



# POK POK

ANDY  
RICKER

with JJ Goode



# pok pok

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Food and Stories from the Streets,  
Homes, and Roadside Restaurants  
of Thailand

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
Austin Bush

  
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# foreword

by David Thompson

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“One more plate of *laap*—please, Andy,” was my plea. I needed more. I had just finished a plate of this Northern Thai dish of chopped meat (pork, in this instance) mixed with spices and herbs. I have eaten *laap* many times before—it is a regional classic. However, this rendition was irresistible. The minced pork was rich and smoky, the spices bitter and tangy, the herbs enticingly aromatic. The combination of all these flavors left a wonderful taste that lingered long after I’d finished my last bite. I simply just had to order a second plate.

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I confess I was surprised by how good it was; really, it had no right to be so delicious. After all, I was sitting in Portland, Oregon—a far, far cry from Chiang Mai, the Northern Thai city that is this dish’s home.

I guess I shouldn’t have been astonished. Andy may have opened his first Pok Pok restaurant in Portland, but the food he cooks has deep roots in Thailand. It might seem strange that this six-foot-tall Vermonter is cooking Northern Thai food so well, until you understand Andy’s love for the Thais, their cuisine, and in particular the hazy mountainous province of Chiang Mai. Andy makes regular visits to Thailand, where he trawls the markets—watching, asking questions, and collecting recipes. He chats engagingly with local cooks, who share with him tips and techniques—but he is also a keen observer, and gets ideas and knowledge from furtively watching other, unsuspecting cooks. Either way, by whatever means, Andy gets the goods.

Whenever Andy comes to Thailand, I see him in Bangkok, where I live, and occasionally we travel together up-country. Accompanying Andy as he pursues his culinary quarry can be exhausting. He moves quickly from shop to shop, market to market, or village to village with nary a regard for his fellow travelers. He walks past the stalls that don’t pass muster, refusing to stop, while those of us in his wake bleat plaintively, wanting to eat, looking longingly at dishes he dismisses and leaves untouched. Mr. Ricker demands the best and thus he commands my respect, even if I do often end up hungry, tired, and sulky.

Andy has turned his not being Thai into an advantage. He is not limited by an inherent belief, as many Thais are, that his mother’s is the best and the only way to cook. His approach is much broader and more encompassing; he casts his culinary net wider, across all of Northern Thailand and its verdant and fertile fields.

Andy first backpacked through Asia and landed in Thailand in 1987, around the time I was making those same laps. I am surprised I didn’t run into him. Although, given the similarity of our quests, our mutual love for Thailand, and our crazy partying ways, it’s quite possible we did....

Andy’s moment of culinary epiphany came over a mushroom. Mine was over a serpent head fish,

clearly demonstrating that we can't choose our moments. The objects of our inspiration—some fungi and a fish, respectively—might seem silly, but in the end, they prompted both of us to change the course of our lives, including how we eat and cook.

I still recall that sour orange curry of serpent head fish, tart with tamarind leaves, plump with flavor. The seasoning, tastes, and textures of that curry transformed my understanding of Thai food. From then on I was hooked.

I moved to Bangkok to learn about the city's remarkable cuisine, regal past, and sophisticated tastes, opening a few swank restaurants in the process. Meanwhile, Andy was researching up-country eating his way through the north of Thailand. Later he opened the first Pok Pok restaurant in Portland on a maxed-out credit card, a mortgage, and with little capital. In the decade since then, he has established himself as an important voice in Thai cooking and an emissary of Northern Thai food internationally.

I remember working with Andy in both New York City and Portland and being amazed at his rather informal approach to cooking, kitchens, and restaurants. His very first restaurant was built out of his kitchen and partially demolished house, the food served through a window onto his porch and into the backyard—much like some small countryside restaurant in Thailand. You see, I come from the dainty world of fine dining, where certain things—such as grilling over charcoal in smoky forty-four-gallon drums, backyard coconut pressing, drinking beer on the job out of glass jars, fermenting mustard greens on the roof, and more beer drinking—were simply not done (unfortunately). But the casual appearance of Andy's restaurants belies the rigorous, ambitious cooking that happens in his kitchens. He is obsessed with making the very best food he can. I admire the canny way he doctors his lime juice to approximate the taste of lime juice in Thailand, the resourceful way he finds and secures Thai produce, and his faithful adherence to Thai recipes, techniques, and tastes. The restaurants may not look terribly fancy, but inside, Andy and his Pok Pok crew are complete perfectionists, constantly adjusting and tinkering with their recipes to ensure everything is right.

Andy has almost singlehandedly created a market for regional Thai cuisine in the United States. Such food was practically unknown in the US before Pok Pok, but now, many of the dishes he cooks are the objects of cultlike devotion. For proof of his swashbuckling success, simply observe the lines that wind down the street outside of the Pok Pok restaurants. People clamor for his food—a style of cooking that they didn't know existed before 2005. One excellent example is that delectable pork *laap* which was as lip-smackingly good as any version I have found in Thailand.

While eagerly waiting for my second plate, I looked across our table—with its now-empty plates of grilled sausages, noodle salads, soups, curries, and chili dips—to the other tables of equally replete and happy diners. I couldn't help but wonder, what would this damned skillful cook do next?

Well, you're now holding Andy's latest project: the *Pok Pok* cookbook. In it, Andy chronicles Chiang Mai's wide-ranging culinary repertoire—including my longed-for pork *laap*, a sour orange curry quite similar to the one that first enthralled me so many years ago, and many other Northern dishes. This book is the product of years and years of research, practice, and experience, and clearly demonstrates why Andy and Pok Pok are so successful: great food; honest, practical advice and guidance; and a sincere desire to please without compromising the integrity of the cuisine. It's a winning recipe.

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# introduction

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I'm staying with my friend Sunny in the village of Ban Pa Du. One night, we decide to take his pickup truck to the city of Chiang Mai to scout out a restaurant specializing in the blackish jumble of minced meat called *laap meuang*. But on the way there, I spot an open-air restaurant with a ton of motorcycles parked out front, people milling around, and no signs written in English—all the hallmarks of a place worthy of a stop. I ask Sunny what it's all about. "Ah, very old-style food," he says. By the time I finish chiding him for never having told me about this place, we've pulled over.

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It's a typical roadside spot—a dusty lot scattered with tables and benches crudely nailed together, plastic stools sunk into the dirt, and a roof fashioned from teak tree leaves. Soft light comes from bare bulbs. It's hot, so we start pounding Leo beers, a kind of Miller High Life equivalent, poured into ice-filled glasses. Our food starts coming out. After a few bites, Sunny and I look at each other as if to say, *Holy shit, this is good*. We're eating pig brain mixed with curry paste and lime leaf, then wrapped in banana leaf; charred, chewy hunks of pig test; and sour sausage—essentially pork mixed with rice and left to ferment in the heavy heat. It's awesome.

I start chatting with the guy who runs the place with his family. I learn that their day of prepping, pounding, and frying begins at 5 a.m. The food is all made in a rudimentary outdoor kitchen—a couple grills and outdoor stoves. They open for business in the midafternoon, serve food until midnight, then get up and do it all again. Seven days a week. He tells me that he's been doing this, in the same dirt patch, for eleven years. He's forty-five years old, tops. And I can tell by the way his young daughter is charming the crowd that she'll probably end up doing the same.

This is the Thailand I know. I've been traveling there for almost two decades, and I've fallen for the country, the people, and food that bears no resemblance to the pick-a-protein rainbow curries or sweet piles of *phat thai* that I'd wolfed down in restaurants in the US.

So seven years back, I decided to open a takeout-only shack in Portland, Oregon, devoted to the revelatory grub I'd found on the streets of Bangkok, markets in Loei, and homes in Chiang Mai. Friends warned me that no one would want to eat lemongrass-stuffed game hens and bowls of *khao soi*, Chiang Mai's famous curried noodle dish, even though I modified the rotisseries just as they do in Thailand and pressed the coconut milk myself. But I figured at least a few people would, and that would be enough for me. Today I run four restaurants in Portland and two in New York City, all serving food you'd be hard-pressed to find outside of Southeast Asia.



I remember the moment everything changed.

More than a decade before Pok Pok was even a glimmer in my eye, I'd been living in New Zealand

and Australia, doing odd jobs—I picked pumpkins and packed kiwis, I DJed, I painted houses, I cooked at restaurants—when I decided to backpack up through Singapore and Malaysia. I ended up on a stunning group of islands on the east coast in Southern Thailand. I ate well. I loved the food. But my experience was similar to that of most tourists—I was eating better versions of the stuff I'd had back home. Eventually, I wound up in Portland. It wasn't until four years after my first trip that I returned to Thailand and had my revelation.

I was staying in Chiang Mai with my friend Chris and his wife, Lakhana, a village woman steeped in the local culture. They took me to a restaurant that specialized in Northern Thai food. I didn't even know there was such a thing as Northern Thai food. It was a sweltering April. At that time of year, Thais forage for *het thawp*, a slightly bitter puffball-like mushroom, which came to us floating in a soupy, herbaceous “curry.” I dipped my spoon and tasted. It was like seeing an entirely new color. It was nothing like anything I had eaten before. It was unbelievably good.

From then on, my eyes were open. On every street corner, I saw people eating dishes I'd never even heard of. There was *yen ta fo*, noodles and fish cakes floating in soup tinted pink from fermented bean curd. There was *kuaytiaw reua*, or boat noodles, so named because the bowls of dark, murky broth, fragrant with cinnamon and star anise, were once sold from the vessels floating in the canals and rivers of Central Thailand. There were simple relishes—*naam phrik* and *lon*—that served as fiery or funky dips for boiled vegetables, otherworldly herbs, and crunchy curls of pork crackling.

Occasionally, I found a dish whose name I recognized, but what I got when I ordered it was something almost unrecognizable. Hunched on a way-too-small plastic stool in Chiang Mai, I ordered *laap*, expecting the pleasant, lime-spiked chopped-meat salad I'd eaten all my life in Portland and New York City and LA. Instead, the stuff that arrived was fragrant, bitter, black—and wonderful. At the time, I could barely keep track of what I was eating. All I knew was that if this is what Thais eat, then I wanted to eat it, too.

Back in the States, my obsession with Thailand made me hard to hire, because every winter, I'd have to quit my job and go back. That's when I decided to take up house painting full-time, after spending much of my working life in restaurants. It gave me the flexibility to spend months at a time in Thailand. I took language lessons. My eating became more systematic. I'd taste something, get obsessed with it, and eat it everywhere I could. So much of the food there is cooked outdoors, in plain sight, so I watched the food being made. I talked my way into the homes of friends, and friends of friends. I'd hang out with street vendors, picking their brains over glasses of rice whiskey. Gradually I learned to cook the dishes I loved most, to tweak them and tweak them until they tasted just like the ones I did at my favorite spots. *Someday I'll open a restaurant*, I thought. *Americans need to know this food*.

At this point, I'd been painting houses for eight years straight. When I'd go to work, I'd just stare at the unpainted walls. I could barely bring myself to pick up a brush. I wanted to open a restaurant, but at this rate, I never would. Then I thought about my friend Ethan.

Ethan is a friend from Vermont, where I grew up. He lives in Austin, Texas, and we called the four-room shack where he lived at the time the Vermont Embassy, because that's where everyone from Vermont crashed when they came to town, sometimes twenty of us at a time. Once I was down there visiting and noticed a leak under his bathroom sink. I called him in and suggested a few stop-gap repairs. He took one look, and yanked the leaky pipe out of the wall. I was shocked. We could've stopped the leak. But he said something I'll never forget: “Now it's completely broken. Now, it'll have to get fixed the right way.”

When I got back to Portland, I started applying the Ethan Method of getting things done. I knocked down walls, smashed windows, and threw everything into the backyard. I made my home unlivable.

That way, I had to fix it up. I spent three years doing just that. Then I took out another mortgage. My plan was to use the proceeds to open a restaurant.

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I ultimately decided I'd serve a limited menu of simple dishes I wished I could find in the States, and go from there. I knew one thing for sure: I wouldn't call the place a Thai restaurant. If I did, people would show up expecting *phat thai* and cashew chicken.

The property that caught my eye, on a particularly unsightly stretch of SE Division Street, was owned by an elderly Japanese couple—probably the thriftiest people I've ever encountered. The house and shack hadn't seen any major improvement since about 1935. There was an ancient, cracked deep fryer. There was an antique gas stove, the kind with cast-iron legs that looked like it should be burning wood in some pioneer's farmhouse. I don't even know how they found it. Yet there was an exhaust hood in the basement. And there was a stainless steel triple-sink—the kind you'd get for \$39.99 at Home Depot. I would have an operational—barely, but still—kitchen, and under the city's regulations it would be grandfathered in as a commercial restaurant. I could start cooking immediately.

So I got to work on the glamorous chef stuff—you know, plumbing the shack, adding electrical service, and tackling a three-day-long jack-hammering project to break through an eighteen-inch concrete slab. I finally opened the takeout-only shack with a dinky eight-item menu—including rotisserie chickens, a few papaya salad permutations, pork *sateh*, and *khao soi*—and one employee—my buddy Ike from Vietnam. I named it Pok Pok, after the sound a pestle makes when it strikes a clay mortar as you make papaya salad. I told a few friends to come by and hoped for the best. Within six months, there was a line snaking down the driveway to Division Street. I couldn't believe it. Customers embraced the food with so much fervor that you'd think I was serving cupcakes.

Now, I'd worked in enough restaurants to know that a busy restaurant doesn't mean a profitable one. Sure enough, a year later, despite the success of the shack, I was broke. More than broke. I had maxed out about six credit cards in the process of building out the rest of the house into a proper restaurant. I fielded menacing calls from creditors. I'd broken every rule there is about opening a restaurant: I'd set up shop in an undeveloped neighborhood. I'd put up my house as collateral. I wrote checks blindly. My mom had to loan me seven thousand dollars that she couldn't afford so I could make my first payroll. All this to serve food not many Portlanders had ever heard of.

Finally I opened the sit-down version of Pok Pok. In the winter. I had to sell my house, moving from one cheap rental to another, even living for a while in what would later become Pok Pok's upstairs dining room. Equipment started breaking; employees weren't making money and were losing faith. When it seemed like the jig was up, *The Oregonian* named Pok Pok "Restaurant of the Year." Business tripled. By the end of the year, I was debt-free and Pok Pok was packed every day.

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I've accidentally spent the last ten years preparing to write this book. It is, I suppose, the Pok Pok cookbook. It's a collection of recipes from the restaurant, but it also includes food that reflects some of my fondest memories and moments of discovery before and since that day in November, 2005, when the shack's window first opened.

One thing that it's definitely *not* is a Thai cookbook, in part because Pok Pok is not an exclusively Thai restaurant but also because Thailand is a vast, diverse country that even after two decades of eating and exploring I still have much to learn about. The range of recipes in this book is severely constrained by my knowledge, experience, and ability. I've included recipes from all over Thailand and other countries to which my early travels took me, though many come from Northern Thailand, where my first revelation occurred and where I've had many since.

After people eat at Pok Pok, they often assume I have an army of Thai women in my kitchen ~~pounding pastes and simmering sauces that they've made since they were girls. Me, the big white guy? I probably just taste whatever they've made and give it the thumbs up. No such luck.~~

I've researched every one of the dishes we serve at the restaurant. I've tried and failed and tried and failed to make them come close to my favorite versions in Thailand. And I've at last deciphered a recipe, a way to replicate real-deal Thai flavor using ingredients available in the West. But more important, I've figured out a way to communicate the techniques and flavors to my new cooks, who at first think papaya salad is something you'd find in the deli cold case next to the cubed watermelon. Because not so long ago, I was like them (and if I may be so bold, like you): someone who loves Thai food but doesn't know how to cook it.

My hopes for this book are simple: to show you 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.

This book is a tribute to the cooks of Thailand. Which leads me to disclaimer number one: I'm not a chef. I didn't invent this stuff. The food at my restaurants is not my take on Thai food. It isn't inspired by Thai ingredients. 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. The recipes in this book are my best approximations of some of my favorite versions of my favorite Thai dishes, which have been created, cooked, and perfected by Thai people.

Disclaimer number two: I am not a trained scholar of Thai food or culture. My knowledge is largely anecdotal, gleaned from twenty years of observing, eating, cooking, wandering, and wondering. There are aspects of Thai life and food that I may never understand. I still learn something new on every trip I take. The more I learn, the more I understand how much I don't know. I heartily recommend that anyone interested in a scholarly English-language paean look up David Thompson, the Australian-born chef of Nahm in Bangkok and the author of several excellent cookbooks, including the incredibly informative tome *Thai Food*. He has learned to read long-defunct Thai script, unearthed long-forgotten recipes, and generally devoted his life's work to the study of Thai history and culture as seen through its cuisine. If this book joins his on your shelf, I'd be thrilled and honored.

I do realize some of you won't cook through every last dish in this book. Some of my favorite cookbooks have sauce-splattered, dog-eared pages. Others are pristine. So another of my goals in writing it is to provide a glimpse of Thai life and culture. I hope the book helps illuminate why the food is the way it is, not from a preponderance of historical facts, but from the ingredients and techniques used to make it, and from observations about where and how it's eaten, from me and from the mouths of some of the characters who have taught me what I know.

These characters, I should mention, are getting older and their knowledge is being threatened with extinction. Many members of the younger generation of Thais no longer want to take over their parents' food stalls or learn the secrets of their grandmothers' bamboo shoot salads. They want to go to college, move to Bangkok, or leave the country. And like kids just about everywhere nowadays, they're eager to eat at KFC. These changes aren't bad or good. They reflect a changing economy that has created new opportunities for young Thais. It is what it is. Many of this book's recipes embody traditions that are rapidly disappearing. Even if you don't cook through the recipe for Northern Thai *laap*, at least it will be on paper. At least there will be a record in English of its existence.





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## how to use this book

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To begin, let me acknowledge my two seemingly conflicting tasks: dispensing with the myths that keep people from making Thai food at home in the first place but also recognizing the effort it entails. You shouldn't be dissuaded by nonsense, but you should know exactly what you're getting into.

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First up, two big myths. One: Thai food is too laborious for home cooks. I've eaten too much mind-blowingly good food cooked in ramshackle kitchens with single-burner stoves for this to hold any weight with me. And the casualness of much of the preparation is liberating. When I hire a new cook, I immediately explain that he's not at a high-minded fine-dining place where they serve deep-fried hummingbird with truffle tincture on a tree bark platter. So he should stop thinking like a twenty-year-old culinary student aspiring to a job at Noma or Per Se and start thinking like a forty-five-year-old rice field worker who just opened a food stall. He won't use a \$150 knife; he'll have a \$4 stainless steel blade. He won't cut carrots into brunoise or slice cucumbers into fettuccine—he'll cut them up into crude bite-size chunks. Cooking this food is relatively straightforward. The hardest part is finding the ingredients.

Two: You can't cook Thai food in the US, because you can't get any of the ingredients. As you might have guessed, I ran into this roadblock when I set about reproducing Northern Thai *laap* in Portland. A lot of ingredients in Thailand, like young tamarind leaves and banana blossoms, are either nearly impossible to find here or dramatically inferior to their Thai counterparts. And since trying to make banana blossom salad without banana blossoms would be like building a brick house without the bricks, I developed a revolutionary approach: I just don't make banana blossom salad. The recipes in this book embody that same logic—they're dishes you can make with ingredients available in the US without sacrificing the flavor you'd get in Thailand.

Next up, what you're getting into. This isn't *How to Cook Asian Food in Three Easy Steps*. Some recipes are simple, not because I've dumbed them down, but because the recipe in question happens to be simple. Some recipes will take work. You can't just pop over to the corner store for water spinach, galangal, and fresh noodles as you can for broccoli raab, ginger, and spaghetti. You can't just whiz curry paste ingredients in a food processor and expect a truly great result.

With this in mind, I've intentionally limited the number of recipes to about seventy. When I first endeavored to learn about a cuisine with entirely unfamiliar ingredients and techniques, I was overwhelmed by the vastness of what I didn't know. Poring over encyclopedic volumes and then trying to cook, felt like taking Physics 101 and then trying to build a space shuttle. By focusing my efforts, I'll have the room to provide the knowledge and tools you need to make faithful reproductions. If I'm going to ask you to make food that's unlike anything you've ever cooked, the least I can do is guide you through the process.

To that end, I chose to write recipes packed with the details you'll need to successfully make this food, even though that makes the recipes look long. For the more complicated recipes, I've included a plan that makes it clear when certain components or steps can be done days, even weeks or months in advance. I will urge, coax, coerce, and threaten until you make the extra effort it takes to do this food justice. I will be a bit of a dictator, but a benevolent one. That's why some recipes that call for a particularly onerous step or hard-to-find ingredient offer another option—but only if that option truly serves the final product.

## **INGREDIENTS AND SUBSTITUTIONS**

My recipes aim to recreate particular dishes with particular flavors. Some dishes can be replicated at home with concessions to convenience. Some can't. I've provided substitutions only when the result won't suffer. When an ingredient is available in the US, I ask you to buy it. To help, see [Ingredients](#) and [Mail-Order Sources](#). When it isn't, I've developed a bunch of hacks—useful tricks for accessing true Thai flavor. This is why, for instance, every recipe that calls for limes recommends taking the extra step to find Key limes, which ape the fragrant, fruity, slightly sweet Thai limes, or calibrating the juice of typical limes with a squeeze of Meyer lemon juice.

Again, many ingredients are not easy to find. My suggestion, then, is to go to the market with a few dishes, not just one, in mind. That way, you're prepared when the fresh ingredient you're after isn't there.

You might wonder whether you can, say, omit the Chinese celery in [Yam Khai Dao \(Fried egg salad\)](#), or serve the chile sauce meant for a deep-fried whole fish over a simple pan-fried fillet. My hope is that after you cook through this book, after you get comfortable with the ingredients and techniques, you'll be able to make your own calls about which substitutions and shortcuts work and which don't. While this book's primary goal is to help you replicate specific dishes, I wouldn't be upset if it simply helped you make great food at home.

## **THE LIMITS OF RECIPES**

Any cookbook worth its cover price acknowledges that recipes are by nature imperfect. This is especially true for a cookbook like this one, where the recipes rely on less-than-familiar ingredients and techniques. There will be a major learning curve, no question. So here's a caveat before you begin cooking: the dishes in this book might not come out perfectly on your first go. My goal in writing the recipes was to make sure that your first attempt turns out close to perfect at best and really tasty at worst. My hope is that you cook these dishes more than once, knowing that the results will improve with each attempt.

This next piece of advice may sound obvious, but I've certainly been guilty of not following it myself, so it bears repeating: before you start cooking, read the recipe first. That way you'll know what can or must be done ahead and what to expect as you cook.

## **SEASONING TO TASTE**

One Thai bird chile is evisceratingly hot while the next is surprisingly mild. One brand of soy sauce is saltier than another. Recipes can only attempt to account for this. They can guide you toward a desired

result, they can get you close. But only you can take the final few steps it takes to get there, so most cookbook authors tell you to season—with salt or lemon—to taste. In Thai cooking, seasoning to taste is particularly important. For vendor fare that's made to order, customers typically request more heat, less sweetness, more tartness, and so on. Most noodle dishes come with things like chile powder, vinegar-soaked chiles, fish sauce, and sugar so diners can tweak the flavor themselves.

If I were new to Thai cooking, and you told me to season [Som Tam Lao \(Lao/Isaan-style papaya salad\)](#), to taste, I'd probably dump in three times the palm sugar. The dish would taste decent, sure, but it would no longer taste like Lao/Isaan-style papaya salad, which is defined as much by its ingredients as by its flavor profile—sour, salty, and funky, not sweet. The point of these recipes is to take you to a specific place, perhaps somewhere you've never been before. To help, each recipe has a brief description of the proper flavor profile (listed from the most prominent flavors to the least), so that inevitable point in the recipe process when you must season to taste, you'll at least have some idea of your goal. The stories, I hope, provide some context that will guide you as well. For instance, something that might taste too intense to be eaten by the spoonful might be just right when eaten with sticky rice. It also helps to get to know your raw ingredients, especially ones with which you might not be familiar. So sniff, bite, chew. That way, you'll know how they can affect the final product.

You'll notice that many recipes that ask you to pound a bunch of ingredients into a paste have you make more of this paste than you'll ultimately use. That's intentional. Not only does it avoid the absurdly precise measurements you'd need to come up with exactly the right amount of paste, but it also means you'll have extra in case you think a curry needs more punch.

## **FORGET WHAT YOU KNOW**

A key to successfully cooking unfamiliar food is denying some of your culinary instincts. Western cooks tend to want to brown meat before stewing, cook the meat until it's falling-apart tender, and reduce thin broths to intensely flavored liquids. That's all good when you're making Daniel Boulud's braised shortribs, but not if you're making *jin hoom*. Same goes for the temperature at which food is served. Many recipes in this book are best served not steaming hot but just above room temperature—or, as I like to think of it, at room temperature if that room is in steamy Bangkok.

## **HIGH HEAT, COOKING TIMES, & CO.**

I won't travel too far down this rabbit hole. I think it goes without saying that your stove and mine have different definitions of “high” and “low” heat. And that the time estimates each recipe provides for frying paste, cooking meat, and pounding chiles to a powder are approximate—dependent on stoves, pans, and individual cooks. Treat them as guidelines. Pay closer attention to the descriptions of what things should look, smell, and taste like. Understand that though my goal in writing these recipes was to give you great results on your first cook-through, each dish will get better the more times you cook it.

## **MEASUREMENTS: VOLUME AND WEIGHT**

I've used volume for liquid ingredients, but also for those that are grated, minced, in powder form, or otherwise fine enough for volume to be an accurate measure. I've included weight for most solid

ingredients. A good digital scale costs twenty dollars. Splurge. Calling for “2 small shallots” or a “medium daikon radish” just won’t do (one person’s small is another’s large). Nor will “¼ cup thinly sliced lemongrass,” whose impact in a dish will depend on the thinness of those slices and the cook’s tendency to pack those slices into the cup measure. It may sound fussy to call for “3 grams of garlic,” but it is simply more precise—and looks less insane than the imperial equivalent of “0.1 ounces,” which is why I included gram measurements for weights under 1 ounce. And since many of the ingredients, techniques, and foods in this book will be unfamiliar to most cooks, precision is especially important. The instincts you’d typically rely on to make up for a lack of precision don’t apply. The good news: Digital scales are inexpensive. Weighing ingredients is really easy. So is toggling between grams and ounces. Once you start, you’ll be hooked.

That said, I did ultimately give in to entreaties from scale-less friends, and in many recipes I’ve provided volume equivalents for the weight measures. (I still urge you to buy a scale and treat the weight measures as gospel and the other measures as guidance.) I drew the line, however, at ingredients that are to be pounded to a paste. For those, precision is key. (Dried chiles are the only exception; since they’re too light to accurately register on some scales, I’ve indicated the number of chiles as well as their weight.)

## **BUILDING A PANTRY**

At first glance, many of the recipes in this book might seem intimidating. A relatively simple stir-fry calls for Thai oyster sauce, thin soy sauce, and yellow bean sauce. A salad recipe asks you to make toasted–sticky rice powder and toasted–chile powder. A curry requires you to make a special shrimp paste, pound a curry paste, and fry shallots. Recreating true Thai flavor in the West takes work, no question, but at the same time, cooking this food is not as difficult as it appears to be.

To the problem of lists full of seemingly strange ingredients, one big shopping trip is the solution. Once you build up even a modest pantry, cooking this food becomes infinitely less onerous. Dried or preserved ingredients such as palm sugar, dried chiles, dried shrimp, and bottled sauces last indefinitely in your cupboard or fridge. Many fresh ingredients such as chiles, galangal, and kaffir lime leaves can be purchased frozen and keep frozen for months.

With the challenge of recipes within recipes, some perspective helps. Thai cooking relies on a pantry that’s different from our Western one. A cook in Thailand has certain staple ingredients on hand—such as chile powder, toasted–sticky rice powder, and pork stock—or they can easily find high-quality versions at the market. In the US, some of these must be made at home, because store-bought versions aren’t up to snuff. Yet no one’s saying you have to make toasted–chile powder every time you cook. Take the time to make it once and you’re set for a while. Other ingredients, such as tamarind water and palm sugar simple syrup, last for a week. Still others can be prepared a day or so in advance. I’ve indicated whenever possible how long ingredients like these can keep.

To further help with the task of making this food, I’ve identified recipes in this book that become significantly less daunting once you break them into several tasks to be performed over a few weeks or days. Each of these recipes includes a game plan meant to ease your mind and get you cooking.

## **EQUIPMENT**

If you want to cook everything in this book, you’ll have to buy some special equipment. There’s no way to make great sticky rice without a sticky rice steamer. It costs twelve dollars. There’s no better

vessel for stir-frying than a wok. Buy one. To make great *som tam*, you need a large, deep clay mortar to pound curry pastes, you'll need a medium-size granite mortar. Each recipe explains exactly what equipment is necessary to make the recipe. Here are two lists (neither include a large pot, blender, spice grinder, and other things a well-equipped kitchen has)—one for those looking to cook the most dishes with the least equipment and another for those cooks determined to make every recipe in this book. Aside from the digital scale and charcoal grill, which are available virtually anywhere, you'll find them all in Thai and other Asian markets or online (see [Mail-Order Sources](#)).

#### AT THE LEAST

- \* **Digital scale**
- \* **Flat-bottomed wok**
- \* **Wok spatula**
- \* **Medium Thai granite mortar (the opening about 6 inches in diameter) and pestle**
- \* **Large Thai clay mortar (the opening about 8 inches in diameter)**
- \* **Wooden pestle**
- \* **Electric rice cooker**
- \* **Sticky rice steamer set (both the woven basket and pot-bellied pot)**
- \* **Long-handled noodle strainer**

#### A STEP BEYOND

The above nine plus:

- \* **Charcoal grill**
- \* ***Tao* (Thai-style charcoal stove)**
- \* **Wide aluminum Chinese steamer**
- \* **Clay pot**
- \* ***Laap* knife or other heavy cleaver**
- \* **Thick wood chopping block (not bamboo)**
- \* **Papaya shredder (look for the Kiwi brand)**



## MAKING A MEAL

Making the recipes in this book into a larger meal deserves a little elaboration. The dishes that follow (even the non-Thai ones) fall into three general Thai categories: *aahaan kap khao*, the proper meal; *aahaan jaan diaw*, the one-plate meal; and *khong waan*, sweets.

## AAHAAN KAP KHAO: Dishes to eat with rice as part of a shared meal

The proper meal comprises a number of dishes that everyone shares along with plenty of rice. These meals, taken in homes and restaurants alike, strike a balance between sweetness and tartness, saltiness and bitterness, mildness and heat (not necessarily within each dish, but in the meal as a whole) that is particular to the place where they're eaten and the people eating them.

The meal is different from how we typically eat at restaurants in the US. We order appetizers that we occasionally share, but then it's every diner for himself. One person orders the steak, another the pasta. We even do this at Thai restaurants, where someone orders the green curry, another, the red. That's one reason the idea of a communal, balanced meal can be a difficult sell at Pok Pok. Yet this notion of a balanced meal should seem entirely familiar: Every year, we gather for family-style dinners of turkey, salty stuffing, sugary sweet potatoes, and tangy cranberry sauce. Everyone makes his own meal from the same dishes in the center of the table.

For our purposes, however, you need only pick a few dishes that complement each other. In general, avoid serving multiple dishes with similar flavors or making a meal of all meat or several super-rich dishes. In other words, use your head. To get you started, I provide serving suggestions for each dish, selected with flavor profiles and balance in mind. My serving suggestions also take into consideration the effort required to make each recipe—though it bears repeating that many of the meals you'll make take time and planning.

Most of the recipes in this book that fall into the category of *aahaan kap khao* make relatively small

portions, because again, they're not supposed to be the centerpiece to a meal. Yet I understand that if you're cooking for a bunch of people, you might want to make larger portions. To that end, I've indicated whenever a recipe can be easily doubled (that is, without significant changes in cooking process). For the especially complicated dishes in this book—[Laap Meuang](#) and [Yam Jin Kai](#), for example—and dishes that would be awkward to make in small portions—[Kaeng Hung Leh](#), for instance—I've gone ahead and provided a recipe for a more substantial portion that you can serve with rice and another simple dish or two.

## **AAHAAN JAAN DIAW: The One-Plate Meal**

The one-plate meal is what it sounds like it is: dishes that by themselves make a meal or at least a hearty snack. I devoted an [entire chapter](#) to these dishes, which you can turn to when you're not up for making the multiple dishes that constitute *aahaan kap khao*.

## **KHONG WAAN: Sweets**

Notably not synonymous with dessert, this category includes an expansive roster of snacks that happen to be sweet. The handful of examples in this book barely scratches the surface. But the genre has become one of my favorites among those in the Thai culinary catalog.

## **HOW TO EAT THIS FOOD**

Look, you can eat Thai food with a spatula for all I care. But there are a few things worth saying about how Thais eat. Spoiler: chill with the chopsticks.

Before the nineteenth century, when Thais began to adopt Western utensils like spoons and forks, they ate seated on the floor and with their hands. Even now, in sticky-rice country (Northern and Northeastern Thailand), people often forgo silverware, instead grabbing a small clump of rice and using it to snatch up food. Still, it's common to find a fork and spoon at the Thai table, especially when the rice is jasmine. Generally speaking, Thais use the spoon to eat and the fork to occasionally deliver food from plate to spoon. The spoon is a much more efficient implement for scooping up the many saucy or soupy dishes. Eat this way enough and using a fork on a curry begins to seem as awkward as drinking wine out of a beer mug: it works, but not well.

Knives don't typically appear at the table—meat and vegetables are typically served in bite-size pieces. Nor do chopsticks, unless you're eating noodles. Chopsticks are a Chinese-born implement for a Chinese-born foodstuff.

### **A QUICK NOTE ABOUT TRANSLITERATIONS**

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In general, the Thai words in this book have been transliterated (rendered in phonetically similar words in the Latin alphabet) according to the Royal Thai General System of Transcription



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sample content of Pok Pok: Food and Stories from the Streets, Homes, and Roadside Restaurants of Thailand

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