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THE ONLY BANGKOK RESTAURANT GUIDE
TO TELL IT HOW IT REALLY IS

IMAGE asia

[Home](#) | [Print Version](#) | [Advertise](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Links](#)

[What's New?](#) | [Holes in the Wall](#) | [Features](#) | [Favourite Dish](#) | [Dining Bargains](#) | [Maps](#) | [Symbols](#) | [Directory](#)
[Restaurant Listings](#) | [Reviews](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Places to Go](#) | [Services & Suppliers](#) | [Places on the Move](#) | [Recipes](#)

Where to Eat in Bangkok > Home > Restaurant Features > **The Truth About Thai Seafood**

Features:

[Dining in Converted Houses](#)
[A Primer on Booze: Rum](#)

From Previous Issues

[Dining on Chao Phraya River](#)
[A Primer on Booze: Tequila](#)

[Bangkok's Best Steaks](#)
[A Primer on Booze: Part 1](#)
[The Energy Food Syndrome](#)
[Gin](#)
[French Food in Bangkok](#)
[Nectar from Spain](#)
[Afternoon Tea](#)
[Lee Café Advertorial](#)
[Australian Wine](#)
[Tasty New Tipples](#)
[Little Bo Peep's Missing Sheep](#)
[Siam City Advertorial](#)
[Wyndham Thai Advertorial](#)
[Castello Banfi Wine Maker](#)
[Salad: It's good for you!](#)
[Business Set Lunches](#)
[Reducing Fusion Confusion](#)
[Sunday Brunch with the Kids](#)
[Sauvignon Blanc](#)
[Best Burgers in Bangkok](#)
[Aphrodisiacs](#)
[Wines of the World](#)
[Vin de Pays from France](#)
[Lies We Eat](#)
[Bakery Bargains](#)
[Siam Winery at Samut Sakorn](#)
[A Dummies' Guide Pizzas](#)
[The Truth About Thai Seafood](#)
[Disposable Restaurants](#)
[Japanese Dining in Bangkok](#)
[Service With a Smile?](#)
[A Handle on Italian Wines](#)

The Truth About Thai Seafood

See Also

[Maps](#)
[Bangkok](#)

FEATURES

The Truth About Thai Seafood

by The Wandering Gourmet



What rarely comes from the sea, is sometimes laden with chemicals, and often bland in taste? If you answered, "Thai seafood", you know your mackerel from your halibut and win a free ticket to Finding Nemo. Although extolled for its virtues and good taste, Thai seafood is a mixed catch and often not what it seems. For the truth about this slippery and elusive subject, read on. We think you might be surprised with what you learn.



The Thais, and Thai-Chinese in particular, are fond of displaying live fish and crustaceans in tanks in front of their seafood restaurants. At times these fish are remarkable. The Lumba Lumba on Soi Langsuan, for example, has a giant grouper in one of its tanks that has been around for decades.



Tankfood? An aging grouper tells the tale

In other words, they have been farmed and would be more accurately described if called 'tankfood' rather than 'seafood'.

Large enough to feed an army, you can have it grace your table for a mere 100,000 Baht. But price isn't the only thing that makes the grouper exceptional. Unlike most of the condemned spending their final minutes cramped in tanks in front came from the open sea. The other guys – the ones you and I can afford – began life in captivity and have never lived in anything remotely resembling the ocean.



The reason Thailand relies so heavily on aquaculture is frighteningly simple: the Gulf of Thailand and the country's inland waterways no longer have much of it. Pollution and years of overfishing have depleted supplies in the wild. But the Thais love seafood and have solved the supply problem by becoming masters at raising the stuff, a skill that has made them the world's largest producer and exporter of farmed shrimp.

A list of Thai seafood raised in captivity is mind-boggling. Let's take a look at the fish and then move on to the crustaceans and molluscs. Catfish, snakehead fish and both ordinary and red tilapia, known respectively in Thai as pla duk, pla chon, pla nin and tub tim, are all fresh water species, 100% farmed and very bland in taste, a fact that probably explains why they are usually dipped in high powered sauces. Along with pla thu, they are the fish most commonly eaten by Thais at home and in ordinary restaurants. Pla thu is the only wild fish on the list and the only salt water variety. Once common in Thai waters, it is rapidly disappearing and is now often imported from India. What this means is that when you eat fish in an ordinary Thai restaurant, if it isn't pla thu, it probably came from a fish farm. It also means when it comes to fish at least, Thailand is not the seafood paradise it's cracked up to be.

The Thais have also mastered farming 'seabass', a variety of salt water fish appearing in one form or another throughout the world. It is often found swimming tanks in Thailand's omnipresent seafood restaurants, particularly those catering to farang. Although pleasant to eat, it is not worth getting overly excited about. Unfortunately, it is rarely described as being farmed and often wears a price tag commensurate with it having come from the wild. This is completely unjustified as it can sometimes be purchased from a tank or on ice at Tesco or the Big C for as little as B69 per kilo!



Shrimp and prawns are the crustaceans most commonly raised by Thais. Both fresh and salt water varieties are farmed and constitute 100% of the product consumed in local restaurants. (picture of shrimp farm) If you are used to shrimp and prawns from cold water sources, these beautiful looking

crustaceans are going to be a major disappointment. They are often bland and virtually without taste. People who rave about them are either beguiled by how they look or haven't enjoyed shrimp and prawns from cold water. Executive Chef, Philippe Gaudal of the Landmark Hotel verifies this is true and points out that this problem extends to fish as well as other types of seafood. "The flavour of seafood in Thailand is often disappointing," he told me recently. "This means we have to import much of what we serve, making prices higher than we would like."

Farmed soft-shelled crab is a bright spot on the Thai culinary scene. Long a popular delicacy in the United States and Italy, but only available when crabs moult, the Thais, bless their hearts, have mastered raising them. The flavour seems comparable to wild varieties, prices are a fraction of what they would cost in Venice or Chesapeake Bay and they are available year-round. Soft-shell crabs are now found on the menus of virtually all Thai and international restaurants in Bangkok. Easy to eat and popular with inventive chefs, they might make people forget about all those languid tiger prawns.

Oysters, a mollusc, have long been raised in captivity for pearls, with oyster meat being a delectable by-product. Raw farmed oysters from Surat Thani are frequently served on the half-shell in local restaurants. My advice is to give them a pass and stick with the expensive imported ones



from France, Australia and New Zealand. Eating raw oysters is always risky and a frequent source of hepatitis infections. Water pollution is a common problem in Thailand and I've seen the water in which oysters are farmed in Surat Thani – enough said.



Raising abalones at the Phuket Abalone Farm

The Thai genius for raising seafood is illustrated by the activities of Dr. Sitthisak Muangsin in Phuket. A Doctor of Veterinary Medicine educated at Chulalongkorn University, he has mastered raising abalone, a highly regarded and outrageously expensive mollusc. Popular with the Chinese because it is an auspicious food thought to bring good luck, it is also popular with Westerners lucky enough to have eaten it. Supplies of Abalone in the wild have virtually dried up, but Dr. Sitthisak's abalones provide a viable alternative. Aside from mortality problems, the difficulty with raising abalone is that slow growth makes them prohibitively expensive. Dr. Sitthisak has solved these problems by using a species found in Asian waters that is hardy and grows quick enough to be harvested after only two years. They aren't cheap, but they are significantly less expensive than the wild variety. When I tried some of the good doctor's abalone a couple of years back, they were comparable to the wild varieties I had eaten as a youngster. At the present time virtually all of Dr. Sitthisak's abalone are sold to Taiwanese, Japanese and Korean buyers.



Farm bred and raised abalone

He is currently experimenting with having shrimp farmers raise the abalone in some of their ponds. If this is successful, they should be more widely available and the price should drop significantly. Although quality and lack of taste are always problems with farmed seafood, the most serious concerns are health issues and impact on the environment.

It is difficult to find information about health issues in Thailand itself, but there is tons of information available from abroad and much of it chronicles health problems associated with farmed seafood. Some of this information is suspect because it comes from associations representing fisherman, but much of it is unbiased and a cause for concern. The primary criticisms involve the use of antibiotics and chemicals to prevent disease in the seafood being farmed. Although it is difficult to get information about what is happening in Thailand, it is important to note that Thai shrimp (and other products) have been found by the EU and the United States to contain residues of nitrofurans, chemicals banned for use in food-producing animals by most countries in the world, including Thailand, because they cause cancer in laboratory animals. To be fair, it is important to note the Thais recognize this is a problem and farmers groups have taken steps to eliminate the use of the banned substances in exported products.

The real issue for consumers in Thailand is seafood that is consumed locally. Does this seafood contain banned substances? Are farmers dumping seafood on the local market that would be banned abroad? As far as I can determine, little information is available about what is happening on the domestic scene. It would seem prudent, however, to buy farmed seafood from large concerns who sell seafood that is also being exported. I also shudder to think what might be found in farmed products, like tilapia and catfish, that aren't widely exported. In a country where inspections are few and far between and virtually no labels appended to fresh food products, it could be almost anything. As you can see, Thai seafood is a mixed bag. There is no denying most of it doesn't come from the wild, but this isn't all bad. Farming insures a steady supply of seafood we all like to eat and there are exciting possibilities of new products on the horizon. On the other hand, there are significant environmental and health issues that must be addressed. At this point, it is unclear what the future will hold. In the meantime, the best advice is probably to enjoy your seafood, but in moderation and with a good dose of common sense.

Catfish and snakehead fish are often raised in ponds filled by run-off water from rice paddies



Seafood or Tankfood... The ambiance of seaside dining



[Site Map](#)

[Go to Top](#)