

THAI FOOD LESS TASTED



FORGET THE COCONUT-FLAVOURED GREEN CURRIES AND SWEET FRIED NOODLES THAT TYPIFY MOST FOREIGNERS' IDEA OF THAI FOOD. NORTHERN THAILAND HAS A DISTINCT FOOD CULTURE OF ITS OWN.

Words by Mrigaa Sethi, photos by Rawiruj Suradin
All photos taken at Heaun Lam Poon, Bangkok

For centuries, the lands of northern Thailand belonged to the Lanna Kingdom. As a result, northern cuisine is quite distinct from its central Thai counterpart – and the lack of coconut milk is only one difference. Ancient trade with Burmese and Chinese traders brought in spices not often seen in the south. And thanks to the region's cooler weather, higher altitudes and dense forests, the cuisine draws from a wide variety of seasonal vegetables and mushrooms. It's normal to see many types of vegetables and greens in the same dish, each contributing notes of sweetness, bitterness and sourness towards the overall balance of flavour.

← KHAO SOI ข้าวซอย

Unlike other typical northern Thai food, *khao soi* uses coconut cream for the broth, chicken or beef instead of the ubiquitous pork, and wheat egg noodles rather than rice flour ones. The curry base involves roots like coriander, turmeric, and ginger, and is simmered with coconut cream, stock, soy sauce and palm sugar, then poured over blanched noodles. *Khao soi* is served with pungent accompaniments like raw shallots, pickled mustard greens and chilli paste.

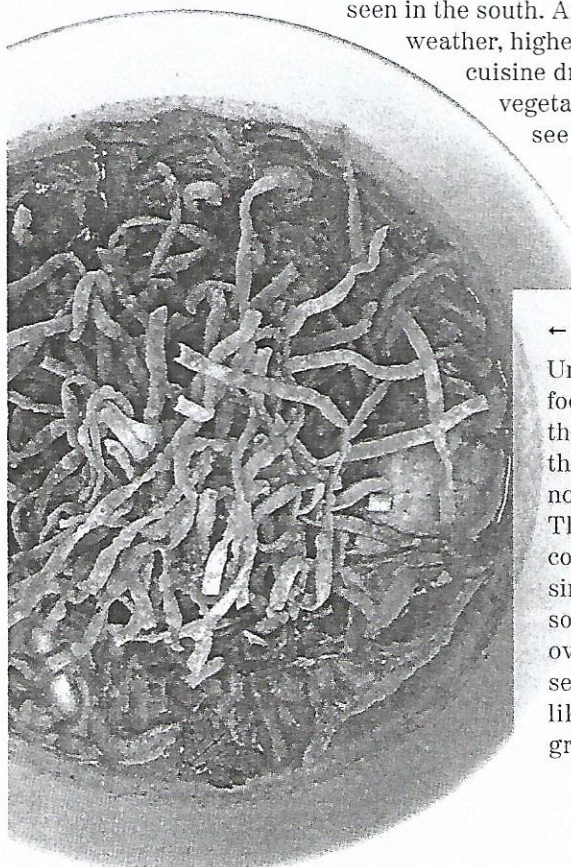


↑ NAEM ไส้หมู

Although this sour, fermented pork sausage is easy enough to find all over Thailand, it is native to Chiang Mai province. Its coarse but soft and luscious texture comes from puréed white sticky rice and shredded pork skin, which are added to salted minced pork before being wrapped in banana leaves and left out in the sun to ferment. Sound dubious? It tastes anything but.

→ NAM PRIK NOOM น้ำพริกหนุ่ม

This smoky, chunky relish is so iconic of Chiang Mai that you're sure to find jars of it on sale in the Chiang Mai airport departure terminal. The eponymous noom are slightly hot, banana chilli-like peppers, which are grilled with shallots and garlic, peeled, and then pounded with roasted shrimp paste, which gives it a meaty flavour. The smoke and umami notes play with the fresh aromatics added at the end, such as spring onion and fresh coriander.





↑ SAI OUA ไส้อั่ว

This northern sausage was traditionally made with the discarded odds and ends of pigs. But thanks to *sai oua's* appealing, herb-intense flavour, there aren't enough odds and ends to supply the demand anymore, so it is typically made with minced fatty pork, along with a paste of shallots, cassia bark, galangal, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, and other herbs and spices.



↑ GAENG HANG LAY แกงฮังเล

Gaeng hang lay is historically Burmese and similar to Indian curries, thanks to the use of ingredients like coriander seeds, cassia bark, cloves and cardamom pods. The meat used is almost always a combination of pork ribs and fatty pork belly, simmered for well over an hour until it reaches a rich, silky consistency.



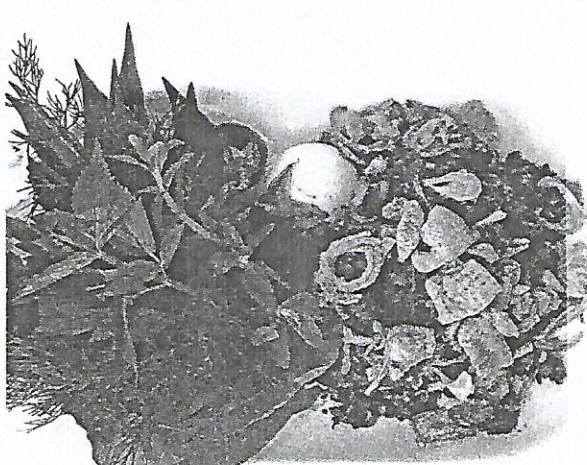
↑ NAAM NGIEW น้ำเงี้ยว

Borrowed from the Shan ethnic group, *naam ngiew* is a broth-like curry rich in flavour. Intensely aromatic ingredients like shrimp paste, garlic, shallots, turmeric root and chillies are cooked with tomatoes, minced pork and the eponymous *ngiew* blossoms before being added to tender pork ribs. *Naam ngiew* is often served on a bed of rice vermicelli noodles (*kanom jin*).



↑ GAENG KHAE แกงแค

Gaeng khae embodies much of northern Thai cuisine. It's more a broth-like soup than a curry and, unlike the curries of the central plain, it uses no coconut milk. It also employs various indigenous vegetables whose bitterness, sweetness and sourness balance the overall flavour. The core paste is a mix of galangal, garlic, shrimp paste, lemongrass and salt.



← LARB MUANG ลาบเมือง

The traditional version of this northern pork salad involves lots of offal and even a dash of lemongrass-spiked pork blood – though a tourist-friendly version with minced pork meat is easily found today. The mixture is cooked with a paste made from cardamom, mace and other spices.

TASTING NOTES

EXPERTS ON NORTHERN THAI FOOD TELL US WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN THEIR FAVOURITE DISHES.

NAAM NGIEW

Charadee Nualkhair, author of Bangkok's Top 50 Street Stalls and blogger at BangkokGlutton.com

"I love *naam ngiew* because it's what my dad used to cook for us when we were kids. He called it Thai spaghetti to get us to eat it. The good ones are meaty and thick, and not anemic and tasteless, like so many in Bangkok. I don't like a lot of tomatoes in my sauce, either. Too often it's used as filler in place of the real stuff, like minced pork, blood or *dok ngiew* blossoms. My favourite place [for *naam ngiew*] in Chiang Mai is probably at Guay Thiew Thumrung place on Nimmanhaeminda Soi 1. In Chiang Rai (my hometown), it's without a doubt Pa Suk."

KHAO SOI

Austin Bush, food blogger and Lonely Planet contributor at AustinBushPhotography.com

"[*Khao soi*] is the perfect illustration of how the Thais often stuff every conceivable flavour and texture into a single dish: the broth is rich, spicy and meaty, the noodles tender and chewy, and the dish is served with sides of lime, sliced shallots and pickled greens, and a spicy chilli condiment, then topped with crunchy deep-fried noodles. My favourite place for *khao soi* in Chiang Mai is Lam Duan Fah Ham. I find many versions of the dish somewhat bland, but the bowls at Lam Duan are the perfect intersection of spiciness and richness."

GAENG KHAE

Siripen Srigabhaga, owner of A Lot of Thai cooking school in Chiang Mai

"My favourite northern Thai dish is *gaeng khae*. It's a mixed vegetable curry, made with any vegetables from the back of the house, sometimes more than ten types. The curry paste is just garlic, shallots, galangal, shrimp paste, chilli, lemongrass and salt. The combination of vegetables like sawtooth coriander, betel leaf, poison ivy gourd is delicious. In the rainy season we might even cook *gaeng khae* with frogs, or sometimes with grilled fish."

C+K RECOMMENDS . . .

Our top two Chiang Mai restaurants for trying these dishes:

Huen Phen, 112 Rachamankha Rd, +66 (0) 5327 7103

Huen Jai Yong, 65 Moo 4, Thambon Buak Khang, +66 (0) 8667 18710