

# Thai Food: 10 Items You Probably Won't Find Back Home

by Michael Moore

Thai food is currently the “in” cuisine with the movers and shakers in the culinary world. Thai restaurants span the globe and can be found in virtually every major metropolis – and more spring to life each day.

Magazines and cookbooks extol the virtues of Thai food and label many of their recipes as “Thai style” or made with “Thai ingredients.” Famous chefs, particularly those who have broken from the traditional mold, stumble over one another in the rush to create new recipes that blend Western and Thai elements.

Now that you are in Thailand, you have a unique opportunity to view and sample this trendy cuisine at its source. But don't make the mistake of simply ordering the Thai dishes with which you have become familiar. Be adventurous and try some of the food that hasn't been exported abroad. If you do, you will not only be in for a taste treat, you will also learn more about the cuisine that everyone is talking about. Here are ten items to get you started. You might find one or two of them at your local restaurant back home, but this is unlikely. All were chosen because visitors to the Thailand often find them delicious and unusual.

**Catfish Salad.** This is a delicious dish, developed for royalty and seldom found outside of the Land of Smiles. In *yam pla duk phoo*, the lowly catfish reaches new heights and becomes a culinary offering that is indeed fit for a King.

In this preparation, catfish is minced and then quickly fried in hot oil so that it forms crunchy little grains. The fish is then mixed with lime juice, fish sauce and some salad ingredients. The result is sour, salty, crunchy – and absolutely delicious. Do yourself a favor and try *yam pla duk phoo*. If you have a difficult time with chili peppers, be sure to ask for it “mai pet” as the salad ingredients often include a large dose of chopped chili peppers.

**Fried Swamp Cabbage.** Swamp cabbage isn't a very glamorous name, neither is morning glory leaves, the other English name often given *pak bung*, but don't let this put you off. When stir-fried with a little oyster sauce or yellow bean sauce, this relative of the morning glory is delicious and invariably raved over by visitors. *Pak bung* can be found in almost any Thai restaurant and is one of the few

vegetables Thais cook with out mixing with other ingredients. If you are looking for the quintessential Thai vegetable, this it it.

**Fried Soft Shelled Crabs.** Unlike the soft-shelled crabs famous in the New England area of the United States, the shells of these delicacies aren't soft only after molting. They are always edible and when fried and dipped in a sauce are absolutely scrumptious.

You won't find these tasty tidbits in all restaurants, but they are relatively common on the menus of restaurants specializing in seafood, particularly those found in Phuket. However, even if you do find *poo nim thod*, you might be reluctant to try them as they arrive at the table looking a bit like a fried spider! For those able to cast inhibitions aside, this is a Thai treat well worth trying.

**Sataw Beans Stir-Fried with Shrimp.** Sataw beans are found in gigantic green pods hanging from trees dotting the Thai countryside. Many people love the bitter taste of the beans and anxiously await their annual arrival, but an equally large group says they taste horrible and smell even worse. Those who dislike them, however, run the risk of eating their words and lots of the beans – some of the strange looking legume's most vociferous proponents come from the ranks of those who were once skeptics.

Interestingly, sataw beans are often stir-fried with shrimp. The bitter tasting bean and the mild flavor of shrimp seem to have an affinity for one another. If you visit southern Thailand where sataw beans are especially favored, you are likely to find *sataw pat gung* on the menu. Try it if you get the chance. Who knows? You might find yourself an ardent supporter rather than one of the giant bean's vocal detractors.

**Minced Meat or Seafood Stir-Fried with Holy Basil.** A favorite with many visitors to Thailand, this dish is made with virtually any kind of minced meat or seafood. Westerners often enjoy it made with minced beef.

The dish is seldom found outside the Kingdom because of the basil leaf used to make it. Sometimes called holy basil, *bai grapao* is not a common ingredient in most Western cuisines. Its strong taste is quite distinct from that of sweet basil and at times is reminiscent of Worcestershire Sauce

Attempts to make this Thai specialty outside of its homeland with mint or other types of basil are tasty, but far from the real thing. While in Thailand, give it a try, but remember to ask for it "*mai pet*" if you don't want it made with copious amounts of chili. One or more of the various incarnations of *bai pat grapao* will be

available at virtually any restaurant in Thailand.

**Sang Thip, Sang Som or Mekhong and Soda.** When Thais go to a restaurant, it is always an auspicious occasion and alcoholic beverages usually play a big part in the proceedings. Many diners bring their own poison, often conspicuously displayed so that other diners can measure status from the type of alcohol being consumed. Johnnie Walker Black and Chivas Regal rate the most points, and like most local spirits are consumed in minute quantities with large amounts of ice and soda water.

The working stiff, however, can't afford the expensive foreign stuff and often drinks Sang Thip, a domestic rum with a reasonably pleasant flavor. Sang Som, another rum, and the legendary Mekhong, a rice whisky popular with GI's during the Vietnam days, are other national favorites.

You aren't going to find any of these beverages back home so give them a try if you want a taste of the "real Thailand." Remember, however, that even though they are consumed with large amounts of ice and soda water, it is the total amount of alcohol consumed during an evening that determines how your head will feel the next morning. All three of the local favorites are famous for creating monumental hangovers.

Ice cream on a Hot Dog Bun. Thailand's cuisine is a fascinating jumble of adaptation, ingenuity, and creativity. The Thai experience with ice cream, or "*I-tim*" as it is known throughout the Kingdom, is a classic example. Lacking dairy products, the Thais initially made "ice cream" with coconut milk or cream. Today, although still made from from coconuts, it is usually made with dairy products or with a combination of coconut milk and dairy cream.

Some of Thailand's most popular flavors are seldom seen elsewhere. Corn, jackfruit, durian, taro root, and *laht chong*, a green noodle flavored with pandanus leaves are all popular in Thailand, but unlikely to be found in western style ice cream shops.

One of the most fascinating things about *I-tim* is the way it is served. Cones are popular, but most Thais prefer their ice cream dished up in a hot dog bun! The bun is opened and small scoops of one or more flavors of ice cream are placed in a row. A topping – always unique to anyone outside of Thailand – is poured on top and the ice cream and bun are then eaten like a hot dog! The result is delicious, unusual and uniquely Thai.

**Green Coconut.** Coconuts found outside of the tropics are usually brown spheres that have been husked. Their interiors contain a little coconut water and hard flesh that can be grated to create the shredded coconut familiar to most people.

Green coconuts are another matter. In Thailand they are sold in traditional markets and by itinerant vendors. The tops are hacked open with a machete and the coconut water drunk through a straw. When the water is finished, the soft flesh inside can be eaten with a spoon. The water is slightly astringent and very refreshing; the flesh, which is soft but not sweet, is less strongly flavored than hard coconut meat. Green coconuts are an invigorating treat on a hot day and provide a healthy alternative to beer or soft drinks. They are especially delicious on Koh Samui, not only a fabulous resort, but also one of Thailand's leading producers of coconuts.

**Grilled Bananas.** To most of us a banana is something we simply peel and eat. In Thailand, where there are reputed to be 40 different varieties, bananas are eaten in a mind boggling number of ways. One of the simplest and most readily available is *kluay ping*.

Walk down any street and you will see bananas being grilled on a barbecue. The flesh of those without a peel is firm and often covered with a fine coat of sugar that has crystalized as the banana cooks. The taste is sweet and smoky.

The banana that is grilled in its skin is a different variety, but equally delicious. The flesh is soft – almost like a custard – and flavored by the charred skin of the banana. It is also less sweet than those cooked without their skin and at times slightly sour.

If you want to try either of these delicious treats, simply point to the bananas and hand the vendor 10 baht. In return, you will receive about five bananas – more than enough for an ample snack for two people. This is Thai food as it should be – simple, direct and affordable by everyone.

Everywhere you turn in Thailand you will find examples of local food that you won't find back home. Hopefully, this guide will activate your spirit of adventure so that you will try some of the things you discover. If you do, you will not only encounter some delicious things to eat, you will also experience a part of Thailand that is missed by most visitors.

Happy adventures and bon appetit!