



A long wooden boat transports eager learners down the historical town of Thonburi, once known as the Victory Land of Siam, to the waterside Thai cooking school.

COOKING WITH THAM: A Lesson In

Thai Cuisine

Story by Gary Singh

Photos by Mark Edward Harris

WE LEAVE THA CHANG PIER IN BANGKOK AND CRUISE down the Chao Phraya River in a longtail speedboat. As we curve down the Yai canal, the houses become more affluent as we arrive at a dock behind Piyawadi “Tam” Jantrupon’s property. Soon, an apron-clad Tam greets us from underneath a gateway arch that says: Amita Thai Cooking Class.

Tam opened her cooking school in August of 2008 and named it after her daughter Amita, which means “eternity.” Underneath a backyard canopy, we sit down at a table and begin to munch on flowers and herbs, all fried Tempura style. Tam used to be a legal advisor but ditched that claiming, “cooking is more fun.

She then announces the four dishes we are about to cook: Gai Hor Bai Toey (Deep fried chicken in pandanus leaves), Moo Satay (pork satay), Gaeng Khiao Wan (green curry shrimp in coconut milk), and Khao Niew Ma Muang (mango with sticky rice).

Tam situates herself at her own cooking station in front of the class and we watch. She cooks each dish, explaining each step of the process in precise detail.

For the first dish, small pieces of chicken thigh meat are rubbed with coriander root, garlic, black sweet soy sauce and sesame oil. Then the pieces are wrapped in pandanus leaves for deep frying—not an easy process for beginners. For each piece, the leaf is tied in a loose knot around the meat and then tightened into a wad that one can place into the wok. The leaf forms a casing, preventing the meat from burning. For the dipping sauce, palm sugar, tamarind paste, soy sauce, ginger and a pinch of salt are cooked together, after which roasted sesame seeds and green onion are added.

Pork Satay comes next, with Tam revealing a few secret tips. The wooden skewers should be soaked in water first, so they won’t burn when they’re on the grill. To make the presentation look nicer, the meat should cover up the pointed end of the skewer.

“This is an Indian-influenced dish,” she explains. “India is the mother of all cultures.”

The sauce is made from mussaman paste, tamarind salt, roasted peanuts and coconut cream. If someone has a peanut allergy, says Tam, mashed potatoes can be substituted for the peanuts. Instead of a regular brush to coat the meat with the sauce, she uses a rolled-up banana leaf with frayed edges.

Third up is a delectable curry dish, featuring sea shrimp, kaffir lime leaves, long beans, pea eggplant, fish sauce, and vegetables. For dessert, Tam already has the sticky rice made. The mangos will come later, she says.

We then migrate to our respective cooking stations—ten, to be exact, lined up in two flanks of five, facing each other—and away we go. All the necessary utensils and ingredients are there for us at each station. Thankfully, we are not left completely to our own accords. Tam and her assistants hover about the





(LEFT) A pandanus leaf encases a sliver of chicken to prevent it from burning. (RIGHT) Sprigs of herbs, and bulbs of edible flowers are battered and fried to make a tempura-style Thai treat.

entire area to help us when we screw up. I, for one, screw up several times, but it matters none. A meal is already being prepared in the back in case we botch the entire thing.

Soon thereafter, we are back at the table, gorging on the entire *mélange* of victuals, family style, reminding me of an old music professor from college who said that composing a piece of music is the same thing as cooking: The creative process is the same, all the way down to the final performance, that is, the eating.

In the end, I have taken part in one long drawn-out performance of Thai cooking and I am a better person as a result. Piyawadi, Tam's real name, means sweetheart, she tells me. The logo on her business card is a caricature of herself, a face looking back over her own shoulder, as if she's watching out for me. That's the feeling I get from her class. ●

SIDEBAR

Amita Thai Cooking Classes are conducted in English and take place from 9:30am–1:30pm daily, except Wednesday. Different dishes are taught on different days. The price for one half-day class is 2,800 Baht person, which includes door-to-door pick up, drop off services and traveling by speedboat along the river to the school. Group packages can be arranged and reservations can be made on the website, by email or phone.

ADDRESS

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TAM'S RECIPE FOR SATAY WITH SPICY PEANUT SAUCE (PORK, CHICKEN OR BEEF):

- 150 grams (pork, chicken or beef) fillet or loin, thinly sliced into 8–9 strips
- ½ teaspoon roasted coriander seeds
- ½ teaspoon roasted cumin seeds
- ½ tablespoon garlic, finely chopped
- ½ teaspoon curry powder
- Pinch of salt
- Pinch of turmeric powder
- 1 teaspoon palm sugar
- ¼ cup coconut cream
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 2 tablespoons coconut milk (1 tablespoon coconut cream + 1 tablespoon water)
- 8–9 satay sticks

1. Use a mortar and pestle, grind coriander seeds and cumin seeds. Pound together all ingredients, until mixed well
2. Pour mixed ingredients in a bowl with coconut cream
3. Add meat strips and marinate overnight or at least 3 hours

4. Thread meat strips with satay sticks
5. Grill satay on charcoal stove over low heat. Turn them regularly and brush them with the remaining marinated sauce and coconut milk while turning
6. When the satay is cooked, serve with spicy peanut sauce and cucumbers

SPICY PEANUT SAUCE:

- 2 tablespoons of roasted (unsalted) peanuts
 - 1 tablespoon Massa Man curry paste
 - 6 tablespoons coconut cream
 - 2 tablespoons tamarind juice
 - 2 teaspoons palm sugar
 - Pinch of salt
1. Grind or crush the peanuts to a fairly fine paste and set aside
 2. Pour coconut cream into a pan over medium heat, add Massa Man curry paste, and stir time until the sauce become smooth
 3. Combine them with the remaining ingredients. If the sauce is too thick, add a little water