

## Being a vegetarian/pescatarian in Thailand By Catherine Tucker

So you're moving to Thailand and you're a vegetarian or a pescatarian. Your first thoughts may be, what am I going to eat? Well, the first thing you need to know is: **LOWER YOUR STANDARDS.** You will accidentally eat meat and/or you will eat a meat byproduct, like some kind of broth. Vegans: don't even think about coming to Thailand.

Being a pescatarian, I thought living would not be too bad in the ways of food here in Surat; however, ordering food has been more challenging than I have realized. Most places seem to have prawns or koong, but some places only serve one thing, and that one thing usually has pork. Pork is a very big product in Thailand. It seems as though mostly all dishes have it, especially at the dim sum places I have been to. In fact, during one of my first weeks here, I ate what innocently appeared to be some kind of fried bread with maybe something sweet inside. That sweet "thing" turned out to be pork. That was the first time I accidentally ate meat.

Another time I accidentally ate meat was during one of my first weeks working at Thida. After teaching some of my classes, I had time for a break so I went to the teacher room. Awaiting me on the table was a dish called "", looking innocently like some sort of shredded wheat with sticky rice, chicken, and a dipping sauce. I was instructed to tear off some of the floss and use it to wrap up the sticky rice and chicken and dunk it in the sauce; I did all of the above, minus the chicken. Later, I found out that the "shredded wheat" looking floss is actually PORK floss. They had done it again! Those sneaky Thais and their pork! Apparently, you can get shrimp floss too; maybe I'll go for that next time.

Accidentally eating meat aside, the more I am here, the more the options reveal themselves to me. For example, I was told that Isaan food is very pescatarian friendly. Isaan food is named after a northeastern section of Thailand, where there style of food is very delicious. Perhaps the deliciousness comes from the fact that most of it seems to be fried, or at least the things that I have tried. There is a restaurant in Surat Thani that most of us teachers have been to and enjoyed. It is fondly referred to "Under the Bridge" as it is nestled in a lovely spot slightly under, but mostly next to the Don Nok bridge. Being

completely open, like most Thai restaurants, with only a roof, the view is one of magical wonderment.



It is here at "Under the Bridge" where you can order a dish called Nam Pla Duk Fu, which is a scrumptiously fried catfish dish with Som Tum placed on top. Som Tum is a staple dish of the pescatarian diet. The more English friendly name is

papaya salad being made from unripened, shredded green papaya, tomatoes, carrots, peanuts, fish sauce, dried shrimp, sugar, some kind of vinegar, and as many prik, or chile, as you can stand (I can usually only handle one). All of these ingredients are put into a wooden mortar and pestle and are stomped together, softening the unripened papaya and marrying all of the wonderful sweet, salty, spicy, crunchy, and soupy textures and flavors into an invigorating party for your mouth.

The aforementioned “party for your mouth” is scooped on top of crispy, crunchy, perfectly fried catfish that has been chopped so finely it’s like you only get to eat all of the little crunchy bits.

Adding this texture to the already wonderful and fun (funderful?) texture of the Som Tum makes for a wholesome, savory, yet nectarous and spicy, well-seasoned plate of a very flavorsome traditional Isaan Thai food. Just thinking and writing about it makes my mouth water and want to run out to see if “Under the Bridge” is still open to serve me some.



Another one of my favorite dishes here in Surat Thani is called “Pad Pong Garee,” from what we call “Corner Guy.” I’m not too sure on the spelling of the dish, but it is one tasty morsel! “Corner Guy” is called as such because it located on the corner of Amphur Rd. and Chalak Rut, down the

street from the big and the new house. This is a great place for all of the Super English teachers to share a meal because it is within walking distance of both houses, is highly affordable, and stays open late for some good drinking hours. Mostly, I choose to spend my time there eating.

“Guy” from “Corner Guy’s” name is Ya, and is always smiling and greeting us kindly when we walk in. His wife works there too, along with their two children, which is something that you will run into a lot in Thailand. Most families run an entire eatery and they not only have everyone in the family working there, but they usually live there as well. We have lovingly given nicknames to one of the sons: Marshmellow. This chubby little boy likes to sit around and watch as his slender brother waits on us in a very efficient way. At one of our many dinners at “Corner Guy” I was able to catch a glance of Marshmellow trying to sneak some food from the prep table. As he reached his little hot dog fingers out, Ya grabbed a board from the ceiling and threatened to hit him with it. It was a great, and very Thai sight to see. I have not seen Mr. Mellow trying to sneak food since.

Anyway, back to the food! Pad Pong Garee is a great seafood curry dish that is served on top of rice (as most things are). More reminiscent of an Indian curry, the color leans towards gold and the flavor leans towards godly. Being one of my favorite plates of food in Thailand, I find Pad Pong Garee to be full of rich flavor that is not too overwhelming or spicy. Ya and his wife put a pretty good amount of seafood (considering you usually one get about 3 shrimps in everything

else, everywhere else) into this dish, including tentacle ridden calamari. Be careful though, the chefs tend to leave in some kind of unwanted crunchy thing (which I think is the beak), but it is easy enough to eat around, just like a shrimp tail. Unwanted crunchy things and shrimp tails aside, I believe Pad Pong Garee might be one of my favorite curries in Thailand.



Pad Pon Galee is not the only vegequarian dish at “Corner Guy” that is worth eating, there are a few others I have tried that are delicious. Being a soup person, I was excited to find Suki, which is comes with glass noodles, some kind of green, and usually egg but sometimes you have to ask for it (“sai kai”). This soup can be vegetarian if you leave it at that, but you can also get it with shrimp (“sai koong”) or other meats, if you’re one of those people.

They give you some sweet chile sauce to pour into it, which gives it a nice quick without being overwhelming. Suki is cheap and filling, and is fun to eat with chopsticks and an Asian spoon. Other dishes include the standard fried rices and fried noodles. You can find these at most places, and it all depends on our you order them for them to be vegetarian or pescatarian. If you order kao pad, which is fried rice, you can get it sai puk (with vegetables), sai kai (with egg), or sai koong (with shrimp). The same goes for pad see yoo, which is the fried flat noodles. If you order kai ado, that is a fried egg most places will put on top of your food, instead of mixing it in.

The last few dishes I mentioned, kao pad and pad see yoo, you can find at most places. However, there is one special appetizer type dish at “Corner Guy” that cannot go without mentioning. I was introduced to this one of the first nights I was in Thailand and have been in love with it ever since. Being on the more expensive side, I do not order it much, but I always try to whenever we eat there in a big group. The dish I speak of is called yam yam maprau, which is a plate of “coconut french fries.” Ya and his wife cut up pieces of coconut so that they resemble the shape of fries and then fry them in an almost tempura-like batter. On the side comes a dipping sauce that is more of a seafood ceviche with whole pieces of shrimp, rings of calamari, and even tentacle calamari floating about. Included in this sauce are also pieces of raw red onion, chiles, and what I think is cilantro. It is probably the best part of the dish. On of my favorite things to do it take the coconut fries, dip them in the sauce, and then put it through a ring of calamari so that I am able to have a mixture of flavors and textures in my mouth. The sauce tastes somewhat tangy, sweet, and spicy, but does not have a fishy flavor, instead the seafood adds nice contrast to the fried coconut pieces.

If you are wondering what to eat for breakfast, there are a few different options. One non-Thai option is to buy cereal or muesli from one of the grocery stores and eat that with milk or yogurt and fruit. I do this most mornings as a healthier option, but sometimes I will treat myself to a traditional Thai breakfast of rice soup. This rice “soup,” called johk, is more of a thick and somewhat creamy porridge that is hot and very filling. Most of the time it comes with pork, but you can order it “mai moo,” which means no pork. This is how I always order it, and now I can go to the johk place by the new house on Amphur Rd., sit down, and they bring it to me just the

way I like it without having to order. Another way I like my johk is with an egg in it. At the johk place, they put in a raw egg, which most places will do, so that you can mix it around in your hot johk. I like to cover my egg in its whole form so that it poaches and I can eat it about halfway through my bowl., making my johk super eggy and delicious.

When eating at Thidamaepra during the free lunch hour, the choices are very slim. However, the food is free, so I've usually been able to make whatever they give us work for my diet. Most of the time there is a big pot of rice with accompanying dishes to go with it. A lot of the time the meals have meat in them, but sometimes there will be seafood or fish, and on the rare occasion, there will be a hotel tray of vegetables. Some days there are even



hotel trays full of omelet style eggs which are good to eat with the rice. Other days there may be nothing vegetarian or pescatarian friendly, so it is on those days I try to find the vegetables that are floating around with the bits of meat. I do my best to fish them out to make a somewhat vegetarian friendly meal. This is where there is a bit of a gray area in being a vegetarian. If you are super strict, then this method probably won't work for you. If this is the case, then you could always buy your lunch elsewhere, or try to talk to the people who work in the cafeteria about making you a special lunch. But, this means you would have to eat at Thida most days, which is not a bad deal considering it's free!

Being a pescatarian is not the easiest thing in Thailand, but it's not the worst thing either. I have usually been able to find something to eat at most restaurants I have been to. Additionally, there are grocery stores so that you can make food at home as well. Not having a full kitchen makes this more challenging, but I do eat a lot of cucumber and tomato sandwiches, which do not require any cooking! Not eating any meat at all will prove to be more difficult, but you can definitely make it work with effort. One of the reasons why I moved to Thailand was to try new kinds of foods, and I have been able to do that even with my dietary restrictions. So, do not let you diet deter you from moving to Thailand, just lower your standards a bit and you'll be fine!