

Food for Thought: Thailand's Hot Zone --- Some Disparage It, But Isaan Cuisine Is Hot in Bangkok

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

People from Isaan have rougher tongues than other Thais, or so say those soft Bangkok city folk who can't cope with a cuisine that takes spiciness to a new level. Dressed up in contemporary menuspeak, a representative Isaan dish would be a medley of chilis on a bed of chilis in a chili marinade with a liaison of chilis topped with a chili julienne. In short, it's hot.

In the past 30 years, many people migrated to Bangkok from Isaan, an impoverished northeastern region of Thailand, and they took their cuisine with them. It was street food, basic grilled dishes and spicy salads sold in markets or from carts. Isaan food reflected the poverty of the dusty, dry region that stretches along the border with Laos. People mostly eat the staple of sticky rice with small amounts of relish foods that are strongly flavored, so that a little goes a long way. Salted fish, lime juice and herbs such as spearmint add a range of elemental flavors to the dishes.

Isaan may be disparaged by Bangkok sophisticates, but it is the simplicity of the region's food that has made it enormously popular. The need to stretch a modest meal by intensifying flavors has gone from being a necessity to a virtue. Isaan food uses little of the coconut milk that mellows and enriches central and southern Thai food, so it has a more direct taste. Isaan food has also spread from the street: Many restaurants now offer at least some dishes, particularly sontam, a pounded green papaya salad flavored with chili, lime and salted fish or crab. There are also a growing number of restaurants specializing in the region's cuisine. One of the most popular in Bangkok goes by the unlikely name of Sara-Jane [Snider-Angsuvanir]'.s.

FULL TEXT

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more direct taste. Isaan food has also spread from the street: Many restaurants now offer at least some dishes, particularly somtam, a pounded green papaya salad flavored with chili, lime and salted fish or crab. There are also a growing number of restaurants specializing in the region's cuisine. One of the most popular in Bangkok goes by the unlikely name of Sara-Jane's.

Sara-Jane Snider-Angsuvarnsiri opened the eponymous eatery 13 years ago as a way to learn how to run a restaurant before heading back to her native Massachusetts to open a Thai restaurant there.

"People thought I was crazy -- here was this American woman selling peasant food," she says. "At first people were hesitant because they thought we were expensive, but that month it rained a lot and people wanted to get indoors away from the flooding so they started coming in." Soon it was a runaway success, attracting the whole spectrum of Bangkok residents, from cops sloshing back Mekong whiskey on their lunch breaks to the queen's sister. Sara-Jane never made it back to the States.

The restaurant has moved to shinier premises in an office building on Wireless Road, but it hasn't lost its appeal. It serves more than 300 people at lunch each day from a small glass-walled kitchen that seems to work to a rapid beat set by a cook standing on a plastic crate pounding each serving of somtam. (Somewhat incongruously, it bills itself as an Italian-Isaan joint and offers a range of standard Italian meals. A window display of dusty spaghetti and wicker-wrapped Chianti bottles offers the ominous prospect of bad Italian food. But don't be put off.)

The basic dishes of Isaan food are grilled meat and fish. On the street, these are often grilled into blackened slabs that become fibrous and woody. A restaurant grill may not impart the smoky flavor of wood, but it allows for more control and more succulent meat. Most other meat dishes begin with minced meat cooked with chilis and lime; to this is added a flour made of roasted sticky rice ground to a powder, which binds the sauce and meat. These dishes, known as larb, are made with everything from meat to fish to poultry. Sara-Jane's offers a range of larb dishes, from duck and chicken to more contemporary variations such as tuna and shrimp. There's a vegetarian version made with lightly fermented bamboo shoots.

Every Isaan meal requires somtam, which traditionally consists of shredded green papaya, vegetables and salted fish thrown together and pounded for a few minutes to release and blend the flavors. Nowadays, there are a number of variants. Sara-Jane's has a less salty somtam made with fresh shrimp. There's another one with small purple crabs that have been pickled for a day or so in fish sauce. Somtam is one of the most refreshing dishes in Thai cuisine, with its rush of fresh tastes that flood the tongue in quick succession with sweet, briny and hot sensations.

Saikrok Isaan are popular pork sausages best eaten fresh off the grill with slices of raw, crunchy ginger and raw bird's-eye chilis. The old adage about it being best not to explore how sausages are made applies here, so the sensitive might want to avert their eyes. Pork is mixed with powdered rice and stuffed into natural skins. These are hung in the open air for a few days to let the rice ferment slightly, creating a sour taste. Twisted into short links and then deep fried or grilled, they are among the best sausages available in Asia. Those served at Sara-Jane's are made from pure pork without the rice -- these are still slightly fermented, but have a softer taste than the sour variety served on the street.

The restaurant has some of the more exotic dishes from Isaan, including sua rong hai, or crying tiger, which is fatty beef mixed with spices and rice powder and deep fried. Some restaurants serve a variant of this dish with grilled sirloin topped with a spicy tamarind sauce. Sara-Jane's serves many of the tripe dishes that are popular in an area where every part of an animal is eaten. It used to serve a bull's penis soup -- euphemistically known in Thai as "soup made from that which there is only one," but there weren't many takers.

Most of the dishes at Sara-Jane's are moderately hot. (If you don't like chilis, the Italian menu may be your best bet.) If you want the heat turned up you can request hotter dishes, or, if you really want to work up a sweat, just do as many diners do and munch on the some small but explosive red and green chilis that come on the side of almost every dish.

Finding Isaan

Sara-Jane's is in the ground floor of the Sindhorn Tower 1, 130-132 Wireless Road, Bangkok 10330. Tel 650-9992. Isaan dishes cost about \$1 to \$3. A substantial meal without alcohol costs less than \$10 per person. The restaurant is packed at lunchtime, but service is quick and the wait for a table is never long. Most credit and debit cards are accepted.

Ruen Thai at the Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel is also popular with locals. Ruen Thai isn't strictly an Isaan restaurant, but it has many of the most popular dishes on its menu. Dishes are more costly than at Sara-Jane's, with dinner running \$15 to \$20 a head. The hotel is at 494 Rajdamri Road, Bangkok 10330. Credit cards are accepted.

Many restaurants serve some Isaan dishes, and hotels often have promotions of food from the region. There are Isaan street stalls all over Bangkok. Many Thais express some anxiety about eating stall-made somtam pounded with uncooked fermented fish because of the risk of parasites.

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