

Thai Cooking



Thai vegetables at the Sompert market in Chiang Mai

One of the best parts of traveling is sampling the local cuisine. In the case of Thailand, this is particularly fun as Thai food is unique and very good. In fact, there are lots of Thai restaurants everywhere. But how does one really get to understand Thai food? The guidebook describes the food, and how to order, and which restaurants are good. And as I studied it, I noticed references to Thai cooking schools in Chiang Mai. Since I was in Chiang Mai, I noted the location of one of the schools and during my exploration I went into the office and asked about classes. There was an opening for the next day!! This would take up most of the next day, but I was well on my way to a long temple list anyway, and so, after a short procrastination, I enrolled at the Chiang Mai Thai Cooking School for a one-day short course on Thai cooking.

The class started at 10 am. This was a good start time since Thai temples are designed to glitter in the early morning sun. In fact, I started the day with visits to Wat Phra Singh and Wat Suan Dok. I had plenty of time to hire a tuk-tuk to get back to the school for class. There were about 15 students from the US, England and Australia.

The first event was a visit to the Sompert food market. We needed to get to know Thai food resources – the vegetables, herbs and sauces. We divided into subgroups. I was with Australians Corrine and Rodney. Our instructor was An. She led us from stall to stall explaining varieties of Thai rice, vegetables, herbs and flavorings, coconut milk

processing, essential Thai sauces, types of tofu and other lessons about the cooking resources available for use.



Kaffir lime leaves are used in many Thai dishes. Our teacher, An, described many of the essential ingredients to us.

An describing Thai cooking sauces to classmates Corrine and Rodney. Fish sauce should be very dark in color, the darker the better. Most Thai cooks made their own red and green curry pastes.



After an hour at the market we returned to the cooking school. It is in an open-air patio next to the restaurant associated with the school. There is a set of student workstations surround a demonstration table. Each station has a wok, a cleaver and an apron. I chose a station with a bright blue apron. We would be making six dishes over the next few hours. Each dish started with a lecture and demonstration.



Another instructor explains the sequence and ingredients needed to complete the dish. Tapioca is used to thicken many of the sauces. No MSG was suggested for any of the dishes.

To aid us, there is a food preparation staff. At the start of each dish, components for the dish are provided to each workstation. Instructors strolled around providing comments and adding new ingredients at the appropriate times. I kept forgetting to turn off the flame under the wok, causing personal attention to my performance.



The starting point



The result: Mixed Vegetables with mushrooms



Students cooking in class. We were encouraged to eat our results.

The dishes that we prepared included:

1) **Chicken in coconut milk soup**: This was delicious. Coconut milk is the Thai's answer to olive oil. This dish features some unique Thai ingredients – galangal root, lemon grass, kaffir lime leaves. These items aren't edible, but they add flavor. This was our appetizer.

2) **Stir fried mixed vegetables with mushrooms**. This is a typical mixed vegetable dish. The sauce is thickened with tapioca flour. The shitake mushrooms were decorated by cutting a cross in their caps.

The next two dishes were served for lunch with steamed rice.

3) **Red curry with fish**. The curry pastes are prepared ahead of time and fried in the wok before the fish is added. Coconut milk is used for garnish as well as a main ingredient.

4) **Big fried noodles with thick sauce and ground pork**. This is a “quick” dish for most Thai cooks. The noodles are fried first to avoid clumping, but something went wrong with my attempt. I got a big ball of noodles, but it tasted good.

5) **Green papaya salad**. The green papaya salad was particularly interesting. The recipe called for six hot chili peppers. My workstation partner said that she didn't really like spicy food that much, and suggested that we use fewer in our preparation. I agreed, and we decided on just two peppers. One of the other students would use six, and so I would be able to compare the “heat.” The instructor demonstrated crushing the initial ingredients, including the peppers. She advocated at least 5 peppers, but we remained at two. Our salad ended up being fairly spicy, near the limit of what I find enjoyable. To my surprise, our salad was “hotter” than the salad with six peppers. The other student

admitted to not having crushed her peppers very thoroughly. Just swallow, don't crush.



Demonstrating preparation of the green papaya salad. If you don't want it too spicy, don't crush the peppers too thoroughly!

6) The final dish was a **banana cake steamed in a banana leaf**. Since all of the cakes were steamed together, we had to “mark” each effort with a clever nametag. The result was fairly good, but I prefer western desserts.



Chef Jeff and **Chef Rena** at their cooking stations at the **Chaing Mai Thai**
Cooking School

Yum! That was fun.