

Food for Thought: Beyond Pad Thai --- Forget Thai Classics: Pok Pok, Ant's Eggs Await Bangkok Diners

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

A trip to Bangkok is also a chance to break away from the array of conventional Thai dishes that are now global staples. When dishes start to appear on every hotel room-service menu around the world, you know it's time to try something new. Skip the pad thai and green curry and opt for the ant's egg omelet instead. Branch out and eat in some of the variety of Thai restaurants that Bangkok has to offer.

After consulting with some local experts and examining the recommendations of Bangkok Metro Magazine -- which has the most up-to-date and seemingly least PR-driven restaurant listings of any English-language publication in the city -- here are some suggestions of where to eat in Bangkok. I've stuck to places along the route of the life-transforming Skytrain -- there must be people in Bangkok who have never moved this fast in their lives -- so you won't have to work up an appetite sitting in traffic. They are also restaurants where you don't have to speak Thai or know everything about the food to enjoy yourselves, yet they're still places that are highly regarded by locals.

One thing to try in Bangkok that's more difficult to get outside of Thailand is food from Isaan, in the northeast of the country. I've already written about Sara-Jane's on Wireless Road (see "Thailand's Hot Zone: Some Disparage It, but Isaan Cuisine Is Hot in Bangkok," *Personal Journal*, June 25-26), but I'd also recommend Vientiane Kitchen, a cheerful, atmospheric restaurant with an encyclopedic menu of the powerfully flavored northeastern food.

FULL TEXT

BANGKOK -- Street vendors and their customers here are furious. Food sellers have been banned from setting up their stalls within 20 meters of any of the new Skytrain stations. Unusually for Thailand, the rules are being enforced, and so outraged city residents are sometimes forced to walk for as long as two or three minutes without any snacking opportunities at all.

It's been a shock in a country where at any time half the population is involved in feeding the other half. Few places in the world make food so ubiquitous. But as a visitor to Bangkok, it's not always easy to find the right places, in part due to the city's endless, sclerotic sprawl and the vast choice.

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The restaurant is set in what passes for a rural setting here, next to an abandoned lot just off Sukhumvit. There are a number of open bamboo houses set around a small courtyard where in the evenings a traditional band plays and dancers perform. It sounds like a thousand tourist traps in Thailand but actually has a rare, informal charm, with attentive but relaxed service and an encouraging hubbub from the largely Thai clientele. Tune out the sound of the passing Skytrain and you could be in a northeastern village.

The food at Vientiane Kitchen has all the intense flavors of good Isaan cuisine. Curries come with thin but fiercely hot gravies that are not softened with coconut milk as they are in the south of Thailand. There are a large range of som tam dishes -- pounded salads of green papaya and fermented or fresh fish also known as papaya pok-pok, from the sound the pestle makes as it strikes the mortar.

The restaurant also has many of the insect dishes available in Isaan, where red ants and their eggs add a sharp note of formic acid and a dash of protein to a diet that often has been limited to sticky rice and small amounts of highly flavored dishes. Unusually for Isaan restaurants in Bangkok, Vientiane Kitchen has a full range of dishes, including frogs, wild pork, fishcake-wrapped eggs and catfish. The sai krok Isaan yang, a slightly fermented pork sausage, is excellent.

Almost at the other end of the spectrum is Basil at the Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit, an attempt to bring a hip sensibility to local food in Bangkok. Avert your eyes from the off-putting slogan "cool jazz, hot curries" that the hotel somehow feels will entice clients and enter a dining room that is one of the sleekest in the city.

The food is a mix of classic Thai with some excellent vegetarian dishes and a few northern touches like the khao soi noodles, one of Thailand's great underappreciated dishes. Soft noodles are served in a thick coconut curry gravy with chicken. The dish is topped with crunchy, deep-fried noodles. Pickled vegetables, chopped fresh ginger and red onions are added just before you eat, lending more texture and fragrance and cutting the sweetness of the coconut milk.

The khao soi is good at Basil but it is better at You and Mee, the upscale noodle joint at the Grand Hyatt Erawan. I'm always surprised that this hotel chain hasn't opened clones all over Asia, as You and Mee seems so much more popular than most tired hotel restaurants and draws a huge crowd of locals, especially at lunch. It serves a wide range of noodle dishes from around Thailand and the rest of Asia in what is really an air-conditioned street stall. For those uninitiated in the world of Bangkok street food, this is a great place to start, and it has the lushest khao soi I've eaten in Thailand.

Mango Tree, in a soi between Silom and Surawong, has become an enduring staple for office workers in the area. At lunch time, Mango Tree is full of groups of people more focused on the food than conversation. It's in a house, with tables outside on the terrace and a calm, unpretentious feel. The restaurant has a reputation for good seafood and curries.

Since it opened a few years back, Baan Khanitha has established an enviable reputation among Thai restaurants in the city. Despite the plush antiques and solicitous service, it manages to attract a wide-ranging crowd, from eager dating couples to formal business groups to families. The specialty is soft-shell crab, caught at the vulnerable moment when it has shed one hard carapace but not grown the next. One gets a strong sense of the care that goes into the food at Baan Khanitha and the effort to get the perfect balance of sweet, sharp, sour and salty. Particularly good is a salad of beef with grapes, in which the meat is a rich spicy counterpoint to succulent grapes.

As you sit down at Baan Khanitha, a small platter is set at your table, laden with little dishes ringed by leaves. You fold the leaves into tiny cones and then fill them with chilies, peanuts, small pieces of ginger, onion and lime, then top this melange with a sweet sauce. Each mouthful contains all the contrasting flavors of Thai food and is a great way to get you salivating for more.

Send comments to Robert Templer at awsj.food@awsj.com

On the Beaten Path

Vientiane Kitchen, 8 Sukhumvit Soi 36, Tel: 258-6171. Hours: noon to midnight daily. (Skytrain -- Thong Lor)

Mango Tree, 37 Soi Anumarn Rachthon, opposite the Tawana Ramada Hotel on Surawong Road. Tel: 236-2820. Hours: 10 a.m.-2 p.m., 6 p.m.-10 p.m. (Skytrain -- Sala Daeng)

Basil, Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit, 250 Sukhumvit Road. Tel: 653-0333. Hours: noon-2:30 p.m., 6:30 p.m.-10:30 p.m. (Skytrain -- Asok)

You and Mee, Grand Hyatt Erawan, 494 Ratchadamri Road. Tel: 254-1234. Hours: 11 a.m.-11 p.m. daily (Skytrain -- Chitlom)

Baan Khanitha, 36/1 Sukhumvit Soi 23. Tel: 258-4181. Hours: 11 a.m.-2 p.m., 6 p.m.-11 p.m. (Skytrain -- Asok)

DETAILS

Business indexing term: Subject: Restaurants Hotels & motels; Industry: 72251 : Restaurants and Other Eating Places 72111 : Hotels (except Casino Hotels) and Motels

Subject: Restaurants; Hotels & motels; Eggs; Food

Publication title: Asian Wall Street Journal; Victoria, Hong Kong

Pages: P8

Number of pages: 0

Publication year: 2000

Publication date:	Feb 18, 2000
Section:	Personal Journal
Publisher:	Dow Jones & Company Inc.
Place of publication:	Victoria, Hong Kong
Country of publication:	United States, Victoria, Hong Kong
Publication subject:	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
ISSN:	03779920
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	NEWSPAPER
ProQuest document ID:	315505799
Document URL:	http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-beyond-pad-thai-forget-classics-pok/docview/315505799/se-2?accountid=11311
Copyright:	Copyright Dow Jones & Company Inc Feb 18, 2000
Last updated:	2023-11-20
Database:	ProQuest One Business, ProQuest Central

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