

story tellers

IT'S PHUKET, BUT NOT AS YOU KNOW IT.

CARLA GROSSETTI GETS TO KNOW THE ISLAND PROVINCE ONE SPICE SPOON AT A TIME.

I'M STANDING TIGHT-PACKED in the Baan Kien Market (Don Jum Thao Rd, Baan Kien) with chef Woropoon 'Noon' Ninthom from Anantara Layan Phuket Resort when the national anthem crackles through the speakers and a hush falls over the concrete space. When the song ends, it's like pressing play on the scene, and in a finger's snap, the stallholders are carrying on with their daily routine and we are sucked back into the main mosh pit of the market.

Chef Noon strides with purpose to a long table where we linger a while as she tests my Thai vocabulary, snapping off a stalk of pak boon Thai (water spinach) here, a sprig of bai horapa (Thai sweet basil) there.

"Oooh, look," exclaims chef Noon. "It is bai maeng-luck [lemon basil]. This herb is common all throughout Thailand and used to flavour fish." What about this? I ask, pointing at a small, green fruit.

"Aaaaah. This is makuea poo-ung... it's the Thai eggplant and it is used in curries and usually eaten with nam prik," says Noon, as she pantomimes for me to try one. It's piercingly bitter and, I scrunch up my face and shudder, to the delight of the stallholders.

As chef Noon explains, telling a story about Thai cuisine is like telling a story that is still happening. "The story of Thai food is like a curry. It's a little bit of this, it's a little bit of that and it is like a culinary story about the history of Thailand," says the 32-year-old, who conducts market tours ahead of her weekly Spice Spoons cooking classes at Dee Plee restaurant at Anantara Layan Phuket Resort.

Most of the stalls at the undercover market are covered in sheets of plastic piled high with colour-coordinated vegetables. With her hands clasped behind her, chef Noon walks slowly around the market until we arrive at a stall where they are making fresh coconut milk. It pays to dither, as the stallholder insists we sample the creamy rich milk pressed fresh from coconut flesh, which is to be a key ingredient in our cooking class later that day.

However you adorn Thai food, says Noon, the foundation of each dish usually comprises galangal, chilli, lemongrass, shallots and kaffir lime leaves. As Noon explains, each ingredient has its own history and that history varies according to each region.

"In Thailand, the mothers and the grandmothers are the best teachers.

What I learn from my mum is that you eat what you grow. We planted chilli, kaffir lime leaves, papaya and coconuts so that is what we ate because it suits the climate. Eating with the seasons is all we have ever known in Thailand," says chef Noon, who grew up in Tha Yang, in the southern part of the Phetchaburi Province.

As we stride past a group of stallholders tucking into a steaming bowl of soup, chef Noon smiles and nods. "That is vegetable soup with instant noodles – Thai fast food."

Back at the resort, my husband and I don aprons and follow chef Noon's instructions. Her beaming face radiates a sort of saintly patience as we spend the next two hours chopping, stirring, mixing and frying the ingredients for our four-course feast. With practised calm, Noon teaches us how to make: krathong thong (golden flowers), an appetiser in the form of light, crispy cups filled with tiger prawns, chestnuts, curry powder and coriander; tom yum goong (spicy prawn soup); gaeng kiew wan gai (green curry with chicken); khao soi gai (Chiang Mai noodles) and khao tom madt (Thai bananas in sticky rice). When the class is finished, we



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A Phuket fisherman; Thai eggplant; chicken balls on skewers at a Phuket market; colourful scenes at the Phuket Vegetarian Festival; a dish at the festival; chillies at Baan Kien Market

RIGHT Fruit and veg at a roadside stall in Old Phuket Town
CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW Chef Noon Ninthom; rambutans at Baan Kien Market; tom yum goong at a Spice Spoons cooking class; the golden sea dragon that is said to protect Phuket

OPPOSITE PAGE Long-tail boats moored in Phuket's Kamala Bay at sunset make for a picturesque scene



enjoy our feast, which is layered with flavours, before bringing our hands together in a prayer-like manner and thanking chef Noon: 'Kapun kaaaaap'.

Nearby at the Outrigger Laguna Phuket, we also undertake a cooking class where we learn how to recreate curries and soups that we spike with chilli and temper with coconut milk.

As chef Noon explains it, the history of Thai cuisine can often be seen on the plate – from Chiang Mai noodles that have their roots in the Muslim heartlands of Burma, to the tod man pla (Thai fish cakes) which were featured on a 2011 BBC *MasterChef* episode; to Phuket noodles, the island specialty, which tells the story of Chinese migrant history and the influence this had on the island's cuisine.

I addressed the question of where to get the best Phuket noodles to three locals while in Phuket and dutifully followed their leads to enjoy an exquisite rendition of the popular dish at the Outrigger Laguna Phuket Beach Resort and a more rustic take of the island's signature dish at the Black Cat restaurant in Layan. It's here, while sipping a cold Chang beer at a table crowded with condiments, that we contemplate how the salty, sweet, spicy flavours that underpin Thai cuisine are what makes it so intoxicating. It's true I could maroon myself on the 576 square kilometre island for years and never exhaust of eating adventures. Sadly, it's time to say "sawadee kap", Thailand. Until next time.



DRAGON: MARCO BORGHINI / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM; FRUIT & VEG STALL: MARKET SCENES & DISH: CARLA GROSSETTI

ISLAND HIGHLIGHTS / NEED TO KNOW

VISITORS TO PHUKET are spoiled for choice. Whether you are vegetarian (gin jay), or you love pet mak (spicy) food, are craving satay skewers or have a hankering for pizza or pasta, here are seven reasons food lovers should visit Phuket.

DINE LIKE ROYALTY Inspire Insta-envy with an image of you and your plus one dining poolside with your own personal chef and butler. Dining by Design, The Residences, Anantara Layan Phuket Resort, phuket-layan.anantara.com/residences.aspx

VISIT BAAN KIEN MARKET Have your basket at the ready at Baan Kien Market, where you can stock up on fresh coconut milk and tropical

fruit and practise your Thai pleasantries. Don Jum Thao Rd, Baan Kien

PRACTISE YOUR JAZZ HANDS Siam Supper Club is an air-conditioned oasis for expats. Expect tinkling jazz and a menu with an Italian accent. 36-40 Lagoon Rd, Cherngtalay, Thalang, Phuket. siamsupperclub.com

SLURP NOODLES LIKE A LOCAL Thais who are passionate about Phuket noodles will point you to Nam Yoi restaurant, where you can request your food to be "Thai spicy", meaning fierce. Ruamphatana Rd, Mueang Phuket, Phuket

ENJOY A SEAFOOD BANQUET Start small with prawns before

tackling the lobsters with your bare hands at the beachfront barbecue at Edgewater. Outrigger Laguna Phuket Beach Resort, outrigger.com/Phuket

KEEP YOUR CAFFEINE CRAVINGS AT BAY Head to Hockhoelee in Phuket Town for a cup of cold-brewed coffee, or do as the local Phuketians do and order it sweetened with condensed milk. 183 Ranong Rd, Taradnuea, Mueng, Phuket, hockhoelee.com

ATTEND A FOOD FESTIVAL Time your visit to coincide with a Thai festival such as Songkran Festival (Thai New Year celebration) in April or the Vegetarian Festival in October. phuket.com

OUTRIGGER LAGUNA PHUKET BEACH RESORT Located between a tropical lagoon and the Andaman Sea, this family-friendly option is sitting pretty on Bangtao Beach. outrigger.com/Phuket

ANANTARA LAYAN PHUKET RESORT Lush it up at this tucked-away resort that tumbles down a hillside onto a beach surrounded by verdant jungle. phuket-layan.anantara.com

JETSTAR flies direct from Sydney and Melbourne to Phuket three times each week. New Zealanders can connect to Phuket via Sydney and Melbourne with Jetstar from Auckland, Christchurch and Queenstown, as well as from Wellington to Melbourne.

