

INSIGHT

Eating the island

Koh Samui natives are using local ingredients to create a deliciously distinctive cuisine

Story and photos by Austin Bush

Walk down the streets of virtually any tourist area of Koh Samui and you'll find restaurants selling cuisine native to Italy, Japan, Greece, Australia, England and Germany. Oddly, one type of food missing is the cuisine of Koh Samui, a variant of southern Thai cooking with a unique island touch. The cooking of Koh Samui was relegated to home kitchens until relatively recently, when a few natives decided to share their secrets with the rest of us.

"I was the first person to open a restaurant on Koh Samui featuring local food," says Sookkhoe Donsai, the owner of **Bangpo Seafood** (07-7420-010). Wearing only shorts and a smile, Ta Koe ("Grandpa Koe"), as he is affectionately known, is a native of Samui, and owner of one of the island's most highly regarded Thai restaurants.

"I used to be a lawyer and got to travel all over Thailand," says the 58-year-old. "I noticed that each province had a place to sample its local dishes, which made me realize that Koh Samui had nothing like this. So after coming back home, I opened this restaurant." That was 13 years ago, and today the success of Ta Koe's restaurant has largely been responsible for inspiring other restaurants on Koh Samui to include local dishes on their menus.

The emphasis at Ta Koe's restaurant, as well as the base for much of Koh Samui's native cuisine is, not surprisingly, seafood. However, unlike the grilled prawn and *pad thai* that is featured in most restaurants that cater to tourists, the food of Koh Samui is spicy and salty, featuring strong flavors and making good use of the ingredients at hand.

Often these ingredients tend to be the relatively easy to gather items found just offshore, such as the inedible-looking sea urchin. Ta Koe explains that during the right season, the people of Koh Samui pry the sea urchins off of the coral, crack them open and eat the rich roe found inside. At Bangpo Seafood raw sea urchin roe is mixed with curry paste, shredded mango and chilies into a *yam*, or Thai-style salad. "The salad has to be sour and spicy to counter the fishy taste of the urchin," explains Ta Koe. A taste reveals that the salad is indeed spicy, but rather than tasting simply fishy, it features the pungent saltiness of Samui's clear waters.

Another fruit of the sea served at Bangpo Seafood is a small octopus known locally as *waay*.

"It comes out early in the morning when the water is cool," says Ta Koe, adding that when in season, fresh *waay* is used in *tom som*, a spicy/sour soup similar to the popular *tom yum*. When it's out of season, the dried meat is quickly rejuvenated in water before being stewed with fresh coconut milk and bruised herbs, a dish that features equal parts of sweet, salty and savory.

Fish is another staple on Koh Samui, and at Bangpo Seafood fresh fish is



Koh Samui has a large amount of homegrown produce.

prepared using a local method known as *hoop ping*, meaning that it is splayed and rubbed with a mixture of coconut milk, fresh turmeric, black pepper and salt before being grilled over coals. The turmeric mixture gives the fish a pleasant orange hue, eliminates any "fishy" odors and negates the need for any dipping sauce.

The residents of Koh Samui have long made use of the sea's other treasures, notably its seaweed, which can be found at **Kin Khao Bang Kham** (07-7426-181), another seafood restaurant whose menu features a few local dishes.

Toom, the restaurant's head chef and a native of Koh Samui, says the seaweed, known as *saraay khor*, is gathered from the beach in the mornings after the tide recedes. "It's getting harder and harder to find nowadays," he laments. Toom, who was interviewed on a Thai TV program about this very ingredient, goes on to explain that the seaweed is rinsed and par-boiled before being combined with other ingredients in a Thai-style salad, a dish that has made the restaurant popular among locals. "The seaweed [off of Koh Samui] is very good," he says. "The ocean floor is muddy, which is good for the seaweed and makes it fat and crunchy."

Not all of the ingredients found in Samui's kitchens



Top: *Khoej jii*, a local dish of ground up shrimp paste. Bottom: *Yam hoy men*, a spicy/sour sea urchin roe salad.



Fishing is one of the main industries fueling Koh Samui's economy, with seafood making up a big part of the local diet.



Coconuts are Koh Samui's most important crop and are a key ingredient in most local dishes.

come from the sea. Koh Samui's cash crop is coconuts, the extracted milk of which seems to find its way into virtually every local dish. "People from Samui feel that if they eat a soup or curry that doesn't have coconut milk they don't feel full," says Sermsi Thongrueang, a Samui native and owner of a traditional sauna and massage business in her family's 80-year-old home just minutes from the sea.

Sermsi, who also has a reputation as a knowledgeable cook, agreed to demonstrate how to make two local dishes, both of which include coconut milk. The first dish is known locally as *khao man thua kbiaow*, and is simply rice cooked in coconut milk along with salt and dried beans, a dish that, despite its simplicity, has become very hard to find. "We used to make it in a clay pot," says Sermsi. "This adds to the flavor." Today, however, Sermsi makes the dish in an electric rice cooker, something of an anomaly in her ancient teak wood home.

'These old ladies don't mind giving their secrets away.'



Top: *Plaah hoop ping*, a dish of marinated fish. Bottom: *Waay phat kathi* - octopus and coconut milk.

As an accompaniment to the rich rice dish, Sermsi makes *khoey jii*, a unique side dish of roasted shrimp paste. Marching into her sandy yard the energetic 65-year-old comes back with a single coconut that she thrusts onto an exposed stake to pry away its thick husk. Taking the coconut into the kitchen, she cracks it open and uses a traditional sit-down shredder to extract some of the mature meat inside. This meat is ground up in a mortar and pestle with shrimp paste, chilies, garlic and shallots, and the resulting paste is spread onto the inside portion of a coconut shell and grilled over coals until fragrant.

The dishes are, like much of local Samui cuisine, salty and pleasantly oily, and use ingredients that can be found with little effort. "Before, people on Koh Samui didn't have to buy anything," reflects Sermsi. "We fished ourselves, raised chickens and grew coconut. The only thing we ever had to buy was pork."

Also making good use of the abundant coconut is Sabeinglae (07-7233-082), an open-air seafood restaurant largely frequented by locals.

"I don't know how to cook, but I know how the food should taste," reveals Sabeinglae's owner, Amnat Chotchong. "I grew up right here on the beach, and I've been eating this food since I was a kid." As for where the recipes in his restaurant come from, Amnat says that when he was at community or religious festivals, where there tends to be lots of communal food, he would taste the different dishes, find the best one, and ask the cook how she made it. "These old ladies don't mind giving their secrets away," he laughs.

One such find is Sabeinglae's *kaeng khua het loop*, a rich coconut milk-based curry using *het loop*, the small anemone-like *beche-de-mer* found on the coral around Koh Samui. The curry is thick but not oily, and is laced with a generous handful of fragrant-but-spicy cumin leaves, another common ingredient on Koh Samui. Like many of the ingredients in local dishes, the *het loop* is strictly seasonal, close at hand, and comes from the sea; just some of the elements of a delicious island cuisine that is finally being discovered.



Muek phat kathi, a local dish of squid stewed with fresh coconut milk and herbs.



Sermsi Thongrueang grates coconut to make *khoey jii*, a local dish of grilled shrimp paste.