

Tastes of Thailand – FAQs

What are the tastes of Thailand?

Thai cuisine is known for its balance of five fundamental flavors in each dish – spicy, tangy or sour, sweet, salty, and pungent. Carefully selected ingredients provide the unique flavors, among them coconut milk, seafood, and fruit, which are used frequently in soups and curries. Thai food can be distinguished from other regional cuisines based on its liberal use of fresh herbs and spices as well as several condiments such as fish sauce.

Where can I buy Thai ingredients for cooking at home?

Many grocery stores across the United States carry Thai ingredients, including shrimp, Hom Mali jasmine rice, spices, sauces, canned and frozen fruits and vegetables, coconut products (canned coconut milk and juice), and fruit juices. While most Asian markets carry Thai ingredients, authentic Thai products also are available in Thai Town in Los Angeles. Look for the “made in Thailand” label to be sure you’re buying a genuine Thai article.

What are popular ways to prepare Thai food?

Grilling. With Thailand’s abundant supply of natural wood, grilling is a popular method of preparing meats and fresh seafood, but American cooks are more likely to use charcoal or gas. Once cooked, Thai meat dishes normally are accompanied by *Nam Phrik*, a spicy chili paste, sauce, or dip that enhances the meat’s flavoring. *Nam Phrik* increases the salty, sour, sweet, and spicy flavors of food. Thais often use wrap the fish or meat with banana leaves, just as one use aluminum foil. The banana leaves infuse a pleasant earthy flavor during grilling.

Boiling: Before the advent of modern cookware, clay pots were used in Thai cooking to prepare rice and soups. Thai soup stocks are made through prolonged boiling and simmering, usually with crushed peppercorns, salt, garlic, shallots, coriander roots, and the meats the chef prefers. Galangal, lemon grass, kaffir lime leaves, crushed fresh chilies, fish sauce, and lime juice are used to create the basic stock for a spicy Tom Yam soup.

Stir-fry: Thai cuisine has borrowed the Chinese quick-frying method, producing a large choice of stir-fried entrees. Another Chinese influence is reflected in the extensive use of noodles in Thai recipes. While the Chinese deep-fried noodles are mixed with savory sauces, Thais use noodles and sauces that taste salty, sweet, sour, and sometimes spicy. A distinctive dish is *Mee Krob*, or crispy noodles.

Steamed: Steaming is a popular method of cooking various meats, seafood, Thai-style dumplings and some other snacks and desserts using steamed bananas and sticky rice, coconut milk, or rice flour. As the ingredients are cooked by vapor rising from boiling water and do not come in direct contact with the liquid, most of the nutrients are retained, making this a healthy means of cooking food. To get the best results out of steaming food, always use the freshest ingredients.

Salad (Yam): Unlike Western salads, which tend to be mayonnaise or oil-based, Thai salad dressing contains no fat. When preparing a Thai salad, simply toss your vegetables and/or fruit with a salty seasoning such as fish sauce, combined with lemon, juice, or tamarind water (for a sour taste), plus chili or chili jam for some heat, and, sometimes, garlic and shallots. Use palm sugar for sweetness or mint for a refreshing flavor. Depending on your preferences, add other ingredients such as seafood, meat, peanuts, glass noodles, and so forth.

What is the traditional way to eat Thai food?

Thai meals are essentially communal. Dishes are intended to be shared, family style. The main courses, usually curries or soups, are served in the middle of the table. Diners use a shared spoon to lift the food onto their own plates, where it usually is mixed with rice, the key dish in every Thai meal. Thais eat with a spoon and a fork, scooping rice and sauces onto the spoon and pushing other food onto the spoon. To get the full, balanced flavors of Thai food, you need to combine all of the sauce, rice, and other ingredients in one bite. That can be done only on a spoon, which is why Thais do not use chopsticks like some other Asian cultures.

Is Thai food alike throughout Thailand?

Thai food reflects the four regions of the country – northern, northeastern, central, and southern. While absorbing some Western and Eastern influences over the centuries, the regional cuisines have maintained their distinctive flavors and characteristics. Food in the north and northeast especially is mild to very hot, salty, and sour, but never sweet. Sticky rice is served with boiled vegetables, *Nam Phrik*, grilled fish or chicken, soups, or curries. The north also is well-known for its sausage, *Naem*, which consists of fermented minced pork, fish or beef. This sour-flavored sausage is sold wrapped in a banana leaf and cellophane. Cuisine in the central region is milder and includes such dishes as stir fried vegetables with shrimp or chicken and fried rice. Even so, the dishes are flavored with spices, herbs, and condiments such as green curry and *Tom Yam Gung* with young coconut. In the south, traditional food is very hot and full of flavorful herbs and spices. The region's special soups are made with fish, bamboo, and other vegetables and served with rice noodles and fresh vegetables. Both the southern and eastern areas of the country are known for their seafood dishes.

What foods should I avoid if I have a peanut allergy?

Since peanuts are used often in Thai cooking, in a restaurant, be sure to tell your server you have an allergy. Popular dishes such as Pad Thai can be ordered without peanuts, and satays can be made with sauces other than peanuts, including cucumber, chili, shallot and vinegar. You can find many delicious and satisfying alternatives in a wide range of flavors.

What Thai dishes will satisfy vegetarians?

Most Thai dishes consist of rice or noodles with vegetables, meat, and sauce on top. Meat and seafood are considered an ingredient of a Thai dish and not the focal point of the meal. Since the flavoring of Thai dishes comes from the sauces, vegetables, and seasoning, it is common to substitute bean curd (tofu) for meat.

What are the most popular Thai dishes for foreigners?

A Thai Ministry of Culture survey of Thai restaurants in America, Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa found that the 10 favorite Thai dishes in those countries were as follows:

1. Tom Yam Kung (spicy shrimp soup)
2. Kaeng Keow Wan Kai (green curry with chicken)
3. Pad Thai (stir-fried Thai noodles)
4. Pad Kaphrao (stir fried basil with chicken)
5. Kaeng Phet Pet Yang (roast duck curry)
6. Tom Kha Kai (chicken coconut soup)
7. Yam Nua Yang (spicy roast beef salad)
8. Pork Satay (roast pork coated with turmeric)
9. Kai Phat Met Mamuang Himmaphan (fried chicken with cashew nuts)
10. Phanaeng Kai (chicken in coconut cream)