

Food For Thought: Cambodian Cuisine's Unlikely Thai Ally --- In an Effort to Keep Grilled Frogs Alive, One Woman Rewrote the Recipe Book From Scratch

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

"I was amazed that ingredients that were so familiar could at the same time be so exotic," she recalls. With that dish, she says, "a spell was cast." A decade later, Ms. Thaitawat spent a year meticulously researching all facets of Cambodian food, from the dishes served in Phnom Penh's royal palace to the paddy fields and lakes where most Cambodians spend their lives. The resulting book, "The Cuisine of Cambodia," is a rare achievement. The beautifully produced and lavishly photographed cookbook serves as a history of Cambodian food and customs as well as a vital document that will preserve many recipes that have been at risk of disappearing.

Still, as a Thai writer researching Cambodian food Ms. Thaitawat had to tread carefully. Many Cambodians have at best an ambivalent relationship with their Thai neighbors, and not offending national sensibilities required some diplomacy. Before embarking on her project she secured the support of King Norodom Sihanouk, known for his love of food, and the country's Ministry of Tourism. Then she set about collecting more than a thousand recipes. Some came from old cookbooks dating from colonial days that were published in Khmer and French; others were coaxed from sometimes-reluctant middle-class families and from people in the countryside who were generally eager to share their culinary secrets. The chapters on the court food were written with the help of the Royal Family and aided by a 1960s book of royal recipes by Princess Norodom Rasmi Sobhana, the king's aunt.

In fact, one of the reasons the book stands out from the mass of food publications is because Ms. Thaitawat stuck closely to recipes as cooked by Cambodians, refusing to compromise them for the demands of a Western palate or kitchen. Many of the recipes are easy to follow, with ingredients that are available around the world. But the book doesn't shy away from unusual foods. She included a whole chapter on frogs, caught by villagers using a long fishing line with a bright yellow pumpkin flower as bait. There are also recipes for deep-fried tarantulas from a family in the town of Kieng Svay, while Roland Eng, a senior Cambodian diplomat, contributed a recipe for the more cosmopolitan dish of stuffed crickets cooked with champagne.

FULL TEXT

It all began with a stuffed frog. Nusara Thaitawat, a young journalist with the Bangkok Post, was in Phnom Penh in the early 1990s to cover the start of the peace process when she tasted grilled frogs stuffed with pork accompanied by a salad made from m'kakk, a small amber-colored fruit the size of a mango. Despite being made with ingredients that were all available in her native Thailand, the dishes were a revelation of subtle, balanced flavors.

"I was amazed that ingredients that were so familiar could at the same time be so exotic," she recalls. With that dish, she says, "a spell was cast." A decade later, Ms. Thaitawat spent a year meticulously researching all facets of Cambodian food, from the dishes served in Phnom Penh's royal palace to the paddy fields and lakes where most Cambodians spend their lives. The resulting book, "The Cuisine of Cambodia," is a rare achievement. The

beautifully produced and lavishly photographed cookbook serves as a history of Cambodian food and customs as well as a vital document that will preserve many recipes that have been at risk of disappearing.

Like so much of Cambodia's heritage, the country's cuisine has been threatened with extinction by the conflicts that lasted from the 1960s to the 1990s, particularly during the brutal reign of the Khmer Rouge. The powerful influences from Vietnam, when it occupied the country during the 1980s, and more recently from Thailand threatened to erase the fine distinctions between Cambodian food and that of its neighbors. The arrival of United Nations peacekeepers in the past decade brought some stability, but it also introduced dishes like pizza and hamburgers, which can muscle out local foods.

All this added up to a situation where Cambodians lost confidence in their culinary arts, according to Ms. Thaitawat. "One of the problems in Cambodia is that because of all the trauma and conflict they lack the confidence to express themselves through their food and to be proud of their cuisine," she says. This is now changing as the country gains some measure of stability and as tourists start to demand a taste of authentic local cuisine.

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While in exile in Beijing and Pyongyang in the 1980s, the king and another aunt, Princess Mom Ket Kanya, recorded many of the traditional recipes and published them in the king's monthly bulletin. King Sihanouk even contributed his own recipe for "Petits Gateaux de Banane au Buerre de Cacahouette et au Caramel," which translates as "banana, peanut butter and caramel cakes." In English it sounds like the sort of snack Elvis might have favored, but it looks suitably sophisticated in the book.

Bitter conflicts can arise in all countries over what is seen as authentic and what is terminally tainted by foreign influences, so Ms. Thaitawat sent the recipes to the Ministry of Culture, intellectuals in the country and Cambodians abroad before selecting the 200 that finally ended up in the book. Like all foods, the cuisine includes influences and ingredients from around the world, but the aim was to collect those recipes that were regarded as most distinctly Cambodian.

In fact, one of the reasons the book stands out from the mass of food publications is because Ms. Thaitawat stuck closely to recipes as cooked by Cambodians, refusing to compromise them for the demands of a Western palate or kitchen. Many of the recipes are easy to follow, with ingredients that are available around the world. But the book doesn't shy away from unusual foods. She included a whole chapter on frogs, caught by villagers using a long fishing line with a bright yellow pumpkin flower as bait. There are also recipes for deep-fried tarantulas from a family in the town of Kieng Svay, while Roland Eng, a senior Cambodian diplomat, contributed a recipe for the more cosmopolitan dish of stuffed crickets cooked with champagne.

The recipes in the book took Ms. Thaitawat and a team of Cambodian cooks four months to test, as few of the older recipes came with any measurements of ingredients. The volume also includes articles about all aspects of Cambodian food. The country has a long history of rice cultivation that was once so advanced that farmers chose

from 2,000 varieties of the grain. Nobody knows how many varieties are left nowadays but much of that heritage has been lost.

The production of prahok, the fermented fish paste produced each year from the bountiful catch of the Mekong and Tonle Sap Lake, is in many ways the key to Cambodian food. As well as providing essential proteins and nutrients in a rice-based diet and preserving a seasonal glut of fish, the paste is a key flavor in almost all dishes. It comes in numerous varieties depending on which type of fish is used and whether it is fermented with such additions as fish eggs or roasted red sticky rice. There is also a wide range of smoked and dried fish.

Although Cambodia has been overshadowed by its neighbors -- particularly now that Thai and Vietnamese cuisines have joined the ranks of global foods -- it still has something distinctive to offer. "There are lots of similarities with Thai food as we come from the same region," says Ms. Thaitawat. "The basis and ingredients are the same but it has evolved differently. They use ingredients that we have lost as we've become a more urban society. In Cambodia, you can walk out of your house and pick these herbs and vegetables and fruits. In Cambodia, they are still more connected to the earth."

Send comments to awsj.food@awsj.com

For Further Reading, Eating and Surfing

"The Cuisine of Cambodia" by Nusara Thaitawat with photographs by Somkid Chajitvanit and Yingyong Un-anongrak is published by Nusara and Friends and distributed in Thailand by Asiabooks and in Cambodia by Monument books. It is available on the Web at www.nusara-and-friends.com

Ms. Thaitawat's recommendations for the best eats in Cambodia:

In Phnom Penh:

Pon Loc Khmer Restaurant, Monivong Boulevard (opposite Calmette Hospital)

In Kampong Speu:

Bai Pa-em, About 20 Km on National Highway No.4 No phone

In Siem Reap:

Angkor Village, Wat Bo (855-63) 96 35 63

The Citadel, Sofitel Royal Angkor, Vithei Charles de Gaulle (855-63) 96 46 00

Recipe: Princess Rasmi Sobhana's South Srom (Veiled Eggs)

Ingredients:

2 tbsp minced pork, boiled

4 tbsp minced chicken, boiled

4 tbsp crab meat, boiled

2 tbsp crouton

7 duck eggs

4 garlic cloves, chopped

1/4 tsp parsley root, chopped

pinch of salt, sugar, black pepper

Method:

Hard boil five eggs, remove shells and cut across lengthwise into two. Carefully remove the yolks, making sure not to break the white. Mix together the yolks with the meats, crouton, and chopped garlic and parsley root. Season with salt, sugar, pepper and maggi sauce. Beat remaining two eggs. Carefully fill the white egg shells with the meat-yolk mix and dip in the beaten eggs. Deep fry in hot vegetable oil until golden brown. Serve warm.

DETAILS

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