

Mortar, Pestle, Cleaver and Wok

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by Michael Moore

The rhythmic thud of pestles striking mortars; the clatter of spatulas against woks; the chopping sound of a cleaver striking wood – rural Thailand is awakening from its slumber and all is well with the world. Mortar, pestle, cleaver and wok: symbols of strength and stability; symbols of Thailand.

The Thais are a frugal, hardworking people and the cooking implements found in their traditional kitchens reflect these characteristics. Simple, versatile, and easy on the pocketbook, these basic tools provide a vehicle for a journey into the fascinating culture of Thailand. Let's take this journey and begin our exploration with the mortar and pestle.

Unchanged over the centuries, this device enables the cook to grind, mash and pulverize the melange of spices and other ingredients necessary in Thai cooking. The most common type is hacked from a piece of granite in the village of Ang-Sila, just southeast of Bangkok. Basic and primitive, there are no moving parts and nothing to break; once purchased, it will probably last a lifetime.

Those electric wonders designed to make cooking easy -- the blender, food mill and food processor – have attacked the mortar and pestle, but it has stubbornly resisted and is still found in most Thai kitchens. The reason is simple. It does a better job than its electrical competitors. They cut, while it bruises and mashes, releasing the oils and flavors necessary for an authentic Thai taste. And then, of course, there is the sound. Awakening to the whir of an electrical appliance doesn't provide the feeling of cultural strength and solidity, created by the thud of pestle against mortar.

Not all mortars and pestles are fashioned from stone. The ones designed to make *som tum*, a salad originally from the northeast of the country, but now widely popular everywhere, are made from unglazed, fired clay. The pestle is always made of wood, as any other material would break the mortar.

Large mortars and pestles made entirely of wood can also be found. As with those made from clay and wood, they are used for making *som tum*. Smaller wood models are available and can be purchased in Phuket at the row kitchen supply stores on Sim Phai Road near Robinson Department Store. Although designed for mashing pills and other delicate ingredients, they make great gifts for visiting tourists. Unlike their granite brethren, they are light and easy to pack.

The Wok, the round-bottomed cooking pan so popular in China, is the primary cooking vessel in Thailand; and in humble kitchens, it is often the *only* cooking pan to be found. This marvelous utensil,

called a *gah ta* in Thailand, is remarkably versatile. It can be used to stir-fry, deep-fry, steam or roast.

The most popular woks are those made from spun carbon steel, a material considered inferior in the West because it is a poor conductor and develops a hot spot right over the burner. This liability is a virtue in the wok. Stir-fried foods are seared as they pass over the hot spot, sealing in the vitamins and juices -- and the ingredients don't burn because their contact with the hot spot is too brief.

Most Westerners know a wok can be used to stir-fry, but don't realize it has other uses. In Thailand, where the shape of the stove stabilizes its round bottom, it is used for deep-frying -- something that is very dangerous on Western stoves. The rounded bottom minimizes the amount of oil necessary for frying, an important consideration for the frugal Thais. Deep-fried chicken, *gai thod* in Thai, can be found mounded next to enormous woks all over the island. Fried bananas, or *kluey thod*, are another popular snack that is often deep-fried in a wok.

Steaming is exceedingly simple with this versatile cooking utensil. A single dish can be steamed by putting water in the bottom of a covered wok and placing the dish on a rack above the water. Wooden chopsticks are often used to make the rack. Larger amounts of food can be steamed by stacking large bamboo baskets in the wok. The slopping sides hold these specially crafted baskets above the boiling water. The bottoms of the baskets are made with a loose lattice of bamboo that allows steam to rise through all the baskets. The basket on top of the stack has a tight fitting lid to insure that the steam doesn't escape. *Salapao*, a rice flour bun filled with pork or a bean paste mixture, is often steamed in this way. Smaller versions of these baskets can be found in numerous shops around the island selling *dim sum*, little steamed snacks served for lunch in Chinese restaurants.

The large size of a wok permits it to be used as a primitive oven. The food to be roasted or baked is simply placed on a rack inside a covered wok that has been heated over a burner turned to low. An interesting variation on this process involves putting an ingredient, like sugar, in the bottom of the wok in order to produce smoke. When this is done, the wok suddenly transforms itself into a smoker.

Like the mortar and pestle, the wok is inexpensive and will last a lifetime. A good one, made from spun carbon steel, can be purchased for about 200 baht. When compared with the cost of a set of pots and pans in the West, the virtues of this multi-purpose, long-lasting cooking utensil become even more evident.

The last stop on our examination of Thailand's basic cooking tools is the cleaver. Although not found in some kitchens because it is relatively expensive, the cleaver is popular with serious cooks and those with a Chinese heritage. Originally introduced into Thailand from China, the best cleavers are still imported from the enormous country to the north. It is almost always used with a round chopping block made from the wood of a tamarind tree. Although hard, the

wood is soft enough to keep from blunting the cleaver's sharp edge. The chopping blocks are invariably purchased from vendors wandering around the island with carts filled with enormous piles of chopping blocks, an intriguing sight for those fortunate enough to see it.

The versatility of a cleaver is mind-boggling. First, of all, it can be used to cut, chop and dice, like a French Chef's Knife. But because it is short and heavy, it can also be used to hack through bones – much like a miniature ax. This is the end of its cutting functions, and it must be admitted that it can't make the delicate incisions sometimes required in cooking. But look at the other things it can do.

When turned over, the wide, top edge of the cutting blade can be used to tenderize meat. When turned upright, the end of the handle can be used to bruise garlic so that the skin can be removed. The garlic is then placed on the wooden block and slapped with the flat side of the blade, crushing it. This process beats a garlic press, and the flavor of the garlic doesn't seem to change.

Have you ever chopped onions and then had trouble removing them from the chopping block? No problem with a cleaver. Its blade is wide enough to hold a large quantity of good. Simply sweep up the onions and transfer them to the pan. This same process can be used with other chopped vegetables. The cleaver acts like a flat plate for transferring objects from the chopping block to the stove.

Knife, plate, meat tenderizer, and garlic press; these are only some of the functions of the versatile cleaver. This remarkable tool deserves a spot in any kitchen in the world.

This brings us to the end of our brief journey. But remember, mortar, pestle, cleaver and wok: the basic tools of the Thai kitchen. Strong, versatile, and long-lasting. Just like the people and culture who use them.