

Well I'll be Dipped

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by Michael Moore

In recent years a platter of fresh vegetables and a dip or two have become popular and healthy appetizers in the West. For the Thais, this is nothing new. In fact, fresh vegetables and a variety of spicy sauces have served as the core element in traditional Thai meals for centuries. A bowl of rice, a couple of fish, a few raw vegetables and a zesty sauce for dipping were – and still are – all that was needed for a healthy Thai meal.

These sauces are serious business with the Thais and are as important to their cuisine as sauces are to the cuisine of France. All Thai cooks know how to prepare them and each will argue that his or her recipes are the best. All Thai meals, from the most humble to those at a lavish banquet, will include some fresh vegetables and sauces for dipping.

Thai sauces fall into two general categories: *Nam Prik* and *Lon*. The differences between the two lie in the ingredients and methods of preparation.

The *Nam Prik* sauces of today typically contain chilies, dried shrimp or fish, garlic, fish sauce, lime juice and a dash of sugar. This is all pounded together in a mortar so that a spicy thick sauce is formed. A few tiny, bitter eggplants are then usually stirred in to form the basic sauce. If a dollop of shrimp paste is added, the result is *Nam Prik Kapi*; add a little salted mackerel, and *Nam Prik Pla Too* is created. Other ingredients, depending upon the region, the cook's preferences and what is available in larder are frequently incorporated to form any of several different kinds of *Nam Prik*.

Lon are richer and more involved than *Nam Prik*. They are usually cooked and made with coconut milk. Instead of dried shrimp or fish, they often contain cooked pork or fresh shrimp. The *Lon* sauces are frequently preferred by Westerners as they aren't as incendiary as *Nam Prik* and the taste of fermented or dried seafood usually isn't as prominent. An especially delicious *Lon* available at many restaurants in Phuket is *Poo Lon*. Made with coconut milk and crab, this sauce will soon make you forget Western vegetable dips made with packaged soup mixes and creamed cheese! It is absolutely scrumptious.

Although dipping sauces have been enjoyed by Thais for centuries, the recipes have gradually changed over the years. The zest in the original versions didn't come from chili peppers as this fiery ingredient didn't appear in Thailand until the Portuguese brought it in the 16th century.

Black pepper provided the initial fire and is known as *Prik Thai* in Thailand.

Until the 20th century, transportation to the inland areas of the country was difficult and many of the ingredients used by coastal peoples weren't common in the interior of Thailand. Fish sauce, an indispensable ingredient in most of today's dipping sauces, wasn't popular in much of the country until fairly recent times. Instead, inland people used *Pla Ra*, a fermented brew of freshwater fish and rice. *Nam Prik Pla Ra* is still a very popular dipping sauce in the northeastern part of the country.

It is impossible to discuss all of the types of *Nam Prik* and *Lon* found in Thailand as dozens of versions are available and regional differences play a big role. Some of the sauces, however, are enjoyed by all Thais, regardless of where they are from or the size of their pocketbooks.

Nam Prik Pao, sometimes called "Chili Jam," is made from ingredients that have been roasted, peeled and then pounded into a paste. In traditional kitchens with wood fires, the ingredients are roasted in the coals until their skins are black. Today, most people, dry roast the ingredients in a frying pan. In addition to being used as a dip, *Nam Prik Pao* is often added as an ingredient to other dishes. Some people like to spread it on rounds of toast for eating as an appetizer. (Mention Tom Yam Gung)

Lon Tao Jiao is a delicious sauce made with soy bean paste, coconut milk and minced pork. The fact that it is cooked gives it a savory flavor that is simultaneously salty, sour and sweet. A notable omission in this sauce is the heat associated with many Thai sauces – making it a favorite with many Westerners. Versions of this sauce made in Phuket sometimes contain small crabs that are eaten shell and all by the Thais.

Two sauces from the Chiang Mai area have become popular throughout Thailand. *Nam Prik Ong*, unlike most *Nam Prik*, is cooked and contains pork and tomatoes, making it the Thai equivalent of spaghetti sauce. Although used primarily as a dip for vegetables, sticky rice and crisp-fried pork skins, it is sometimes used to sauce rice or noodles. *Nam Prik Noom* is a green sauce made from green chilies similar to banana peppers found in the West. The peppers are roasted and peeled before being mashed into a paste. This gives the sauce a roasted taste that many find appealing.

The cuisine of Southern Thailand – of which Phuket is a part – is noted for its intense flavors. *Nam Prik Jone*, a southern specialty, is filled with spicy heat. It is an unusual *Nam Prik* in that the ingredients are left in chunks rather than being mashed into a paste. Since *Jone* means "pirate" in Thai, cookbook author Nancee McDermott suggests the sauce is chunky because its originators were constantly on the move in an attempt to avoid the long-arm of the law. *Naam Prik Gung Siab*, a big favorite at

the Baan Rim Pa Restaurant in Patong Beach, is a traditional *Nam Prik* that is made with a type of dried shrimp popular in Phuket. Although very Thai, and with a flavor that is different from what is typical in the West, this dip has proved to be a favorite at this popular restaurant.

These are but a few of the numerous dips found in the Kingdom of Thailand. The Thais are real veterans when it comes to vegetable dips. While you are here, do yourself a favor and try some of them. If you do, you will probably have something new to add to your repertoire of appetizers when you return home.