



ICONIC DISHES: PAI

PAI executive chef and co-owner Nuit Regular walks us through the dishes she cooks that take her back to her home in northern Thailand.

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ON A WICKEDLY cold winter night a couple of years ago, my Uber crawled past a crowd of bundled up people waiting outside what I presumed was a busy nightclub. “It’s right there,” my driver pointed. “Downstairs,” he encouraged as I braced for the frigid air.

Once I made it past the slush and puffy coats, I saw the glow of PAI and followed my nose through the doors into a different world, one that was warm and vibrant and full of enticing scents, sounds and buzzing people (so many people).

“It’s a very unique experience,” says Nuit Regular of PAI, where she has been the executive chef and co-owner since its inception in 2014. Named after a small town in northern Thailand — where Regular met her now husband and business partner, Jeff Regular on the back of an elephant — PAI is also a love story.

“Pai [the town] holds a very special place in our hearts,” she says. “When I came to Canada with Jeff, we really missed Pai’s friendly people. It’s a laid-back town with hippie vibes, very different from the big

city of Toronto. We wanted to preserve the memory of Pai and bring that northern Thai experience to Toronto diners.”

After seven years of perfecting aromatic, soul-filling dishes, PAI was recognized by the Royal Thai Government with the Thai Select Signature Award (the highest prize for authentic Thai food and Thai restaurants).

Today, a visit to PAI feels like a trip to northern Thailand, without the plane ticket.

It’s become so popular that they’ve had to build several expansions to the original downtown location. They recently completed a sprawling Eglinton location (where we photographed) — a challenging, but worthwhile passion project that COVID temporarily derailed. But even a global pandemic couldn’t stop PAI for long. Everyone from locals to hungry travellers and celebrities know it’s the spot for street-style Thai cuisine — but it took some convincing at first.

“In the early days, many of our guests would be like, ‘What is this?’ ‘Why is the colour like this?’ And I would say, ‘These are the beautiful spices that transport you back to northern Thailand,’” says Regular.

“My pad Thai is brown, not an orangey

colour, so customers would say, ‘You don’t know how to cook pad Thai.’ That was the knowledge that they had because they were used to pad Thai with ketchup. I’m glad I’m stubborn because I’m not just looking for money, I want to stay true to my authentic tradition that I try to preserve and share,” she explains.

Regular, who first started cooking with her mother, learned through osmosis. She recalls helping the women in her family prepare meals, picking vegetables spotted with morning dew from the garden, and watching market vendors cook dishes. After pursuing a career in nursing, she decided (with much disapproval from her step-father) to follow her passion for making food. “When I create something, it just pops up in the back of my head; it’s so fresh, the memory is my library.”

When you taste a dish at PAI, you are tasting food etched in time by Regular’s experiences, culture and teachings from her family. “Being able to share my Thai food and culture, what I’ve grown up eating and cooking, makes me feel special,” says Regular, who takes us on an equally special journey through PAI’s iconic dishes. ▶



Tom Yum Mor Fai

“Mor fai is a container that we serve tom yum in. ‘Mor’ means ‘pot’ and ‘fai’ means ‘fire’, so a pot that makes fire. In Thailand we

take a long time to eat, hours and hours of sitting and talking over food. By the time you eat your soup, it’s cold. So they created this pot and the soup stays hot. I want to bring our guests closer to Thailand so I import all

the pots. The flavour of tom yum is refreshing with all the herbs and seafood. During the fall, it’s our best seller. It’s a dish that people want to come in to see and sit in front of the fire. It’s very interesting and beautiful.”