



REAL PHAT THAI

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY AUSTIN BUSH

On Bangkok's Khao San Road, undoubtedly the most famous backpacker ghetto in the world, you'll find vendors selling the ubiquitous Thai dish, *phat thai*.

Sold from wheeled carts, it combines lightly seasoned rice noodles, Chinese kale, carrots, cabbage and sometimes egg. The dish is hugely popular with visitors, and for many, it is their first taste of Thai food in Thailand. This should come as no surprise, as *phat thai* is available on the menu of virtually every Thai restaurant abroad, where it often takes the form of an immense mass of noodles topped with beef or chicken. However this, and the *phat thai* sold on Khao San Road are, if you really desire the truth, only *phat thai* in name.

Phat thai, perhaps Thailand's most famous culinary export, also happens to be one of its most commonly misinterpreted dishes. Both abroad, and increasingly at home, *phat thai* is twisted into variants that have little to do with the original creation. Perhaps this is because real *phat thai*, a handful of good-quality rice noodles stir-fried with a simple sauce and a few (mostly seafood-related) ingredients, is deceptively simple in concept, but considerably more difficult to make.

Despite the nationalistic-sounding

name, *phat thai* is essentially a foreign dish. Both noodles and the concept of stir-frying were introduced to Thailand by the Chinese. Thai cooks combined the two, and after adding a sauce made with indigenous ingredients like fish sauce and palm sugar, as well as dried shrimp and eggs, the dish was deemed sufficiently original that the word "Thai" was tacked on (the word *phat* means simply "to fry"). The name stuck, and this example of early fusion is now without a doubt the most famous Thai dish in the world.

Unlike versions sold abroad, you'll rarely find *phat thai* in Thailand made with any meat other than shrimp. Variations containing chicken or beef are largely concoctions meant to appeal to Western-style palates, and in Thailand, are only found at tourist restaurants. Any *phat thai* that includes copious quantities of vegetables should also be regarded with suspicion. In its most basic form, the dish often only contains a sprinkling of dried shrimp and bits of tofu, the bulk of the protein typically being egg, which is either fried along

with the noodles, or alternatively, made into a thin omelet and wrapped around the fried noodles to form an attractive package. And the only veggies you'll see in a real *phat thai* are a scattering of Chinese chives and mung bean sprouts; *phat thai* truly is an exercise in carbs.

Another misunderstanding about the dish is how it is eaten. *Phat thai* is an example of what Thais call *ahaan jaan diow*, a one-dish meal. A Thai would never order a dish of *phat thai* to accompany a plate of rice or a bowl of curry. What the dish is served with is also important. In traditional Thai cooking, an effort is made to balance all the flavors: sweet, sour, salty, spicy and sometimes, bitter. Because none of the ingredients in *phat thai* feature the bitter flavor that so many Thais love, the dish is almost always served with a side of *hua plee*, the astringent flower of the banana tree, as well as a few extra Chinese chives. To add an extra tart note, *phat thai* is also accompanied by slices of lime. And like all noodle dishes in Thailand, *phat thai* should be served with optional toppings of sugar, fish sauce and ground dried chiles, just in case you find one of the flavors lacking.

With this in mind, the next step is

finding an authentic phat thai. In Bangkok this is, unsurprisingly, not a difficult task. But to sample a truly legendary phat thai, locals (myself included) head to Thip Samai. This nondescript shophouse in an old district of Bangkok is by all accounts the most famous phat thai restaurant in the country (and probably the only one with a website: www.thipsamai.com). The restaurant has been making the dish in the same location for forty years, and although its menu has expanded slightly, you'll be hard-pressed to find an item that doesn't include noodles.

Just outside the open dining room, two chefs work over several coal-fired stoves that have electric fans pointed at them to intensify the heat. When the shop opens, the chefs make the phat thai *en masse*, stirring huge vats of ten or more dishes. Despite this, first-time visitors will be surprised to learn that phat thai is not the gut-filling heap of noodles that it tends to be abroad. A dish of phat thai in Thailand is generally a dainty dish, particularly here. However, the emphasis is on noodles, and Thip Samai only uses *sen jan*, the famous rice noodles from Thailand's Chanthaburi province, cooked decidedly *al dente*. At Thip Samai you can order your noodles fried simply with egg, topped with prawns, or alternatively fried with *man koong*, the flavorful fat found inside shrimp heads, which gives the noodles a red hue.

Like so many others before me, I head to Thip Samai one evening with that particular phat thai craving. I arrive and order *sen jan koong sot*, phat thai with prawns. In seconds I am rewarded with a steaming dish of noodles and a plate of greens. After a squeeze of lime and a sprinkling of fish sauce, I dig in, and trading bites with the obligatory side dishes of banana flower and chives, am really, truly in phat thai heaven.

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SERVES 4

Each serving is stir-fried individually. Any leftover sauce can be refrigerated, tightly covered, for up to two weeks. You'll find all the Thai ingredients in an Asian market or large grocery store, except perhaps the banana flower. If you can get it, try it.

For sauce

- 2 cups water
- 1/2 cup tamarind pulp
- 4 tablespoons palm sugar
- 4 tablespoons fish sauce

For finished dish

- 1 package (16 ounces) dried flat rice noodles
- 4 tablespoons cooking oil
- 5 shallots, finely sliced
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 4 tablespoons finely chopped preserved white radish (optional)
- 4 tablespoons dried shrimp
- 1/2 block firm tofu, sliced into 1/2-inch pieces (8 ounces)
- 1/2 pound shrimp, shelled (optional)
- 4 eggs
- 1/2 cup roasted peanuts, finely chopped
- 1 cup chives or scallions, chopped into 1-inch lengths
- 2 cups mung bean sprouts
- 1 banana flower (optional), outer peel removed and sliced lengthwise into eighths
- 2 limes, sliced in half

Condiments

Fish sauce, sugar, ground dried chilies, additional Chinese chives

1. Make phat thai sauce. Bring water to a boil and add tamarind pulp. Simmer for 5 minutes, pushing tamarind with a wooden spoon to extract as much pulp as possible. Let cool and strain tamarind pulp, reserving liquid and discarding solids.
2. Return reserved liquid to a small saucepan over medium heat. Add palm



sugar and fish sauce. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer until thickened and reduced by one third. Check for taste; sauce should be equal parts salty and sour, with a slightly sweet leading flavor. Set aside.

3. Meanwhile, soak rice noodles in plenty of cold water until just soft but still al dente, about 10 minutes. Place noodles in a colander to drain.

4. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large wok over medium-high heat. Add 1/4 of shallots, garlic, preserved white radish, dried shrimp and tofu. Fry until tofu is slightly browned, about 4 minutes.

5. Add a quarter of rice noodles, followed by 3 tablespoons of sauce, and fry, stirring noodles in a swirling motion until they have absorbed most of sauce, about 4 to 5 minutes. Reduce heat if mixture sticks to wok.

6. Push noodles to side of wok and crack 1 egg into center of wok. When egg begins to set, add 1/4 of the prawns, if using. Stir to combine until prawns are just done, about 1 minute. Add 1/4 of the peanuts, chives or scallions, and bean sprouts, stirring to combine all ingredients. Remove from heat.

7. Repeat process 3 more times with remaining ingredients.

8. Serve phat thai with sides of banana flower, if available, half a lime, and condiments.

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