

Sampling the Local Drop

by Michael Moore

It all started thousands of years ago, not in one place, but seemingly everywhere. Today every region in the world has an indigenous brew that reflects this distant past, but it is sometimes difficult to find. As our world shrinks groups like the wily Scots, the wine drinking French and the beer swilling Germans muddy the waters by spreading their finely crafted beverages all over the place. Those who want to compare and contrast cultures by sampling the local drop must make a special effort to discover what the locals drank before Johnnie Walker and his omnipresent friends arrived on the scene. In Thailand the local poison is called *lao khao*. Before the advent of taxes and the revenue agent, the rice beer from which this beverage is distilled was made at home. It is now illegal to homebrew *sahtoe*, but a popular joke holds that the only two households in a village that aren't making a batch are the local excise office and the Buddhist *wat*. And people aren't sure about the *wat*. Is it brewed behind closed doors in Phuket? Just might be. The urn in which it is made can be found in a couple of shops adjacent to the market on Ranong Road in Phuket Town. A *hai*, to be sure, is a beautiful work of art and something tourists could take home with them, but tourists and connoisseurs of local ceramics don't seem to be the people making the purchases. Older Thais, particularly those from rural areas, all have stories about *sahtoe*. When asked about the beverage, Nikita, the owner of Nikita's bar in Rawai,

reflected on her childhood in Isarn. “When I was little, my grandmother would make *sahtoe* in a *hai*. Then people would stick a long straw made from bamboo into the *hai* and drink. When they finished, I sometimes got to eat some of the rice. Ooh! It was good and we all laughed a lot.”

When distilled, *sahtoe* becomes *lao khao*, a much more potent brew. This, of course, can also be done at home, but if making *sahtoe* is a no-no, then making moonshine *lao khao* is even a bigger one. Fortunately, this presents no problem to those seeking to sample a bit of local culture. *Lao khao* is not only sold at virtually every small store in Thailand, it is also hawked at bars frequented by the local working stiff: places where buildings are fashioned from bamboo, roofs from palm fronds and barstools from trunks of palm trees.

At the risk of offending some aficionados, but in the interests of accuracy, it must be mentioned that straight *lao khao* is not one of the world’s most refined drinks. Most agree the taste and the aroma leave something to be desired. The Thais solve this problem by tying special ingredients in cheesecloth and dropping it into a container of *lao khao*. After a few days the liquid is ladled into a shot glass and enjoyed as *lao yadong*. The process is not unlike the one employed in the West to change mediocre hard liquor into an expensive liqueur. *Lao yadong*, however, is much more than a mere liqueur. The ingredients that steep in the *lao khao* do more than add flavor and aroma. They invariably seem to possess mystical powers capable of dealing with a wide range of issues and ailments.

A now defunct bar in Rawai used to sell thirty different types of *lao yadong*, each tailored to deal with one of life’s thorny problems. There was a brew for

male impotency (well in advance of Viagra); another for post menstrual cramps; one for backaches; and yet another for those with fertility problems. The variety and special powers were endless. Most bars serving *lao yadong* don't have as wide a selection as the place in Rawai, but they do attempt to deal with some of the rough spots that confront all of us.

Perhaps it is not even wise to ask, but don't expect the barkeep to tell you what is in the *lao yadong*. This is often considered a trade secret and since bar owners aren't protected by patents like the makers of Viagra, they must use secrecy to protect themselves.

Chinese pharmacies are often the source of the mysterious ingredients, but the learned proprietors are quick to point out that they don't offer advice to the fabricators of *lao yadong*. It is technically illegal to add medicines to alcohol in Thailand and all Chinese pharmacists insist that what they sell are medicines. Obviously there is a controversial issue here: when is a natural ingredient a medicine and when is it an herb or flavoring? It could be argued, for example, that a twist of lemon added to a gin and tonic has medicinal properties. Strict interpretation of this law keeps *lao yadong* from being sold in some areas of Thailand, but it is still found in Phuket.

You won't find *lao khao* or *lao yadong* at every bar on the island, but if you see someone sitting at a dimly lit bamboo hut on a barstool hewn from the trunk of a palm tree, you've probably found the right place. Saddle up to the counter, plunk down fifteen baht, and point at one of the containers with stuff floating in it.

Then savor your drink and the chance to experience a dash of another culture

and another era. This is the Thailand that existed before the arrival of tourists and fancy booze from abroad. You will have sampled the real stuff; something that other visitors have missed. And who knows? If you pointed at the right container, maybe it will cure a problem that's been bothering you. But one thing is certain. If you drink enough of it, you will soon forget all of your problems – for awhile at least.