

Eggs Thai Style

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by Michael Moore

The egg - that thing that came either before or after the chicken - is a popular item in Thailand. You may think you've seen and experienced everything that can be done with Humpty Dumpty and his friends, but wait until you see what the Thais do with the "Good Old Egg." The methods of cooking and ingredients used often seem bizarre by Western standards, but the end result is invariably unique and different - and often quite delicious. So put aside those preconceived notions, inhibitions and taboos and take a tour with me of Eggs Thai Style. Then, if you feel adventurous, go to a local food outlet and try one of the items you've read about. You might be surprised at how good it really tastes.

A good place to start our exploration is with one of the country's most humble dishes: the roasted egg, or *kai ping*. For those short on baht this is a popular and fortifying snack. In this preparation, sold by vendors throughout Thailand, chicken eggs are gently cooked in their shells on a grill over charcoal, a method of cooking I always thought would cause the eggs to explode. They don't, and after being shelled are eaten with soy sauce. The price? A paltry ten to fifteen baht for three eggs.

Kai kem, or salty eggs, is a preparation the Thais have enthusiastically borrowed from the Chinese. Here unshelled eggs, traditionally from a duck, are soaked in a brine solution for several weeks. This preserves the eggs so that they can be drained and kept at room temperature for several months. When it is time to eat them, they are boiled and served as an accompaniment to other dishes, most frequently as a salty foil to the bland rice soup that many Thais eat for breakfast. They are also sometimes served as a salty contrast to the incendiary heat of green chicken curry.

One of the most popular egg dishes in Thailand, and a personal favorite, is called Son-in-Law Eggs, or *kai leuk koey*. I'm not sure about the source of the name, but

the dish illustrates the importance that a contrast of flavors and textures plays in Thai cooking. Here duck or chicken eggs are hard boiled and then shelled and fried until the skin of the egg is brown and blistered, a practice unheard of in the West. The eggs are then masked with a sweet, but sharp sauce made from tamarind that is accompanied with chopped coriander leaves. The frying provides a chewy texture that the Thais enjoy and the sauce and coriander the contrast of flavors that is so important in Thai cooking. This is a great dish to try if you want some insight into the basic principles of the cuisine of Thailand.

Another preparation made with hard boiled eggs that are cooked a second time is *kai palo*. This is a stew like dish that is invariably found in big stainless steel pots or trays at small restaurants that serve curries along with plates of rice. If you get a chance, by all means, stop at one of these simple little restaurants. Not all of the dishes served, including this one, are spicy, and you will get a chance to sample some real Thai home cooking. Some of the best food in Phuket is to be found in the stainless steel cauldrons at these unpretentious restaurants. In *kai palo* hard boiled eggs are simmered in a thin sauce that is flavored with the five spice powder popular in Chinese cooking. Bits of fatty pork, reminiscent of bacon, or pieces of chicken often accompany the eggs and sauce.

Let's move on now to dishes where the eggs are fried. Omelets play a significant role in Thai cooking although they are rarely eaten for breakfast. They are cooked until brown, and are usually served along with rice and other preparations. *Kai jiow*, a plain omelet, is made by mixing eggs with fish sauce and then frying it and folding it so that it arrives at the table as a golden brown rectangle. It is invariably served with sauce *Sri Racha*, a red chili sauce that is becoming a popular condiment outside of Thailand. Stuffed omelets, or *kai yaht sai*, are prepared in the same way except that the rectangle is usually filled with a minced pork mixture. In some places it is sometimes possible to find an omelet that is stuffed with a tasty melange of seafood; in this case it is called *kai yaht sai ahahn talay*.

Hoy tod is a dish that simply can't be missed. *Hoy tod*, in fact, is popular not only in Thailand, but everywhere along the Malaysian Peninsula. In this concoction tapioca flour, cornstarch, salt, water and mussels are mixed into a batter and then

fried along with scrambled eggs on an enormous flat steel platter. The omelet like dish is served with bean sprouts, coriander, chili sauce, and a squeeze of lime juice. If you are a mussel lover, this is a memorable preparation that is really worth trying.

Eggs mixed with water, green onions, white pepper, fish sauce, and frequently other ingredients that are then steamed in a bowl is another popular egg dish. *Kai toon* has a texture and consistency somewhere between that of a custard and a soufflé. It is frequently served to the infirm or those unable to chew. It is very similar to *chawan mushi*, a dish served in Japan

The Thais serve a variety of custard like dishes, but they are very different from what is typically served in the West. *Kanome maw gaeng*, or curry pot custard, is a great example. This heavy custard is made with taro roots (sometimes with mung beans), coconut cream, eggs, and palm sugar. It is baked in a pan and served with thinly sliced shallots that have been fried until they are crispy! A sweet dessert with fried onions has got to be unique to Thai cooking, but it again emphasizes the importance of a contrast of flavors and textures to Thai cuisine. By all means don't neglect this dish because of the fried onions. The dish is uniquely delicious and something worth talking about when you get back home.

For those with a sweet tooth *sahngkayah* shouldn't be missed. This is a simple, but delicious, custard made with eggs, palm sugar, and coconut cream. It is usually served with sticky rice that has been softened with sweet-salty coconut cream. In its most elegant form this custard is steamed inside a whole small, green pumpkin called *fahk tong*. When the dish is served, the pumpkin is cut into wedges that are half yellow pumpkin and half white custard. The result is both attractive and extremely delicious. This is a dish that almost everyone seems to enjoy.

The final three dishes in this little tour are not for those worried about their cholesterol counts. The primary ingredient in golden threads, golden egg drops, and golden egg cake – *foi thong*, *thong yip*, and *thong yod*, respectively - is egg yolks. As a matter of fact, egg yolks are basically the only ingredient! In these three dishes a hot syrup is made of sugar and water into which sieved egg yolks are dropped

either in the form of a thread, a drop, or a little pancake. After they solidify they are removed and drained to form a glossy sweet dessert of cooked egg yolk. Wow! Solid, sweet egg yolks. One serving probably gives you your cholesterol allotment for the entire year. Unique, and I must admit, very tasty.

That completes our tour of Eggs Thai Style. Now it's up to you to throw those inhibitions aside and give the Good Old Egg a try. You will certainly find something new and different. And if you're lucky, you will find a dish that you truly enjoy and will remember long after you have left Thailand.