

Food to Thai for

Increasingly popular, the cuisine of Thailand is vibrant, fresh and attractive to look at. It looks healthy and tastes great! Some of the most authentic Thai food in Dubai is served at the Dusit Thani's Benjarong restaurant - a favourite of members of the Thai royal family when they are in Dubai.



Think you know Thai food just because you can recognise bird's eye chillies and lemongrass? Think again. Like many countries, it has no single cuisine, just an overlapping set of shared ingredients, cooking styles and a culture-wide insistence on the freshest of produce.

For a start, there are four regional cuisines: northern, northeastern, central and southern. Although all recognisably Thai, they vary in the use and emphasis on ingredients - lime juice is heavily used in the north-east, for example; and a liberal use of coconut milk and fresh turmeric speak loudly in the south.

Then there is the more subtle, but critical social distinctions: food cooked in the street, food cooked at home and food cooked in the so-called Royal style.

To try and find a way through the Thai food maze, we spoke to Chef Naruemol Poolkuan, Chef de Cuisine at Benjarong and previously at the Dusit Thani Bangkok.

How did you first get interested in food?

Well, I became a chef after I graduated in Home Economics, but since I was very young I was cooking at home with the family. We lived in the city (Bangkok) near the airport and since there was just my brother and myself, from about the age of 12 I was going to the market every day for food. Other children were playing and I was buying food!

What brought you to Dubai?

I had been working at the Dusit Thani Bangkok for some years and came to Dubai as part of the launch team. Like our Bangkok property, we specialise in the Royal cuisine style.

Can you explain how that style differs from, say, Thai food cooked at home?

It has two main elements: there's a great deal of decoration - food carving - and it's not as spicy as everyday Thai food. I say, Royal for presentation and Thai for taste!

Why is that?

The theory is that the Royal family should not be sweating or smell too much, so there's very little spice or garlic in their food.

If you had been cooking a very different style at home, how did you learn the Royal style?

I learned from cookbooks. It is a style that doesn't change - it's always the same. In Bangkok, the palace's kitchens are quite small so they tend to use hotels to cater for large events.

You say that Royal cuisine doesn't change. How is home cooking different?

At home, we don't really use recipes or fixed measures. We just put some, like that. However, we always need to balance the tastes of sweet, salty, sour and spicy.

Do you enjoy other types of food?

For me, European food just uses salt, pepper and butter to flavour. Not for me. If there was no Thai food, then I would choose Cantonese as the food from the south of China is quite close to Thai food.

Shouldn't a chef be tasting everything?

Yes, you are right, but...

What about Japanese food? Does that appeal to you with a similar emphasis on presentation and the freshness of ingredients?

I like some of it but with the presentation I prefer the Thai style. It's more suited to my mind. But some Japanese food, like tempura, is similar to what we do.

Why should people eat Thai food?

It's healthy! We use lots of herbs and not much oil. It looks beautiful and we have so many different tastes.



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Green curry with chicken
SERVES 4

Ingredients:

- 1 chicken breast, sliced (240 gms)**
- 400 ml coconut milk**
- 80 gms green curry paste**
- 120 gms eggplant/aubergine**
- 40 gms fish sauce**
- 30 gms white sugar**
- 15 sweet basil leaves**
- 5 kaffir lime leaves**
- 30 gms red chili, sliced**

Method:

- 1 Heat coconut milk until boiling and add green curry paste.
- 2 Add chicken and seasoning with fish sauce, sugar and eggplant and taste.
- 3 Add kaffir lime and simmer the chicken till soft and tender.
- 4 Add sweet basil, sliced chili and remove from the heat.
- 5 Serve with steamed rice.