



Dim sum, roast pork and coffee can be found in Trang's atmospheric restaurants and cafés.

Story and photos by Austin Bush

Despite the diversity and ubiquity of its cuisine, breakfast in this country is often a dreary sight. The old standby, rice soup, soon becomes tedious after the first couple of starchy, stodgy bowls. The omnipresent "American breakfast," consisting typically of oily fried eggs, lighter-than-air white bread, curiously colored hot dogs and undercooked bacon is neither breakfast nor American. And the combination of instant coffee and the oily deep-fried dough known as *pa thong ko* is enough to send most foreigners running in the other direction. What's a person to do? My suggestion: go to Trang.

In the southern part of the country more than 800 kilometers from Bangkok, the relatively little-visited city seems to thrive on breakfast alone. Populated mainly by Thais of Chinese origin, the residents of Trang have made early morning eating a true delight with atmospheric cafés that haven't changed in decades, great halls dedicated to dim sum and old-fashioned coffee shop/food courts that combine caffeine and food.

"There are at least 70 dim sum shops in Trang," estimates Ja, owner of **Ruean Thai** (07-5219-342), one of the city's best-known dim sum eateries. In his cavernous restaurant just outside downtown Trang, early risers are blessed with a selection of more than 40 steamed dim sum items. "We make all our dim sum by hand," he explains with evident pride. "Many other places just buy the frozen dim sum and steam it."

Ruean Thai's dim sum ranges from quail eggs wrapped in ground pork to plain tofu, and the protocol is much like other dim sum restaurants in the city. After choosing a seat, diners are presented with a large tray of deep-fried dim sum items. You choose what you want, then walk over to the counter where you select your steamed dim sum, which are steamed to order in bamboo trays. Every order is accompanied by a bottomless pot of Chinese tea, and

despite the dish's Chinese origins, chopsticks are nowhere to be seen; the people of Trang favor tiny forks.

Along with dim sum, many of Trang's restaurants feature another dish not normally associated with breakfast, roast pork. "Before people in Trang didn't eat roast pork every day," explains Prasert Namphut, owner of **Trang Muu Yaang**, a popular restaurant that sells the dish. "Before, it was only for special occasions, or given as an offering on Chinese holidays."

Nowadays, *mau yang* (roast pork), is available every day, and in virtually every restaurant. The dish is prepared by marinating an entire pig for eight hours in a mixture of spices and sauces. "The recipe we use comes from China, it's an old one that has been used here in Trang for a long time," says Prasert. After marination, the entire pig is roasted for two hours in a giant oven. This relatively short cooking time gives Trang's roast pork a crispy, nearly charred texture, unlike the tender, juicy meat that most westerners associate with barbecued pork.

### 'Coffee used to cost one baht a glass.'

Every part of the pig is sold, including the head and feet, but the most popular part is undoubtedly the delicious but fatty belly. This cut includes a crispy outer layer of skin, a tender layer of white meat, soft fat and a charred layer of dark meat. The belly is chopped into small bite-sized squares served plain, with dim sum or over rice. Trang Muu Yaang's roast pork is assertively oily, and the marinade has a sweetness associated with that of American-style barbecue sauce.

Other restaurants featuring similar selections of dim sum and roast pork are the popular **Phong Ocha** (07-5219-918) and **Ko Lan** (07-5222-925). The roast pork at Ko Lan was somewhat spicy, suggesting coriander and cumin, and had little of the barbecue sauce sweetness of its neighbor. However the skin was shatteringly crispy, and overall a bit too fatty to stomach for breakfast. Despite the grease, Trang's roast pork is so popular that it has become a souvenir, and most shops sell the dish in decorative take-away boxes.

If all you need in the morning is a simple cup of coffee, then Trang is also well-equipped with numerous old world cafés. Known locally as *raan kopi*, the shops are almost exclusively owned by Thais of Chinese origin, and many seem suspended in time, sporting the same décor and selling the same products they have for decades.

Perhaps the oldest surviving *raan kopi*, and undoubtedly the most atmospheric, is **Yu Chiang**, on Rama VI Road near the market. Although the owners aren't exactly sure how old the shop is (one person said 60 years, another 100), it is obvious that Yu Chiang has changed very little since the day it opened.

Faded green paint on the restaurant's last renovation — which appears to have taken place 50 years ago — is coupled with ancient marble-top tables and rickety wooden chairs. Adding to the atmosphere is the shop's clientele of crusty old men of Chinese origin, aged monks, and laborers smoking hand-rolled cigarettes.

The coffee at Yu Chiang is still made the old way, using a sock-like filter filled with locally grown and roasted beans, and water from a charcoal-burning stove. The only thing that seems to have changed is the prices. "Coffee used to cost one baht a glass," explains Yu Chiang's friendly barista. "That seemed like a lot back then. Now it costs 10 baht, and that's nothing today!"

For those seeking food with their atmosphere and coffee, there is no better choice than **Asia Ocha**. On Kantang Road, not far from the train station, Asia Ocha is a coffee shop and food center of the kind that is still found in Singapore and Malaysia, but hardly exists any more in Thailand. "The shop is no less than 50 years old," explains Somlak Theekhasene, the second-generation owner. "You can tell if a coffee shop is really old by looking at the tables. If they're marble, then the shop is old," he says.

Asia Ocha's tables are indeed both marble and old. Somlak is proud of the shop's original price list, a stained document stating that, at the time of its printing, coffee cost one baht a cup. He seems oblivious to the fact that his shop is in serious need of a paint job, something which doesn't seem to concern the numerous diners slurping noodles to the sound of Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire."

Other unique coffee shop/restaurants include the **Koh Teng Hotel** (07-5218-148), a building dating to 1948 on Rama VI, and **Sin Ocha** (07-5211-191), just steps from Trang's railway station. The latter offers the usual combination of food and coffee, but without much of the old world atmosphere.

Sin Ocha originally opened in 1967, but recently underwent a significant renovation and suggests little of its former self. This is made up for by the excellent coffee, which is perhaps the best in town. Served the traditional way, in short glasses with a dose of sweetened condensed milk, the coffee at Sin Ocha is made in a modern espresso machine, and even features a thin "crema" of foam at the top.

Asked why coffee shops are so popular in Trang, Sin Ocha's second-generation owner, Sutus Chayankiat, says that "in the old days most people in Trang were involved in harvesting rubber. Going to a café after work was a way of exchanging news and info." Although the people of today's Trang are involved in a variety of jobs, the city's *raan kopi* and dim sum restaurants still largely serve this purpose, and provide a convenient meeting place for locals, and, more importantly, good coffee and a decent breakfast.

# Breakfast in TRANG

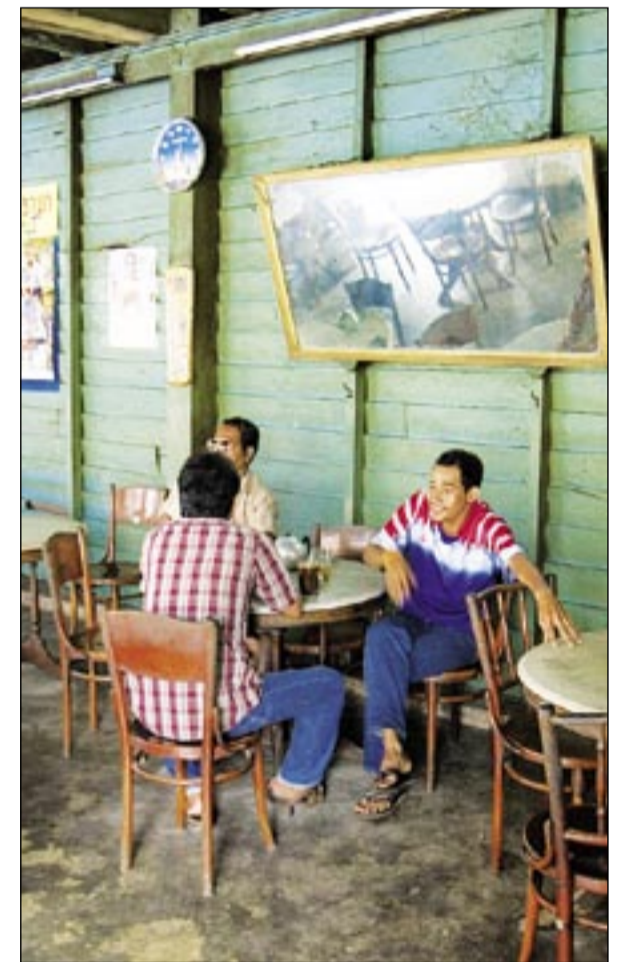
*Southern city solves Thailand's morning blues with its Chinese dim sum breakfast buffets*



A woman steams dim sum at Ruean Thai restaurant, one of the city's best known dim sum eateries.



Trang Muu Yang serves dim sum and its popular specialty, roast pork, which is made using an old Chinese recipe.



Yu Chiang, a coffee shop in Trang, has changed little since its inception at least 60 years ago.

## SECONDHELPINGS

*Previously reviewed in our pages*



### LE BEAULIEU

50 Sukhumvit Soi 19. Call 02-204-2004

Le Beaulieu is a small, 30-seat restaurant with a view of the glassed kitchen where sous chefs flame meat and fish. Its menu is ambitious, containing dishes not normally available in Bangkok's French restaurants. Given the fact that the restaurant's been only open a little more than three weeks, for all Le Beaulieu's minor missteps chef Herve Frerard might yet pull off a truly great restaurant. — Lim Li Min

### THE THIRD FLOOR

Verasu building, Wireless Road. Call 02-254-8101, ext 3600

People looking to eat according to their blood type now (finally!) have somewhere to go in Bangkok: The Third Floor is the first restaurant in the country to offer "blood type cuisine," an alternative sensation in healthy food. As soon as you sit down, the waitress provides you with a menu and asks for your blood type. The menu offers varieties of hearty local and international dishes. — Alisa Kaewsongri

### YUAN

123 Charoen Nakhon Road. Call 02-442-2000

Carrying on the Thais' preference for Cantonese cuisine is the Millennium Hilton's new Chinese restaurant, Yuan. In addition to Cantonese dishes, Yuan also offers some Shanghai specialties — a composite of all Chinese regional cuisines — making extensive use of spirits and often combining a dash of sugar and soy sauce. While chef Chau is an imaginative cook, some dishes work brilliantly, others do not. — Lim Li Min

### KOMALA'S

15 Sukhumvit Soi 20. Call 02-663-5971-2

Specializing in South Indian-style vegetarian cuisine, Komala's is a self-confessed peddler of fast-food. Only a few of the restaurant's dishes cost more than 100 baht. Unfortunately, this frugality is also manifest in the restaurant's interior, which shares the design sensibilities of McDonald's. But luckily the food is as vibrant and delicious as that found in any other Indian restaurant in Bangkok. — Austin Bush

## WINE, TAPAS AND HOW TO COOK LASAGNA

Bangkok has been experiencing a little Spanish culinary wave over the last couple months, with hotels and restaurants around town trying their hands at tapas menus.

Rioja Spanish Bar and Restaurant, the city's most famous Spanish restaurant, has decided not to let itself be overshadowed by hosting a "Spanish Gastronomy Festival" until July 26. Chef Manuel Carlos Quintana, from a famous cooking school in northern Spain, will be offering a special menu for a bargain rate of 350 baht. He'll be preparing dishes you will rarely find in Bangkok, even at Rioja itself, and importing his own specially sourced ingredients directly from Spain (call 02-251-5761 for more details).

It was only a matter of time before someone took the concept of tapas and added a Thai twist. Siam Winery Monsoon Valley is hosting "Thai Wine, Thai Tapas" at The Glaz Bar in the Plaza Athenee. The Thai-style tapas are being prepared by chef McDang until August 12 (call 02-650-800 for details).

On the wine front, Amari Atrium Hotel's Vivaldi Italian restaurant is offering three glasses of wine along with an à la carte menu for only 1,200 baht at dinner (call 02-718-2000), while the wine bar V9 at Sofitel Silom is bringing in chef Philippe Pentecôte of the Michelin-starred restaurant Le Relais Sevres from July 24 through July 29 (call 02-238-1991).

Finally, if you want to improve your Italian cooking,

try a class at the Royal Princess hotel, Larn Luang, this Sunday. The class will focus on the ever-tricky beef lasagna and mozzarella cheese caprese (call 02-281-3088).

— ThaiDay

