

# HAWKER FOOD: A GUIDE FOR THE ADVENTUROUS

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Wherever Thais gather, food seems to follow. Sometimes arriving on each end of a pole slung over a shoulder; on other occasions in a cart pulled by a vendor; but more often than not in a small kitchen attached to a motorbike.

These mobile restaurants are an integral part of Thailand's cultural landscape and provide affordable food to busy people with tiny kitchens and limited budgets. If you want to sample Thai food as most Thais eat it, head for a gathering of these nomadic food vendors. The scene will be colorful, exotic, and authentically Thai. And you will soon discover why most Thais, including those who arrive on the scene by Mercedes Benz, devour hawker food: it is invariably delicious and representative of the best the Kingdom has to offer.

Finding a gathering of Thailand's peripatetic purveyors of food is not difficult. They seem to appear as if by magic wherever people congregate. Entertainment areas, construction sites, night markets and places where people shop are some of their favorite haunts.

The variety of dishes available and the number of cooking methods used is mind-boggling, creating a scene many visitors find chaotic and intimidating. But as with many things in life, a little effort and a touch of patience brings great rewards. This article seeks to simplify the initiation by providing a description of some of the most popular items available. Read it and then head for the hawkers. Don't worry about not speaking Thai. Sign language, a smile and a few baht are the only requirements necessary for sampling this delicious food.

But before continuing, let's briefly examine the issue keeping many away from hawker food: cleanliness and fears of food poisoning. Let's face it, genius isn't necessary to recognize the conditions under which this food is prepared fall below the standards set by most health departments. But there are factors present minimizing the dangers to you and your tummy.

Hawker food is invariably fresh. If you are eating an animal product, the time between execution and consumption is very short. Unlike food purchased in a western-style supermarket, there simply isn't time for it to spoil. In addition the hawker cooks much of the food as you watch, a process eliminating harmful bacteria. Raw fruits and vegetables are a problem for some people, but the great variety of food available makes it easy to avoid these items.

Ultimately the decision to sample hawker food is up you, but many people find the happy smiles on the faces of those consuming it to be reassuring. They've

been eating hawker food for a long time, are vivacious and happy, and don't seem to be suffering from stomach problems. If they can do it, you should be able to do the same.

### Barbecued Food

Mobile barbecues attached to the sides of motorbikes are a common sight in Phuket. Barbecued chicken (*gai yang*) is often the product being dished-up at these nomadic barbecues. Different marinades impart subtle differences in flavor, but mixtures with roots in Isarn – the northeastern part of the country -- are the most popular.

Whole chickens (*gai mun*) roasted on a charcoal-fired rotisserie are the latest rage in Phuket. Vendors dot the island's roads and every family seems to have staked out a favorite. At 100 baht a chicken they are a tasty bargain and a common item on Phuket's dinner tables.

Fish, usually mackerel or catfish, are often barbecued. Like the whole chickens, they are frequently taken home to be eaten. Barbecued pork, on the other hand, is often eaten at a fold-up table near the vendor. *Moo yang* is marinated in a sweetened sauce and barbecued on a bamboo skewer. It is also sometimes possible to find a Malaysian-style pork satay served with a delicious peanut sauce. It is something that shouldn't be missed.

Eggs barbecued in their shell, *gai ping*, are an unusual item. At 10 baht for three eggs, they provide economical nourishment for Thais with little money and a great photo opportunity for curious tourists. The vendors selling the fragile eggs invariably arrive on foot with their barbecue and eggs hanging from the opposite ends of a pole picturesquely slung over their shoulders. Sausage, fresh and dried squid, and ground balls of pork, fish and chicken are some, but not all, of the other items commonly barbecued by food vendors.

### Steamed Food

It is surprising to many westerners, particularly Americans, to witness the amount of corn (*khao poot*) eaten by Thais. Although mature and chewy, the steamed corn served by vendors is very popular. When an ear is removed from the vendor's giant aluminum steamer, the purchaser has the option of having it dunked in salty water and/or cut from the cob. Most Thai purchasers seem to prefer it dunked and left on the cob.

*Salapao*, a steamed rice flour dumpling stuffed with either a pork mixture or sweetened bean paste, is the local equivalent of a sandwich. At five baht a dumpling, they are a great snack. Vendors selling *salapao* also frequently serve *khanom jip*, an item made from a mixture of ground pork or shrimp that's been stuffed into a wonton wrapper and then steamed. Hawkers selling *salapao* are particularly mobile and can often be seen roaring down the highway on a motorbike with a sidecar filled with mounds of puffy white *salapao*.

Minced pork and peanuts are often surrounded by a paste made from tapioca and then cooked in a steamer with a cone-shaped cover to create *sakoo sai moo*. Since pork wrapped in rice pancakes (*khao kriab pak moh*) has the same stuffing, it is often served by the same vendor. It is fascinating to watch the preparation of these two delicious dishes, particularly the skill required for forming the little rice pancakes.

Another in the almost endless list of steamed goodies is *bah jang*. In this dish a *ti* leaf is wrapped around a stuffing made with sticky rice and things like peanuts, pork, mushrooms, Chinese sausage and salty eggs. *Bah jang* are often colorfully wrapped with a straw string and hung from the vendor's cart.

### Deep Fried

The popularity of KFC outlets throughout Thailand attest to the popularity of fried chicken (*gai tod*). But hawkers sold it long before the arrival of the Colonel and Madison Avenue hype. The popular vendor on the street outside the Thai Airways ticket office in Phuket Town has been at the same spot for several years and unlike the Colonel has never spent a cent on advertising.

The Thais like everyone else in the world love spring rolls (*poh pia tod*). The vendors selling them often serve a variety of other fried tidbits, including wontons, potato balls, curry turnovers, fish cakes and squares of toast covered with ground pork or shrimp. The fish cakes (*tod man pla*) are made from fish that has been ground and mixed with curry paste, sliced green beans and slivered lime leaves. Many foreigners enjoy this unusual and tasty little snack.

### Stewed and Boiled Food

Chicken with rice (*khao man gai*) is a bland dish easy on sensitive stomachs. In this preparation vendors boil chicken and use the water to cook rice and make delicious soup. The chicken is shredded and then served along with the rice and soup. A special sauce made with soy sauce, soy bean paste, minced ginger and chopped chilies is always served on the side.

One of the most colorful dishes served by hawkers is *khao ga moo*. In this concoction with Chinese origins, pork is simmered in a red sauce flavored with five-spice powder. It is usually served with rice and some boiled greens.

Noodle soup made with either rice (*kwaytiao nam*) or wheat (*bahmee nam*) noodles and a variety of other ingredients is probably the most popular item served by hawkers. The noodles are always mounded in a glass case along with the other items to be added to the soup. Pointing is the order of the day here as several combinations of ingredients are possible. Balls of minced pork, fish, chicken or beef are some of the items commonly served along with the noodles.

### Sweet Items

The Thais, unlike westerners, rarely eat a dessert at the end of a meal, but this doesn't mean they don't like sweets. They love them, and they are often

purchased from hawkers. The variety of concoctions available is awesome and what follows is only a brief introduction. As with all hawker food pointing and a smile are all that is necessary to get you started.

Bananas, dunked in a batter, sprinkled with sesame seeds, and then deep fried (*kluay tod*) are a crunchy treat enjoyed by virtually everyone. Bananas are also peeled and barbecued (*kluay ping*). Sometimes they are cut into pieces and skewered on bamboo, but more often than not, they are cooked whole – a unique and healthy treat.

(Enlarge and correct mistake) *Khanom krok* is a popular coconut pudding made by pouring a batter into indentations in a special cast iron pan that is then covered and heated over a flame. Midway through the cooking process the puddings are gingerly turned so that they will brown on both sides. This is a wonderful snack everyone seems to enjoy.

Little pancakes spread with coconut cream and then topped with shredded coconut and bright orange strings made from egg yolks are a colorful sweet often served by Phuket's hawkers. A savory version of *khanom buang*, topped with shredded coconut and spring onions, is usually served by the same vendor.

*Khanom tang taek*, which translates as poor man's pancakes, is a popular dish showing being poor might not be that bad in Thailand. The flour and egg pancakes are cooked, spread with a sweet filling, stacked, and then cut into wedges. This tasty treat is often found at the temporary "expos" selling clothing and other merchandise that periodically spring up around the island.

Sticky rice is frequently mixed with bananas, shredded coconut or mashed taro. These mixtures are packed in banana leaves and then roasted (*khao niew ping*) or steamed (*khao tom mud*). Sticky rice is also simply cooked in coconut milk and then topped with a variety of items, including mashed mango (*khao niao mamuang*), creating a dish that is wildly popular with some foreigners.

The Thais like everyone else on the planet seem to be addicted to food covered with sweet syrup. In Thailand these syrups are not only made from sugar, but also sweetened coconut milk. Bananas, corn, and tapioca balls are only some of the items that can be found masked with a sugary liquid. For those of you with a sweet tooth, discovering some of the others will be an enjoyable journey into decadence.

As stated at the outset, this is only an introduction to the wonderful world of Thai sweets. There are dozens of items available that haven't been mentioned. But one of the great things about hawker food, sweet or otherwise, is the chance to sample and explore – it's part of the fun. And now that you have some information, the rest is up to you.

Remember finding a hawker won't be difficult. You don't have to do anything. If you remain in one spot long enough, one will suddenly appear in front you. What could be simpler?