well, spoon portions onto two individual serving dishes, garnish with the remaining bean sprouts and lime quarters, and serve.

Pad Thai Sauce

Makes about 2 cups; serves 8

You can buy premixed tamarind concentrate or make your own tamarind juice: Buy a package of compressed tamarind pulp at any Asian market, cut off ½ cup from the block, and soak it in 1 ½ cups warm water for 20 minutes. Squeeze out the pulp and discard the seeds and pulp; the remaining liquid is the tamarind juice. Store any leftover juice or noodle sauce in a tightly sealed container in the refrigerator or freezer, where it will last almost indefinitely.

Ingredients

1 cup tamarind juice
1 ¼ cups palm sugar
1 cup water
½ cup fish sauce
1 teaspoon salt

Mix all ingredients in a saucepan and cook over medium-low heat for about 1 hour or more, until well mixed and syrupy. Stir occasionally to prevent burning.