

## **Ice Cream: Thailand's Version** (Originally appeared in FoodNews magazine)

by Michael Moore

Thailand's cuisine is a fascinating jumble of adaptation, ingenuity, and creativity. The Thai experience with ice cream, "*I-tim*" or "*Ais-u-creem*" as it is known throughout the Kingdom, is a classic example of how the country's eating habits have evolved.

Frozen desserts seem to be a Chinese invention. There is evidence that primitive forms of ice cream were eaten in frigid areas of China as far back as 2000 BC. Flavored water ices were being eaten regularly when Marco Polo arrived and impressed Italy's famous traveler so much that he took recipes with him when he returned to Europe.

The Europeans started eating ice cream, as we now know it, when the technology for making ice was developed. It became the rage with French royalty after one of their countrymen figured out how to make it. Not to be outdone by the French, other royal houses started consuming it in large quantities. Initially the cost and problems of making ice made it a dish reserved for those with blue blood. But as ice became cheaper, it became popular with the masses. By the time Europeans started colonizing North America, it was being eaten by everyone. and became very popular in the British colonies.

The Thai experience with eating frozen desserts is remarkably similar. They were first eaten by royalty who learned about them from their European counterparts. Later, when it became technically possible to make ice cheaply, the taste for ice cream trickled down to the common people. At this point, the imagination of the Thais took over and the product that emerged used ingredients and flavors that were locally popular and easily available.

The first step was to make flavored frozen ices. This was accomplished in several ways and some of them are still followed today. The *I-tim laht* that are sold by mobile vendors and in Thailand's traditional markets provide a fascinating glimpse into the past. These "Popsicles" or "ice lollies" are made in an extraordinary contraption fabricated from stainless steel. Tubes slide into a rack that is fitted into a large container that is filled with ice and salt. The rack is shaken back and forth to promote freezing. When the ice is almost frozen, a bamboo stick is inserted so that tube of frozen ice can be enjoyed without the consumer ending up with sticky hands.

However, as everyone who has eaten ice cream knows, flavored ices are a far cry from the scrumptiously rich and creamy taste of ice cream. The Thais, who didn't have a lot of dairy products, reached the same

conclusion and began to make “ice cream” from coconut milk. The taste and texture of *I-tim kati soht* is slightly different, but coconut milk has the fat necessary to make a dessert similar to the ice cream made from dairy products.

The flavors of Thailand’s frozen ices and coconut ice cream are unique and virtually unknown as dessert flavorings to Westerners. Millet, corn, basil seeds, red beans, black beans boiled with syrup, and laht chong, a bright green noodle flavored and colored with pandanus leaves, are some of the favorites. Try finding these flavors and toppings at your local Baskin-Robbins!

Even now, when dairy products are readily available in Thailand, the ice cream made by vendors and hawkers is often made solely from coconut milk or from a combination of dairy milk and coconut milk. Although slightly different from the Western product, it is unique and flavorful in its own right.

The Thai fondness for ice cream made from coconut milk probably isn’t only a question of taste preference. The Thais, like most people in the Asia, have difficulties digesting lactose, the sugar that occurs naturally in milk. Since lactose doesn’t occur in coconut milk, large quantities of coconut based ice cream can be consumed without the irritating side effects produced by dairy ice cream.

Traditional Thai ice cream is available in a variety of places. Vendors with boxes filled with ice and coconut ice cream, cruise the streets and sois of Thailand with their bicycles and motorbikes. Children pester their parents for a few baht so that they can enjoy the rich cold sweetness. The scene is one that

One of the most fascinating things about Thai ice cream is the way it is served. Ice cream 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 or two – often unique to Westerners – 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.

### **Old Recipe for Traditional Coconut Ice Cream**

1 cup	sugar
½ cup	water
3 ½ cups	thick coconut milk

1. In a saucepan heat the water and melt the sugar so that a thick syrup is formed, taking care not to scorch the sugar. It should be thick enough to coat a spoon or paddle.
2. Remove from the heat and when the syrup has cooled to the point where it is warm, add the thick coconut milk.
3. Put the mixture in the container of an ice cream maker and crank for about 45 minutes. If desired, after about 25 minutes, shredded coconut or a chopped fruit of your choice can be added.
4. When finished cranking, pour the ice and ice water out of the ice cream maker and put in new ice and salt. Cover the entire ice cream maker with a blanket or newspapers and let sit for about thirty minutes.
5. Remove the ice cream from its container and serve.

### **Sidebar: Two Old-Style Ice Cream Shops**

It is still possible to find old-style ice cream shops in Bangkok. If you are interested, try the *Nattaporn* (221-3042) in Praengputhorn or *I-tim Boran Suwanchiamton* (448-3670) in Bangramad.

Khun Nattaporn, the owner of the ice cream shop bearing her name, is a third generation ice shop owner. Until a short time ago she only served ice cream made with coconut milk (*I-tim kati soht*). Recently she added two ice creams made solely with dairy products. One is flavored with coconut and the other with chocolate. She loves chocolate and is proud that she developed the recipe for chocolate ice cream herself.

The Nattaporn is located near the Ministry of the Interior and the Bangkok Governor's Office. Many of its customers have been frequenting the shop for years. One, a man who is over 70, remembers going to the shop when he was a college student.

The prices at the Nattaporn are also a throwback to the past. A kilo of ice cream made with coconut milk is only 70 baht. The most expensive flavor, chocolate, runs 110 baht a kilo while the coconut flavored regular ice cream is 90 baht a kilo. A cup of any of the three flavors in only 12 baht.

I-tim Boran Suwanchiamton is a similar style operation. Owner Chuan Chuchan's humble establishment is located in a grove of coconut trees. He only makes coconut milk ice cream, and he flavors it with fresh fruits as they become available during their season. He serves his coconut ice cream in a fresh young coconut with the coconut water in a glass on the side. This attractive dish costs a paltry 20 baht. A cup of his delicious ice cream is only 10 baht.

Both of these shops not only serve delightful ice cream, they also provide an inexpensive and fascinating trip into Thailand's past.

