

Southern Thai Cooking

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By Michael Moore

The food of southern Thailand is noted for its sharp, intense flavors, the most dominant of which is the heat generated by chilies and the abundant use of peppercorns. Not far behind is the sour taste provided by limes, vinegar and a collection of local herbs. To modify the intensity of these and other assaults on the taste buds, southerners eat large quantities of raw, fresh vegetables like cucumbers, eggplants, bean sprouts and green beans.

Bitterness is another taste enjoyed in the south. The Thais in general are more likely to appreciate food that is bitter than most cultures, but southerners are especially fond of it. The *sataw* bean, its most unique source, is found in the long, ladder-like pods of a tree that grows throughout the southern Thailand. Affection for this bean is unique to the region and other Thais often identify southerners and southern food with this unusual and intensely flavored legume.

If you are interested in trying some *sataw* beans, *goong pat sataw*, is a good place to start. This is a simple stir-fried dish made with shrimp, garlic, fish sauce, a little sugar and, of course, the bitter beans. *Moo pat sataw* is a similar dish, but made with pork. Both preparations are noticeably bitter, but many people, including visitors, find them a refreshing change of pace.

Southern Thailand's location on the long, narrow Malaysian Peninsula has had a significant impact on its cuisine. The proximity of the sea has made the region famous throughout Thailand for the quality and quantity of its seafood. When visiting the south, Thais from other parts of the country immediately head for a seafood restaurant.

There are a myriad of delicious seafood dishes available, but many of them aren't distinctly southern in character. *Gaeng leuang*, a thin hot and sour curry made with water rather than coconut milk, is a notable exception. This explosive dish is a classic example of what southern Thais enjoy: incendiary heat and lip puckering sourness. If you want a sample of what southern cooking is all about, this is the one dish to try.

Phuket is especially well-known for its seafood. Its proximity to the Andaman Sea and the rest of the Indian Ocean provide it with an abundant supply of marine life. At one time the riches of the Gulf of Thailand supplied all of the country with seafood, but pollution and over-fishing have done much to eliminate this resource. If you want to enjoy Thai seafood at its best, Phuket and the other areas of the south facing the Indian Ocean are where you will find it.

The Thais are masters at preparing seafood. It is barbecued, steamed, stir-fried, eaten raw, cooked in liquids and grilled in foil or banana leaf envelopes. Thailand's seafood dishes are among the country's least complex dishes, but a sauce is usually involved, either as a part of the dish or as something that is served on the side.

The Thais are particularly good at steaming fish, and there is nothing more delicious than a delicate fish that has been steamed. It comes to the table moist, full of flavor and easy to eat. *Pla neung manao* is especially good. In this dish garlic, chilies and lime juice are spread on a fish that is steamed until done. When served, the garlic and chilies are pushed aside, leaving a fish resting in a delicious lemony sauce. On one of your forays to a seafood restaurant give steamed fish a try. You'll be glad you did.

The peninsular location has also opened the South to influences from other cultures. Powdered turmeric and other "Indian" spices frequently appear in Southern dishes. Even more apparent is the impact made by seafaring Chinese who arrived in the area long ago, bringing with them their love of wheat flour noodles. *Hokkien mee*, a spaghetti like noodle, is enjoyed by all Thais in the south. Shops specializing in various preparations using *Hokkien mee* are especially popular in Phuket Town.

Many of the people in the south are Muslim and this has created a distinct sub-cuisine. The curries enjoyed by Muslims are rich, sweet and flavored with many of the spices found in Indian curries. *Gaeng Mussamun*, a curry popular throughout the country, began life in the Muslim south. It is flavored with cinnamon and cardamom and uses potatoes and peanuts as ingredients. Foreign visitors who find Thai food unbearably hot often turn to Muslim curries as they are generally less spicy than those favored by Buddhist Thais.

Another signature dish of the south is *kao yum*. It is so popular there are small shops in Phuket and other population centers that specialize in only this dish. It is made with Jasmine rice that is tossed with a mixture of herbs, vegetables and fruits that are held together with a sauce that is sweet and sour. To all of this, a prodigious amount of dried red chili is added. You should try it if you get a chance, but remember it is likely to knock your socks off unless you specifically ask the vendor to go easy on the chili.

Southern Thai food is hot, sour, sweet and sometimes bitter. It is an expression of a unique culture and heritage. While you are in the south, sample some of the traditional dishes. Their intense flavors will make an impact that you will never forget.