

Thai Food: Beating the Heat

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by Michael Moore

Let's face it, there are two major schools of Thai cooking: the relatively mild, sweet coconut curries that have become so popular outside of Thailand and the food served in the Land of Smiles itself. You've undoubtedly already met the ingredient that separates the cuisine into two camps: the chili pepper. In the exported version of the cuisine use of this fiery ingredient is tempered to meet the tastes of foreign consumers; inside the Kingdom inhibitions are removed and the ferocious fruit is used to meet the desires of the local population – a quantity that invariably knocks the socks off most visitors.

Unfortunately many people who find the heat of the chili pepper unbearable solve the problem by avoiding the local cuisine altogether. This is sad because the food produced in Thailand is truly delicious and a holiday highlight for many visitors to the country. Fortunately there are ways – short of abstinence - for dealing with the impact of the chili pepper. Visitors armed with this knowledge can eat comfortably while in Thailand. In addition they frequently discover that they enjoy the domestic version of the cuisine more than the “Thai food” they are served back home.

Knowing what to do, or perhaps more accurately, what not to do, once zapped by an incendiary chili pepper is important. Fight the impulse to gulp a glass of water. Water removes other flavors from the mouth and leaves the capsaicin, the alkaloid in chilies that make them so hot, with no competition. It is best to immediately take a bite of another food so that your mouth and taste buds will have something else to think about. A spoonful of rice or a few slices of cucumber seems to work well for many people.

Most items served in Thai restaurants – other than curries – are prepared from scratch. This enables the diner ask the chef to prepare the food “*mai pet*” – or not spicy. Unfortunately this strategy doesn't always work. The meaning of “not spicy” to a Thai and a foreigner are often two completely different things. If you are especially sensitive to the heat of the chili, it might be better to ask that the dish be served “*mai prik*” – or without chilies. If you want to add some heat once the dish arrives, you will probably find a container of ground dried chili peppers on the table. If not, the food server will soon find one. Containers of ground chili peppers are as common in Thai restaurants as salt shakers in Western restaurants.

Perhaps the most important weapon for those sensitive to chilies is to realize that not all Thai food contains this potent ingredient. A proper Thai meal should contain a balance of textures, ingredients and flavors. This means that there are many Thai dishes that are prepared without chili peppers. By concentrating on these mild, but flavorful dishes, the heat of the chili can easily be avoided.

Soups constitute the largest category of Thai food that is not overly spicy. *Gaeng chud* means mild tasting liquid – a stock similar to that served in the West. Thai

soups made with stock and other ingredients are invariably delicious and devoid of the heat of the chili pepper. When chilies *are* added, it is usually done by the individual diner at the table to suit his or her own taste.

There are dozens of types of *gaeng chud* served in Thailand. *Gaeng Chud Salai Talay* is especially delicious. In this dish a mild stock is combined with seaweed and seafood to make a delicious soup that is found at most seafood restaurants in Phuket. *Gaeng chud* is also served with minced pork, tofu, bean thread noodles and a multitude of other ingredients. The end result is always flavorful and guaranteed to be mild in taste.

Noodle soup, a popular luncheon dish in Thailand, is a surefire way to avoid the heat of the chili. Carts and small restaurants serving noodles are found on virtually every street corner in Phuket. They serve an astounding variety noodle soup. Stock is scooped from steaming cauldrons and poured over bits of meat, poultry or seafood to which rice, wheat or bean thread noodles are added. Rice noodles served with fish quenelles, *Gaeng Chud Look Jin Pla*, is especially popular in Phuket. The amount of chili pepper consumed by Thais with these soups is often mind-boggling to the foreigner, but the chili is always added at the table to suit the taste of the individual diner. This means the foreign guest has complete control over the incendiary level of the final product.

There are also an astounding variety of fried rice and fried noodle dishes served in Phuket. As with noodle soup it is usually up to the individual diner to add the seasoning to these dishes. Where the chilies are added by the chef it is always possible to ask that the dish be prepared “mai pet” or “mai prik” as these dishes are always made to order. It is especially important that this information be communicated to the chef when ordering *Pad Thai*. This popular dish, a melange of thin rice noodles and a variety of other ingredients, varies widely from one chef to another and sometimes arrives at the table with prodigious quantities of chili pepper added.

If you are stuck and don't know what to do, it is often wise to order some of Phuket's wonderful seafood. Seafood is delicately flavored and easily overpowered by other ingredients. The Thais recognize this and usually keep their seafood offerings mildly spiced. There are exceptions to this rule, seafood salads for example, but most steamed, barbecued and fried seafood dishes are easily negotiated by sensitive palates.

This brings us to Thai curries, the darling of Thai food as served abroad and the dish that foreign visitors frequently find unbearably spicy when consumed in Thailand. The source of the problem can be found in the way Thai curries are created.

The curries of Thailand are made by pounding a variety of ingredients together to with a mortar and pestle to form a thick paste. The paste is then cooked and combined with a liquid, usually coconut milk, and other ingredients to form the curry. Chili peppers are almost always an integral part of the paste, and the creation of the paste a laborious, time-consuming job. This means that curry pastes are invariably prepared in advance, and that they cannot be tailored at the last minute to meet the desires of individual diners.

As we all know the vast majority of Thais like their food hot, phenomenally hot by Western standards. This means that the curry pastes, *Krung Gaeng*, created in advance for use in restaurants within Thailand contain large amounts of chilies. In Thai restaurants overseas the amount of chilies used in creating curry pastes is reduced to meet the tastes of overseas consumers. Hence a curry prepared in Thailand is likely to be much spicier than a curry served abroad.

There is no simple solution to this problem. There are, of course, some excellent Thai restaurants in Phuket that cater primarily to foreign visitors. The curry pastes created in these restaurants are more likely to be like those created overseas. Thai visitors to these restaurants, by the way, invariably complain that the food is bland and without much flavor!

The time will come, however, when you find yourself away from restaurants catering primarily to foreigners or in the mood to eat some “real” Thai food. When this happens, you will find that rice is your greatest ally in the battle against the chili. Thai diners invariably place a mound of rice on their plate and then pour small amounts of curry over the rice. They then control the spiciness of the food they eat by varying the amount of rice consumed along with the curry. When confronted with an extremely spicy curry, a Thai will invariably eat more rice than with a curry that is relatively bland.

Ultimately, probably the best advice for dealing with spicy food is to keep on eating it. The Thais, and others fond of spicy food, are testimony to the fact that the more it is consumed, the less it seems to bite and burn. Food author, Harold McGee also suggests, “It is ... possible that the brain secretes endorphins, its own opiate substances in response to a burning tongue.”

So keep on eating those chili peppers. Eventually you are going to get used to them, and if you eat them long enough, you just might find that you have developed a craving for the burning taste that they produce. When that happens, you will find that you have become an *aficionado* of the chili pepper and that you have joined the ranks of millions of other people throughout the world.