

Anyone for Some Bugs? (Originally appeared in the Phuket Gazette)

by Michael Moore

Tired of the same old curries? Are McDonalds and Burger King becoming a bore? Perhaps it's time for an adventure in the world of the creepy and crawly, time for a little entomophagy. In other words, maybe its time to add a little spice to your life by dining on some bugs!

Many Thais, particularly those living in rural areas, and in the northeastern part of the country in particular, aren't saddled with the narrow-minded prejudices of those who scream, or stomp and spray, when confronted with these delicate creatures. They also recognise that the shrimp and lobster upon which we gorge ourselves belong to the same general family. Bug vendors reinforce this fact by often including a pile of fried shrimp with the other delicacies they offer their customers.

There is no denying that there is much to be gained from a meal of bugs. A grasshopper, for example, is more than 20% protein; when dried, the amount reaches 60%, making it an ideal food for those who want to avoid artery-clogging red meats.

A hundred grams of silkworm larvae, a real favourite with aficionados, meets the daily requirements established by the U.S. Government for copper, zinc, iron, thiamine and riboflavin. Lysine, an amino acid deficient in many diets dependent upon grain, is found in almost all insects.

Grasshoppers are readily available in Bangkok and can be purchased from vendors, particularly in areas frequented by people who have migrated from the northeast. When fried and dunked in a little Maggi sauce, *tukataen thod* are really a tasty little morsel. One piece of advice, though: don't eat the rear legs; they are brittle, tasteless and covered in little spikes. They can gouge your gums if you aren't careful.

Crickets – *jinglee* – are sweeter in flavour and for this reason are a favourite with enthusiasts who have a sweet tooth. They are also extremely high in calcium and for this reason are recommended for those with calcium deficiencies. *Jii kung*, an especially tasty specie, is sometimes available in local markets. They make a great snack and will relieve those nasty worries about not having enough calcium in your diet.

If you are interested in broadening your eating habits, silkworm larvae are a good place to start. They lack the spindly appendages that people associate with things that creep and crawl, making them an excellent choice for

neophytes. When fried, they provide a wonderful accompaniment to a bottle of cold beer and can be tossed into the mouth like peanuts. Things don't get much better than sipping on a cold one while munching on some *dak dae*. It's unlikely that your local bar will have a them on hand, but you can bring your own supply with you. Thai barkeeps are understanding about this sort of thing.

Ant eggs are another excellent choice for beginners. Popular in the northeast, they are packed with flavor and nutrients. *Gaeng mot daeng*, a soup-like curry made from red ant eggs is especially popular and comes highly recommended by those who know their bugs. If curries aren't your thing, try an ant egg salad. When dressed with garlic, lemon grass and lime juice, ant eggs make a piquant treat that is often enjoyed by those who don't like other bug dishes.

Another way to graduate slowly to full-blown bug eating is to get hold of some stink bugs – *maeng keng* in Thai. These can be used either as flavoring in your food (no need to eat the actual bug) or, when you're feeling more adventurous, can be fried up and eaten whole.

The *crème de la crème* of bug cuisine is undoubtedly the large water beetle known as *maeng daa*. This expensive and imposing arthropod is sometimes difficult to find, but is certainly worth the search. When deep-fried or ground to a peppery paste, it is a gourmet treat that simply can't be missed. Be sure to make the effort to search it out. You'll be glad that you did.

Finally, for those with cast-iron constitutions, there is the *joot jee*. When fried up, these little beetles make an excellent accompaniment for cocktails and other drinks. Although vendors often don't include them in their repertoire, you can always forage for them yourself. Simply locate a pile of water buffalo droppings (easily done in rural Thailand), turn it over, and more often than not, you'll find a treasure trove of *joot jee*.

Purveyors of bugs are relatively easy to find in Bangkok. Mobile vendors ply the areas around Sukhumvit and Silom Roads. One particularly popular supplier can almost always be found in the evening near the entrance to Nana Plaza on Sukhumvit Soi 4. By far the best place to find these little delicacies, however, is at the market at Klong Toey. On the road fronting the market, you'll find a row of stalls with heaping piles of all of the most popular varieties.

Hopefully the foregoing will encourage you to cast aside those prejudices and give bugs a try. They are packed with protein and minerals, and since

there are over 200 million of them for every person on the earth, dwindling food supplies may soon force us to start eating them anyway. Bon appétit!