

EATING & DRINKING

HISTORY OF AN APPETITE

One Bite in Bangkok

In the scent of basil wafting out of a sizzling wok, the author of a new cookbook finds a passage to Thailand

BY ANDY RICKER WITH J.J. GOODE

I'M NOT A CHEF. The food at my restaurants is not my take on Thai food. I'm not riffing or playfully reinterpreting. There are American chefs who have successfully managed to apply their creativity to the flavors and ingredients of Thailand. Not me. I'm a proud copycat. My recipes are my best approximations of some of my favorite versions of my favorite Thai dishes. My knowledge is largely anecdotal, gleaned from 20 years of observing, eating, cooking, wandering and wondering. My hopes for the cookbook I just published are to show how to cook some of the dishes that made me fall for Thai food and to provide a sense of place—context for a country, culture and cuisine that can be so inscrutable to an outsider, which I once was and in many ways still am.

Take a dish like *kai kaphrao*, a stir-fry of pork or chicken seasoned aggressively with garlic, chilies, fish sauce, soy sauce and a touch of sugar. Imagine: It's morning in Bangkok. Motorcycles zig-zag treacherously through the lines of cars clogging the streets. You're walking along grand boulevards and down narrow side streets. Overhead, great masses of electric wires snake through the city and skyscrapers gleam in the skyline. You're hungry, searching for something to eat. But you don't have to try hard to find food, because in Bangkok, food usually finds you.

You can't go far without passing a cluster of umbrella-covered stands, selling mammoth pink segments of pomelo or skewers of meat or noodle soups. Finally, you stop at a vendor set up beside an alley, a woman presiding over more than a dozen aluminum trays, each piled with a dish you can't for the life of you identify. Still, you want to eat them all.

It's in this type of restaurant, called *raan khao kaeng* (roughly, curry-over-rice shops), where many visitors to Thailand come across *kai kaphrao*. It's a common morning food (Thais don't eat breakfast the way we do), but it's also lunch, it's a late-afternoon snack, it's whatever you want it to be. Served beside a heap of jasmine rice and perhaps a crisp-edged fried egg, it is a fine example of *aahaan jaan diaw*, what Thais call a one-plate meal.

The dish is defined by a last-minute dose of *bai kaphrao* (holy or hot basil), an ingredient so essential that the dish is named for it. For short, people often order it as *phat kaphrao*, literally "stir-fried holy basil." In the U.S., we'd never give top billing to an herb. Dill salad? No, it's egg salad. Grilled rosemary? No, it's a charred steak—so what if it happens to be perfumed by a few sprigs?

The herb has a very particular flavor, to be sure, a distinctive peppery heat, but in Thailand, it's prized for its powerful aroma. The notion of aroma eclipsing flavor can sometimes confound us Westerners. Ask a Thai person to describe holy basil and the first thing they'll say is *hom*, or "smells good." You'll notice that versions that people have cooked for themselves and their families, compared to those sold by street vendors, contain even more holy basil, which is relatively pricey in Thailand. That's one benefit of making it yourself—you control the size of the handful. The other is being above the hot pan when you add that handful, the pleasure of being in a room overtaken by its scent.

Mr. Ricker is the chef-owner of, among other restaurants, Pok Pok and Whiskey Soda Lounge in Portland, Ore., and New York City. This excerpt is adapted from his new book, co-authored with the food writer J.J. Goode, "Pok Pok" (Ten Speed Press).



SPICE WORLD This stir-fry of chicken or pork, a typical breakfast in Thailand, is a satisfying meal at any time of day.

Austin Bush

Kai Kaphrao Khai Dao (Stir-Fried Chicken With Hot Basil)

TOTAL TIME: 30 minutes SERVES: 1

Holy or hot basil (bai kaphrao in Thai) is a variety with a peppery flavor and distinctive aroma. To find it, your best bet is a Thai-focused market, though you might get lucky at Indian grocery stores (where the herb might be called tulsi) or farmers' markets. The other item worth seeking out for this dish is Thai black soy sauce—aka black thick soy sauce or dark thick soy sauce—a pitch-black, somewhat sweet type with the consistency of a thin syrup, available at Asian markets and online at templeofthai.com.

- 4 dried Thai chilies
- 4 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 large egg, at room temperature
- 1 tablespoon Thai fish sauce
- 2 teaspoons Thai black soy sauce
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled, halved lengthwise and crushed with a mortar and pestle

- 5 ounces ground chicken (preferably thigh meat) or pork
- ¼ cup thinly sliced long beans
- ¼ cup thinly sliced yellow onion
- 4 fresh red Thai chilies, thinly sliced
- 1 cup hot or holy basil leaves
- 1½ cups cooked jasmine rice

1. Make fried dried chilies: Place dried chilies in a wok with enough oil to coat them, about 2 tablespoons. Set wok over medium-low heat. Cook chilies, stirring constantly, until dark brown in color, 7-10 minutes. Use a slotted spoon to transfer chilies to a paper-towel-lined plate. Once cool, coarsely crumble chilies.
2. Cook egg: Wipe wok clean and set over very high heat. Swirl in 2 tablespoons oil, coating sides of wok. When oil begins to smoke, add egg and cook until whites bubble and puff, about 5 seconds. Decrease heat to medium and continue to cook egg, frequently tipping wok slightly and basting egg with oil, until whites have set and turned golden at the

- edges and yolk is cooked to desired doneness, about 1 minute. Turn off heat and transfer egg to a paper-towel-lined plate to drain, leaving oil in wok.
 3. In a small bowl, combine fish sauce, soy sauce and sugar.
 4. Stir-fry chicken: Heat wok over very high heat. When oil begins to smoke, add crushed garlic and take wok off heat. Cook garlic, stirring often, until light brown, about 30 seconds. Put wok back on heat, then add chicken, long beans, onions and fresh red chilies. Stir-fry, constantly stirring and breaking up chicken, until meat is just barely cooked through, about 1 minute. Add fried chilies and fish sauce mixture and cook until liquid has been absorbed, about 1 minute. Turn off heat. Stir in basil and cook until wilted and fragrant, 15 seconds.
 5. Serve chicken with jasmine rice and fried egg.
- Adapted from "Pok Pok" by Andy Ricker with J.J. Goode (Ten Speed Press)

BITS & BITES: NEWS YOU CAN EAT

THE PROVISION Cheese and Crackers Rolled Into One

Once in a great while there comes a snack we obsess over because it's just that good.

The latest addition to that pantheon (and heir apparent to the cheese straw, that holiday-entertaining stalwart): blue cheese shortbread from Farmstead, a Providence, R.I., specialty foods store and restaurant. The cookie/cracker hybrid "is mostly cheese and butter," according to resident baker and co-owner Kate Jennings. She uses whatever leftover blue cheese she has on hand in the shop that day—could be a Stilton from England, say, or Bayley Hazen from Vermont—and mixes it with butter, flour, sugar, salt and cornstarch to create a hefty shortbread with a shattering crumb. The salty-sweet flavor (the dough is rolled in coarse sugar prior to baking), flaky texture and lactic tang are addictive. A natural addition to a cheese plate, the shortbreads also make a delicious snack on their own or with tea or coffee. \$20 for 24 shortbreads, farmsteadinc.com



THE BEVERAGE Some Like It Hot (and Fizzy)

With the season of over-eating upon us, there is nothing like the tummy-soothing bubbly refresher ginger beer. No, not the sugary mass-produced soda: Once we tried the homespun version from Rachel's Ginger Beer, we could never go back to the super-sweet stuff. The three-year-old business, which recently opened a ginger-beer bar in Seattle's Pike Place Market, has just started shipping its namesake libation nationally. Founder Rachel Marshall handcrafts the Original flavor by carbonating a blend of freshly squeezed lemon and ginger juices, organic sugar and water. The result is a concentrated quaff that's fiery yet tart, and tastes as good on its own as it is does mixed into cocktails. (Try it in a Moscow Mule.) Also on offer are seasonal varieties, such as pomegranate, blood orange and cranberry—a perfect non-alcoholic alternative for the Thanksgiving table. \$78 for four 32-ounce bottles, rachelsgingerbeer.com



THE CONDIMENT Give Cranberry Sauce a Rest

Cranberry sauce may be the usual accompaniment to the Thanksgiving turkey. But for those looking to branch out this holiday season, Casa Forcella, a maker of small-batch preserves in Mantua, Italy, has just the thing. Owner Paola Calciolari has been producing mostarda—the spicy candied-fruit condiment typically served in Italy with boiled meats—and preserves, some of which are based on her grandmother's recipes, for almost 20 years. Her plum smoked-tea compote is a full-flavored mix of plums, lapsang souchong tea and sugar, and her blood-orange marmellata, made from organic Sicilian fruit, is sunshine-bright. Like the rest of her creations, both would complement any rich bird, be it turkey or roast duck. From \$10 for plum smoked-tea compote, fairway-market.com —Gabriella Gershenson



F. Martin Ramby/The Wall Street Journal. Styling by Anne Cordanos

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