

Salads

Thailand's Yummy Yams

by Michael Moore

They are easy to make, packed with vitamins and minerals, and a favorite with those interested in keeping the size of their waistline under control. Salads are found in all of the world's major cuisines and that of Thailand is no exception. In fact Thai salads, or *yam* as they are called in the Land of Smiles, are among the world's most imaginative. When Thai chefs create salads they use an astounding variety of techniques and ingredients to achieve the contrast of flavors and textures that the Thai people so deeply love.

Since Thai salads use so many ingredients, it is often difficult to decide whether something is a main course or a salad. The key, however, is in the dressing. Salads everywhere come dressed and those in Thailand invariably wear a shimmering coat made with a mixture of lime juice and salty fish sauce to which sugar is invariably added. When the sugar content is low, the dressings are refreshingly low in calories, a boon to those conscious of their diets.

Some of the best known Thai salads come from Isarn in the northeastern part of the country. Sandwiched between Laos and Cambodia, the soil in this area is poor and when it doesn't rain the crops are meager. The people here are wiry and tough, and the rustic, simple food they enjoy reflects this fact. Most of the people here are of Laotian heritage, and like their relatives on the other side of the Mekong, they are especially fond of fiery salads, spicy dips, "sticky" rice and grilled meats, fish and poultry.

Som tom, a salad now extremely popular in all of Thailand, has its roots in Isarn. Made with shredded green papaya that is pounded with a wooden pestle in a ceramic mortar along with chilies, garlic, shallots, green beans, tiny tomatoes and other ingredients, it is a dramatic introduction to what Thai salads are all about. The shredded papaya provides a crunchy texture, the chilies an abundance of fire and the lime juice used in the dressing a highly regarded sour taste. In Isarn the dish is made with tiny salt-preserved land crabs found in rice paddies and a pungent fermented fish sauce called *pla ra*. Neither ingredient is especially popular outside of Isarn so in the rest of the country dried shrimp and fish sauce are used instead. The Isarn

version of *som tom* is often called *som tom pu* or *som tom Isarn* and the more widely preferred version is known as *som tom Thai*.

Northeasterners love meat and when it is abundant, incorporate it into several salads. A group of these salads is known collectively as *larb*, which means “good fortune” in Thai. The cooked beef, pork, chicken or duck used in making *larb* is minced and mixed with chili powder, shallots, mint leaves, lime juice and roasted rice powder. Although fiery, the combination of ingredients is uniquely delicious. Similar salads called *nam toke* are made with pieces of sliced barbecued meat, but feature the chili, lime, mint and roasted rice powder flavors of *larb*.

One of Thailand’s most unique salads was originally made only for royalty, but the recipe is now common knowledge and it is popular everywhere. *Yam pla dook foo* clearly demonstrates the originality of Thai chefs. Here minced or shredded catfish is deep-fried so that it is crunchy. It is then mixed with or placed upon a bed of shredded green mango. Sprinkled with peanuts and chilies and doused with a dressing made of lime juice, fish sauce and a bit of sugar, it is a delightful combination of crunch, fire, sour, salt and a hint of sweetness. Look for this imaginative concoction on the menu of any Thai restaurant. Its royal origins insure its presence at elegant dining spots and its universal popularity puts it on dining tables in more humble establishments.

A Thai salad popular with foreigners and one featured at many up market restaurants is *yam nua*. The main ingredient here is beef and when it is of high quality, the salad can be sublime. The beef for classy versions of this salad is often marinated, grilled and thinly sliced. It is then mixed with things like coriander leaves, mint leaves, thinly sliced lemon grass and minced chilies. When dressed with a sour and mildly sweet dressing of lime juice, fish sauce and sugar, it is a memorable salad that can easily cross cultural boundaries and form a part of a Western-style meal.

Yam makuea yao takes aubergine, or eggplant as some call it, to new heights. In the best versions of this salad, the aubergine is roasted over charcoal so that the skin is charred, giving the entire aubergine a smoky flavor. Where charcoal isn’t available it is roasted in an oven or under a broiler, but it is never as good. The charred skin is removed and the aubergine flesh roughly chopped into pieces. It is then often mixed with things like chopped eggs, minced cooked pork, shallots and coriander and mint leaves. This *mélange* is then dressed with the traditional dressing and varying amounts of minced chile peppers.

A sour taste is much appreciated by the Thais and in *yam som-o* it comes from the pomelo forming the primary ingredient of the salad. Pomelo, a

parent of the grapefruit – which is a hybrid of the pomelo and orange – is often mixed with a variety of ingredients to make a sour salad. Most versions contain toasted coconut, crushed peanuts, fried garlic and shallot flakes and the obligatory chili. This is very much a cook's dish and can vary considerably from one restaurant to another, but all versions seem to end up tasting delicious.

The “cellophane” noodles made from mung bean paste are an ideal ingredient for a salad. Called *woon sen* in Thai, when softened in hot water, they have an uncanny ability to absorb liquid and flavors. Although there are numerous recipes for *yam woon sen*, it always has a dressing made of lime juice and fish sauce that can be absorbed by the noodles. The other ingredients vary considerably, but often include minced pork, shrimp and squid.

Thailand is blessed with a long coastline and abundant marine resources, making its seafood some of the best in the world. A popular salad all over the country, but especially at resorts like Phuket and Koh Samui, is *yam talay*. Squid and shrimp are almost always ingredients, but occasionally things like mussels and crab will make their way into the mix. These ingredients are usually tossed with sliced shallots, thinly sliced lemon grass coriander leaves, sliced fresh chilies, and Chinese-style celery. A sour dressing of lime juice and fish sauce is then poured over the mixture and everything carefully arranged on a platter. It will arrive at the table glistening with the dressing and decorated with carved vegetables.

Thailand's salads are unique, imaginative and delicious. Although they are typically served as a part of a multi-course meal, the fact they often contain meat, poultry or seafood, makes them excellent luncheon dishes. The next time you are in a Thai restaurant for either lunch or dinner, try some of the country's yummy yams. If you are like most people, you will be glad that you did.