

Breakfast in Surat

By Levi Shand

The day's first meal has been a significant player in my acclimation process here in Surat. The transition from an American breakfast to a Spanish breakfast (where I was before Thailand) was easy, because the Spanish are fond of toasted bread in the morning with butter and jam or else oil and tomatoes, salted. Thailand has offered no such familiarity. The following are examples of the commonest breakfast choices readily available all over our city.

Dim Sum



As you can see, this breakfast is made up of tidbits of various steamed foods. There are many dim sum restaurants close to Super English teacher housing and the meal is an inexpensive one. Outside of incidents of pork and eggs, it bears little resemblance to western breakfast both in terms of material and preparation. Dim sum often is delicious enough for any number of its qualities, but a western person new to dim sum *for breakfast* may need to make an effort to adjust to the idea.

Jok



Jok (*pronounced "joke"*) is by far the most common Thai breakfast option in Surat. It seems as though all of the little open-to-the-street breakfast places offer it and that all the sleepy patrons on their way to work or to take their kids to school are spooning it down and accompanying it with hot or cold tea. It's rice porridge, or gruel, often with bits of sautéed pork suspended therein among shredded horseradish and chopped green onions. Jok can come with or without an egg and sometimes comes with a dash of pepper as its only inherent condiment. Most restaurants supply a condiment caddy, perhaps with a small glass of spicy fish oil, granulated sugar, or pepper oil to complicate the meal.

A porridge like this for breakfast each day may provoke images of Thailand's rural past, not so easily forgotten as its people began to disappear from their field lives to fill the cities. The word itself, *jok*, is a loanword from a dialect of southern Chinese so perhaps this dish is more about fuzzy borders, mixing, and all the consequences and new opportunities an adventurous person can encounter. As I take mine with sugar, which to me makes it more a cousin to oatmeal, I wonder whether I'm not so adventurous as I billed myself before I landed here.

Fried Chicken



Early in the morning, Muslim women in headscarves fire up their fryers at various stands around town. Now, I'm no prude about fried chicken; I love it in all its supra-cultural ubiquity and international permutations and even feel that KFC's Colonel Sanders could learn something from these sweating ladies. But breakfast? Really? It's no secret that fried chicken is best served freshly fried and perhaps wet enough yet to oil-stain its eating surface (as seen above), but "freshly fried" means a diner must show up at one of these stands at 8:00-9:00 in the morning because by ten o'clock you'll be lucky to scrounge a cold thigh.

Thai-style fried chicken usually comes with a packet of sticky rice and if you're lucky, some deep-fried onion bits and some chili sauce. This dish is widely considered a street snack, and if you'll take another look at the top of this article, you'll notice that perhaps dim sum may have roots in snack-dom (it does). Perhaps the following item won't surprise.

Thai Donuts



Another snack! These donuts are sometimes served to go on their own but often accompany dim sum or jok. Maybe the upper one resembles a donut hole, but apart from that the shape of Thai donuts holds little in common with their western counterparts. The bottom donut is known as a “twin”. That green gunk is delicious frosting-as-dipping-sauce and will run you a few baht extra but comes highly recommended. There are several stands and restaurants near to teacher housing that offer this light/heavy little breakfast.

Pork Buns



These little critters are available at 7/11 and also opposite Old Thida before school, as well as many other stands and restaurants at all times of day. I find them “okay” and will suffer them only if I’ve been too lazy to sit and eat a proper breakfast. Note the dot on top: these are code for what is inside. You could get barbecue pork or even a steamed (?) egg inside if you’re not careful. Consider pork buns “fast food”.

To Drink

The people of Surat drink both hot tea and cold tea for breakfast and occasionally, instant coffee. Juices for breakfast are a relative rarity.

Anything else?

Some curry shops are open early and will serve the exact curry they’d serve at other times of the day as a breakfast option, and they do swift business.

Western breakfast is very hard to come by. If you find yourself tiring of the options above, maybe it’s time to invest in a toaster oven or a toaster, or to visit a supermarket and buy a couple boxes of cereal!