

# A BITE OF BANGKOK

Sarah Engstrand gets lost and found in  
Thailand's beguiling and delicious capital city >>

Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of bestselling memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*, said every city has a word that defines it. According to her, New York's was ambition, Rome's was sex and London's was stuffy. Bangkok, I think, should have two.

The first is hustle. In every corner of every quarter and at all times of day, Bangkok buzzes and hums. The second word is eat.

Food is at the very heart of the culture here, and you can't separate the city from its roadside skewer sellers or Michelin stars. Before I even touched down in Bangkok, I had a list of dozens of restaurants and bars, ranging from fine dining to friends' suggestions such as, "this one guy who makes *moo ping* on the street." They were barely able to contain their enthusiasm to share.

Here, food takes on an identity beyond itself: it's a passion, a hobby, a love affair. It's how you show you care and how you say hello. Listen out for, "*Gin khao reu yang?*" when you walk around the city. It means, "Have you eaten rice yet?," and is a common greeting.

As the largest city in Thailand, Bangkok has long been the nation's culinary capital. It's the melting pot where all of Thailand's cultures and cuisines come

together: creamy seafood from the south, bitter, herbaceous dishes from the north, Chinese-influenced central dishes, and the bold flavors of the Isan region are all represented here.

Over the past decade, the city's culinary scene has flourished. Local ingredients, regionally focused dishes and tasting menus are taking over the scene. There's even a Michelin Guide, which was launched last year. You're not just spoiled for choice here, you're also overwhelmed by the quality of the choices.

"Eating in Bangkok is a culinary Aladdin's cave," chef David Thompson tells me. Formerly behind the pass at world-renowned Nahm in the city, Australian-born Thompson is one of the most famous names in Thai cuisine and has made the capital his home for over 30 years. "Bangkok has always been a good place to eat, whether it's in the streets or restaurants, it's always had great food. I think what's happening is that more people are becoming aware of how good it is." And rightly so.

He speaks of the city like a lover, describing one's surrender to the ordered chaos as, "The pleasure of Bangkok." Only once you've abandoned expectations will >>



### CAN'T MISS RESTAURANTS

#### 80/20

Located away from the crowds, this hipster haven serves some of the most exciting food in Bangkok. The Thai menu is designed to be shared, and roughly 80% of the ingredients are locally and sustainably sourced.

#### Bo.lan

Bangkok is having a modern-fusion moment, but here they still serve traditional dishes in one of the city's most glamorous locations. The fine-dining spot draws inspiration from all over the country and is committed to a zero-carbon footprint.

#### Soul Food Mahanakorn

It's run by an American, but the food at this trendy spot is regionally focused, Thai home cooking. Try the smoked duck *larb* with red sticky rice, or the charred eggplant salad with bacon and soft duck eggs.

#### Sorn Fine Southern Cuisine

Taste the best of the south with a five-course, family-style set menu. Ingredients come in daily and are cooked using traditional techniques, including charcoal grills and clay pots. The yellow curry with young mangosteen is a standout dish.

IMAGES: ALAMY; BETTY



Previous pages: Bangkok at night  
From left: Fruit market; pad Thai;  
Soi Cowboy red light district



Clockwise from top: Vendor selling her produce; tom yum soup; Banyan Tree Vertigo rooftop bar and restaurant



IMAGES: BETTY

## IT WAS TRANSFORMATIVE; THE KIND OF CULINARY EXPERIENCE YOU DREAM ABOUT FOR YEARS

you discover the city for what it truly is: wild, untamed and enticing.

When I landed, I had my trip all planned out. The sprawling city had been reduced to a series of stars and flags on Google Maps. Armed with my carefully crafted itinerary I went into the night, but the capital had other plans. My restaurant choices were either closed or full, the street food stalls had moved to some new location, and a bar had been hired out for a private event. Nothing went according to plan.

Tired and defeated, I wandered aimlessly. It was then that I saw an older gentleman preparing mango sticky rice. For less than a dollar, I went home with a whole sliced mango, two heaping scoops of warm sticky rice straight from the cooker, and a bag of sweetened coconut milk. It was transformative; the kind of culinary experience you dream about for years. I went to bed happy and full, having succumbed to the delicious chaos that is Bangkok. And perhaps most importantly, having eaten rice that day.

### BEYOND PAD THAI

Bangkok may have some of the best Thai food in the kingdom, but that's not all there is. The city is home to myriad cuisines, everything from Indian and Italian to French-fusion. "Bangkok's food scene is vibrant and changing very quickly," says Jarrett Wrisley, chef and owner at the popular Soul Food Mahanakorn, which offers a family-style menu. "There's a huge spectrum of food to eat in the city at the

moment: in terms of sheer variety and styles of food, it's one of the world's most diverse cities in which to eat."

But one thing almost all restaurants in Bangkok have in common is exceptional produce. Experience it at the source by shopping where the chefs do at Or Tor Kor Market. The most famous of all the wet markets, it has the best fruit selection in Southeast Asia, says Wrisley and CNN named it one of the top 10 best markets in the world. Well-lit and immaculately presented, it's a must-visit for those looking to understand Thailand's domestic produce and seafood. Wander the stalls and marvel at the beautiful, unblemished mangos, or towering mountains of garlic. If you're visiting between April and June, keep an eye out for the long-stemmed, lychee-shaped *Gan Yao durian*. It's the most prized of the 'King of Fruit' varieties, and some have reportedly sold for more than \$600.

Or Tor Kor Market also has an attached food quarter. The choices can be overwhelming, so regulars recommend walking around first to survey the options and enjoy the sensory overload of brightly colored curries and hurried transactions. Once you've decided, the friendly shopkeepers will load up a plate and throw in a generous serving of rice.

Embrace Bangkok's signature duality by heading to one of the many high-end restaurants that have helped catapult the city to international gastronomic fame. At the eponymous Gaggan, chef and owner Gaggan Anand has redefined >>

## // SIX TO TRY

**1 The classic dish**  
Forget pad Thai, tom yum is the true pride of the kingdom. It's a hot and sour, fragrant soup, usually made with prawns. Fish sauce, lemongrass, chili and kaffir lime leaves combine to create a gorgeous explosion of Thai flavor.

**2 The new obsession dish**  
*Khanom krok* is somewhere between a pudding and a custard. The coconut dessert is made with two separate batters and cooked in a special cast-iron skillet. The result is an addictive, sweet bite with a crispy outside and creamy center.

**3 The can't-stop-thinking-about-it dish**  
*Laab* is a ground meat salad flavored with lime juice, fish sauce, chili and mint. In true Thai fashion, the profile is bold and complex: spicy, sour, sweet, salty and a little bitter.

**4 The street food dish**  
The ultimate snack, *moo ping* can be found in nearly every corner of the city. The grilled pork skewers are usually marinated in a mix of cilantro, pepper, garlic and coconut milk, and they make a great, easy-to-grab breakfast.

**5 The recreate-at-home dish**  
Thai green curry is a staple at cooking classes all around the kingdom, but it doesn't have to be made completely from scratch. Pick up a high-quality curry paste and some full-fat coconut milk to try cooking this dish at home.

**6 The what-the-heck? dish**  
Known as *hoy tod*, oyster pancakes are a street-food staple that are like a cross between a crispy pancake and a traditional omelet. Bursting with oysters, it's a decadent treat usually sold at roadside pad Thai carts.

**BOOK IT NOW**

Experience the culinary culture of this city with a recommended tour. A six-night tour from Monograms is the best way to explore this delicious destination. Start off in Bangkok and end your food tour in Chiang Mai. Departs on April 28, 2019.

**// ESSENTIALS**

**When to go:** Bangkok can be oppressively hot, so go between November and March when the northeast monsoon breeze keeps the temperature cool.

**Currency:** \$1 = 33THB

**Language:** Bangkok Thai and other regional dialects are common, but English is also widely spoken.

**Getting around:** Bangkok is notorious for bad traffic and unscrupulous taxi fares. Before you go make sure to download Grab Taxi, a taxi hailing app with fixed pricing. The two train systems, BTS Skytrain and MRT subway, are convenient and reliable. For something more adventurous, hop on the back of a motorcycle taxi or in one of the many river taxis on the Chao Phraya River.



*Grilled spicy fish  
at a floating market*

Indian food with his irreverent attitude, exacting execution and signature 25-course tasting menu. He calls it “progressive Indian cuisine” and The World’s 50 Best Restaurants website has named it the best restaurant in Asia for the past three years.

Come with an open mind and a sense of humor, because Gaggan is unlike any other dining experience. The single-page menu has no words, only 25 emojis to symbolize the evening’s courses. Some are small, some are large and some require unorthodox methods of consumption, but waiters are always on hand to guide you (albeit somewhat cryptically — pleasant confusion is part of the experience). Book quickly, Gaggan is closing up shop in 2020.

Just across the street, Gaggan’s protege, chef Garima Arora, recently opened Gaa. The eclectic menu is full of surprises, drawing inspiration from her varied travels. Elements of India, Scandinavia, France, Japan, the Middle East and of course, Thailand are present. The former Noma chef embraces many of the iconic restaurant’s philosophies, including a passion for local ingredients. The menu changes frequently, evolving with the seasons. The 14-course tasting menu is the perfect way to delve deep into Thailand’s produce: time to test your new-found market knowledge. Seasonal, fascinating and surprising — even more words to sum up not just Gaa, but Bangkok itself. □

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To book your trip to Bangkok, contact our travel agency — the number’s on the back.