

By Erica Lee Nelson

My most vivid memory of the steamy street cart vendors in Bangkok is red – flaming red chilies in nearly every dish, popping out of salads, underneath the chunk of chicken, slivered or whole or split down the middle. They sneak up on you, at first bite warm, then hot, then building to a crescendo just as you’ve been foolish enough to take another spoonful.

Thankfully though, the pepper is not cruel. A flash of heat, a bead of sweat and it’s all over, leaving you free to soldier on to another spicy delicacy down the road.

Of course, arriving in Bangkok in late April didn’t help. One of the days I spent there proved to be the hottest of the year. But the weather wasn’t deterring any Thai people from chowing down, so it certainly wasn’t going to stop me.

Although I knew of Bangkok’s famous street food, I hadn’t grasped the breadth of it. Barring the purchase of western palette pleasers such as espresso coffee and fancy ice creams, a traveler could easily never set foot inside a restaurant during their entire stay here – and they certainly wouldn’t be missing out on any of the good eats.

My first taste of pavement cuisine came the morning after I arrived on a late night flight. After sleeping in far too late, my husband and I went to the famous mall, MBK Centre, to meet an old friend. Stepping out from the AC sky train to the sultry heat was a shock to the system. As we hiked down the steps I saw my first fruit cart and was drawn to the cool pink pieces of watermelon.

Pineapple, watermelon, papaya, rose apple, mango, musk melon and other varieties are all kept in clean plastic cases on ice, and removed immediately, chopped into pieces and slid into a baggy with a long wooden toothpick. You spear the fruit with the toothpick, pay 10 baht, and walk away with the tastiest and healthiest snacks imaginable. If this was the standard of street food, I was hooked.

That night, my friend took me to a bar in the old city of Banglamphu for a party. The place was full of art, Thais playing pool, expats getting drunk and booming alternative music. Over a few glasses of the local brew Sang Som (rice whiskey, which tastes more like rum), I extracted the street-eat knowledge of local David Osan.

It’s hard to give any definitive recommendations on street food, simply because there is so much of it and so many varieties. “Everyone has their favorite place, there is not place that’s number one” David told me. Looking for the most diverse clientele and cheap prices? Head to the streets between the World Trade Centre and the Watergate Hotel. And what about high-end sidewalk fare for the affluent, after-party crowd? Try Sukumvit’s Soi 38.

“But c’mon” I press him. “If you had to pick one favorite what would it be?”

He ponders. He says he can't. Then he launches into a list of favorites, dish by dish, and my head is swimming in too much humidity and rice whiskey to keep up. Yet from the haze I wake up to the next morning, one piece of advice stands out. Just opposite the Trimitr temple in Chinatown, there's a little street and a little shop that has the best Khao Moo Daeng (crunchy pork with rice) in the city. Having been enamoured of pork since birth (I once broke a stint of vegetarianism after smelling too much bacon frying), my quest was clear: I must find this place. Little did I know how many delicious distractions would confront me on the way.

I planned my day and hoped to end it at the temple. Then I was off, shuffling down the road to breakfast. I stuck to the common sense rule that applies all over the world – eat at places which are crowded with locals – and sat down at the blue plastic tables of the first street cart I saw. There was one thing on the menu that morning, so despite language barriers, ordering was easy. Crispy fried basil and chicken over noodles, with or without egg.

Thai people know what to do with eggs. You'll often see them in huge steel pots, being hard-boiled in mysterious and yummy soups. But the most sinful way to eat one is fried, Thai style, which really means deep fried. Think one whole cup of oil for one egg. It comes out crispy on the edges and almost flaky inside. Add a runny yolk to break over the spunky little basil leaves and marinated chicken, and having noodles for breakfast doesn't seem so strange anymore.

This breakfast bomb gave me the energy for a typical tourist day of gawking at temples and fighting with tuk-tuk drivers. At last, we decided to take a boat down the river to Chinatown, from the pier just below the graceful Rama 8 Bridge.

The heat was pressing down, our spirits low – in short, we needed a cold beer. Luckily, in Bangkok, street drinking is almost as popular as street eating, and the cops don't seem to mind. Right in front of the pier, just beside a hulking banyan tree stood our saviour, Maew, proprietress a charming little bamboo bar and grill. Her beer is cheap by Bangkok standards – just 55 baht – and the atmosphere can't be beat. It's shaded by the tree, cooled by the river breeze, and you can watch non-stop boxing action as hordes of kids and local Muay Thai champions practice in an outdoor ring nearby.

But what pushed me over the moon was Maew's food. She cooks it in the kitchen of her house next door and brings it out to the tables. It takes a while, but it's worth it. I ordered the classic Thai lemongrass soup, thom yam. Thai food is blessedly fragrant, and this glassy yellow broth was a virtual bouquet. Of course, lemon was there, as was a fishy undertone. And was that jasmine, something floral among the red peppers and tart thai ginger, galangal?

Though certainly spicy, the taste lived up to the smell. It was light, brimming with prawns, squid and chicken. After finishing it, I knew I shouldn't give up the chance to try another dish. I ordered another standard, pad thai, those slightly sweet, skinny flat rice noodles loved around the world. I was not disappointed. The sugar was subtle, the bean

sprouts fresh, with liberal doses of egg, crushed peanuts and fresh coriander. Needless to say, I was far too full to make it to Chinatown that night.

The next day my husband and I met a Thai friend for dinner. Though we ate in Soanboom restaurant behind MBK Centre, it must be recommended as most of its food is cooked on the street outside. Seafood is its speciality, but it was the only place I found which offered whole pigs roasted over a flaming pit on the sidewalk.

Our friend was a great fan of street food, and not just for the taste. “They are the cleanest places,” he said. “On the street, there are so many eyes watching them. In a restaurant, back in the kitchen, they could be serving you someone else’s leftovers for dinner!”

It is true that most Thai street vendors would put a Delhi dhabbawallah to shame. I never saw any vendor work on a new dish without cleaning the wok, and every surface was wiped clean. In all my eating adventures, I never once felt sick.

And adventures there were. Roasted insects are popular snacks in Thailand, and can be found all over the city. I bought some grasshoppers, but ended up gagging before I could get their spiky little legs in my mouth. However, the small white worms for sale are much less daunting, and they taste like extra crunchy french fries. As our Thai friend said of them, “They come from inside the bamboo. You can’t grow them, you have to find them. You are lucky to open up a bamboo stalk and just find two. That’s why they are so expensive. But they’re good, they’re jungle food.”

He also told us about attempts to curb the street dining culture. Many vendors, he said, used to be open all night, but new social zoning laws are forcing to people to close around 1 or 2 a.m. In fact, local journalists reported that a political group was trying to pass a law to ban any kind of food from being served in the streets.

I was shocked. The smiling ladies serving up steaming soups on every corner seemed integral to the culture of the place, not to mention a major economic force. If they stop the street food, they will seriously erode part of the charm of Thailand. Fortunately, on the epic eating tour I embarked on the next day, business looked unfettered and booming.

The street vendors near the Watergate hotel along Th Ratchadamri street are nearly restaurants, with seating for at least 30 people and waiters to take your order. Most of the patrons were young office workers enjoying a beer and a bite after work. After a series of lackluster raw papaya salads (som tham), I was ready for the real thing. I got it. We sat down and got the slippery, crunchy masterpiece delivered straight from the traditional wooden bowl it’s prepared in.

I was surprised at how sweet it was. Like most Thai food, it was a study in harmonious contradictions. One good dose of cabbage and (you guessed it) bright red pepper balanced out the sugar. The husband had the soft and subtle barbequed serpent fish, which like most fish in Thailand, is served whole and on a stick. Its flaky, pungent white flesh came off easily from the bone, with just salt for flavouring.

Earlier in the day, we had wandered around the massive Chatuchak market looking for deals, but also getting hungry. We tried a unique fish dish you'll see all around the city. It's a flat white gourami fish that's rubbed with salt and spices, split in two, and left to dry in the sun for some time. Then it's fried and served. Though sun-dried, the flesh still held a lot of moisture, and it wasn't tough to chew.

An even stronger fish taste came from a sort of Thai casserole, hummo. This was probably the only thing that disappointed. Sort of like a coagulated tom yam soup over fish parts and vegetables, with some sort of yogurt on top. Definitely not for the faint of taste bud.

But the best flavour of Chatuchak Market came in the form of heaping bowls of fresh cabbage, basil, pickled spinach and bean sprouts at the tables of a soup hawker. The fresh green vegetables beckoned us on the freakishly hot day, and we sat down to the most basic and widespread street food of all – broth and rice noodle soup, kuaytiaw naam.

This one came with chunks of chicken and balls of tofu. The broth was meaty and blessedly simple. Garnished with a bit of the typical 'mouse dropping' dried red chilis, a hint of sugar, soy sauce and heaping helpings of fresh greens, and you have a satisfying soup and salad all in one bowl.

We found the same sort of street soup in radically different avatar later that night in Chinatown. After 7 p.m., Th Charoen Krung street – the Disneyland of cart cuisine -- opens its movable feast to the world. Neon signs scream in mandarin and Chinese, hordes of people pass by and flames leap six feet in the air as expert chefs toss up seafood and exotic greens.

We stumbled upon a place open early at the eastern end of the street. Everyone was eating just one thing – pepper soup. This one had pork and beef and liver in it, and that wasn't the only change. It sung on the tastebuds with a fiery shot of black pepper and vinegar, and the rice noodles weren't typical at all. Each noodle was thick and short and rolled up around itself; they looked like slender floating seashells.

For the heat sufferers, the best treat is Ruam Mit, a kind of desert cereal made with multicoloured pieces of gelatin, sweet beans, corn, vermicelli noodles and tapioca on ice, all covered with sweet condensed milk. The stalls are everywhere, and the cold milky soup that emerges never fails to satisfy sweaty urban trekkers.

But what of my search for the perfect pork and rice? After enjoying giant barbeque prawns from the popular Lek & Rut seafood stall, my stomach had given up. I thought I could eat no more. So we trekked Trimitr temple not for food, but for a taxi. Curiosity got the best of me though, and the walk reinvigorated my appetite. The pork quest was back on.

After wandering around for a good 15 minutes through machinist shops and dark

alleyways, we still had not found it. Then, in the distance, I saw a fluorescent light. Could this be it? We were caught in a downpour. I didn't care.

After a bit of language-induced confusion, we sat down and got our order. Rice covered in the typical brown sauce you see in any Asian restaurant in any town in any continent, slightly thickened, dark and salty. It was all these things, but it was also on a rain drenched sidewalk being served off the flat bed of broken down pickup truck, while a bunch of Thai teenagers got smashing drunk on the floor of the neighborhood bakery next door. This brown sauce was transcendental.

The kind of pork it's served with is pretty unique: crispy on the outside, a generous layer of crunchy fat and then the soft chewy white meat. There was chunks of that and some darker, meaty cut. The sauce was sweetened from some mysterious source, possibly palm sugar. Salty with pork and soy flavour. Tangy and a little fishy in parts. Subtle. Awesome. I wanted to lick the plate. At 35 baht, you couldn't hope to ask for a better deal.

There were many other tasty and strange memories: crunching on fried crab kebabs with the 'escorts' of Nana entertainment complex. Delicate coconut cream kunam sai-sai in steamed banana leaves. Chewy sweet gelatin balls in the amulet market of Ratanakosin.

The most memorable dishes were always the simplest though: like plain roasted bananas on a stick on the docks by Waat Pho temple. Puffy Chinese fry bread for two baht each on Charoen Krung road. And at a very down market little stall with tattered-looking kebabs came a little masterpiece. Slightly dry and crunchy, incredibly sticky white rice pressed into balls and dipped into a salty vinegar sauce. It was simple, satisfying and unforgettable, and you'll never see it in a fancy restaurant.

The moral? When you eat on the street, don't attempt to transcend the surroundings. Don't wish for an AC. Relish the heat from the pavement, the heat from the peppers, the strange smells and simple pleasures. Your stomach, and your wallet, will thank you.