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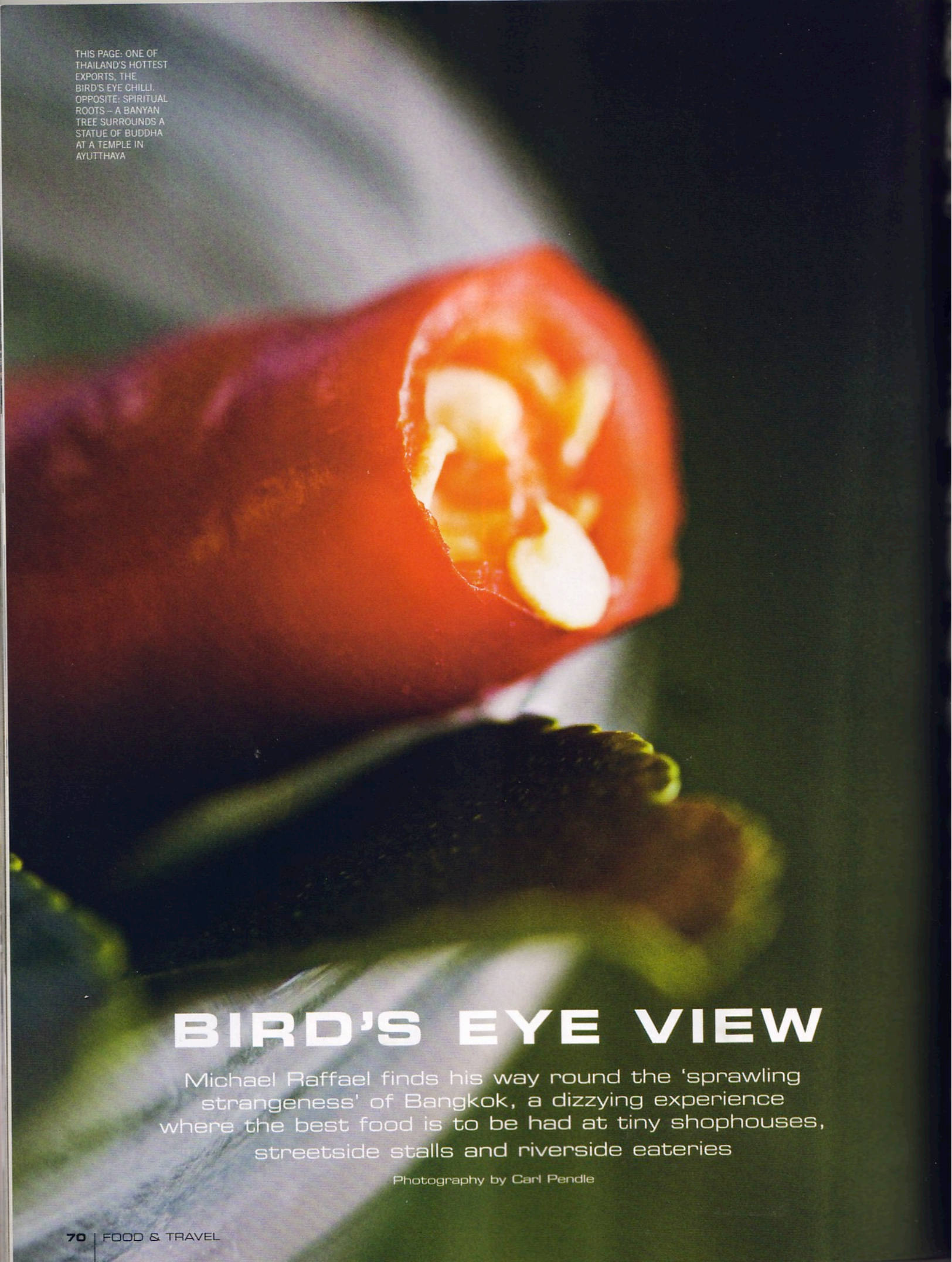


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THIS PAGE: ONE OF THAILAND'S HOTTEST EXPORTS, THE BIRD'S EYE CHILLI. OPPOSITE: SPIRITUAL ROOTS - A BANYAN TREE SURROUNDS A STATUE OF BUDDHA AT A TEMPLE IN AYUTTHAYA

BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Michael Raffael finds his way round the 'sprawling strangeness' of Bangkok, a dizzying experience where the best food is to be had at tiny shophouses, streetside stalls and riverside eateries

Photography by Carl Pendle





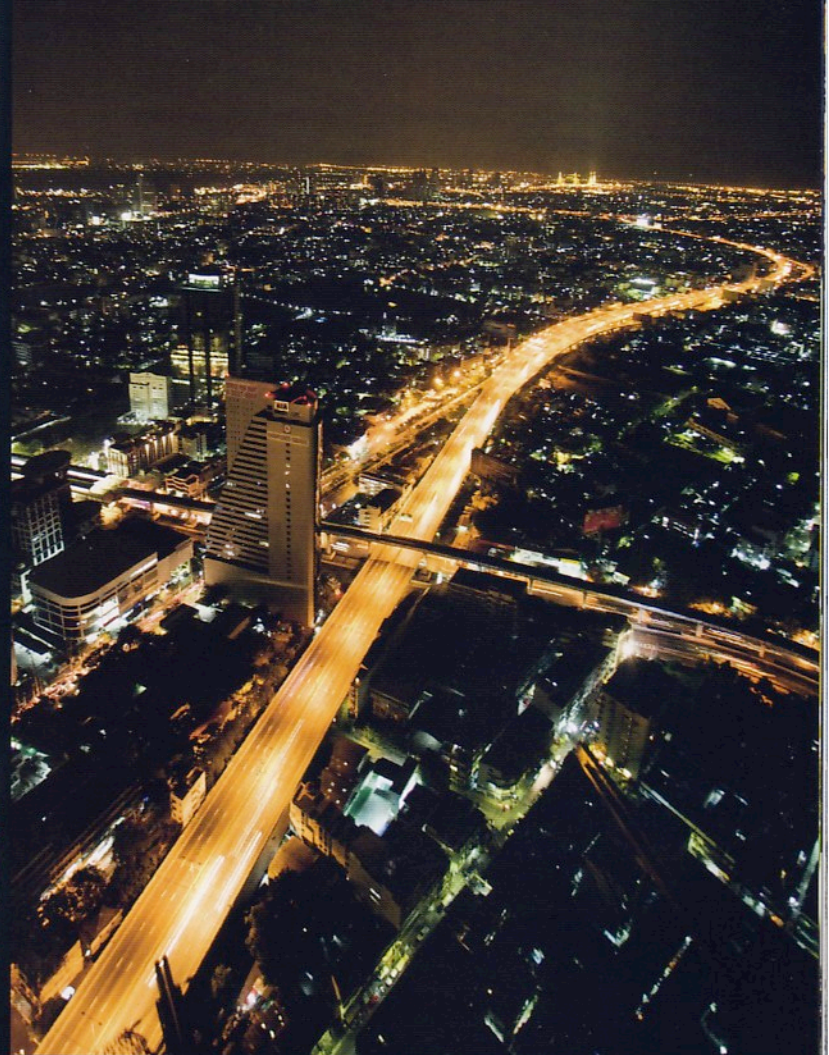
ABOVE: TUK TUK AT NIGHT. LEFT: TONG YIP DESSERT; MONKS IN AYUTTHAYA; ORANGES ON A MARKET STALL. OPPOSITE, TOP: LUNCH AT A LOCAL MARKET; BANGKOK SKYLINE FROM THE SIROCCO BAR. BOTTOM: THAI BAHT; RED CURRY WITH FROG; MAN WEARING BUDDHA NECKLACE; WOK-FRIED CHICKEN

While waiting in the lounge at Heathrow before flying to Thailand, I talked to a Thai woman who had noticed me reading Jennifer Brennan's *Thai Cookery*. Passionate about cooking, she sketched different-shaped noodles – sen lek, sen mee, sen yai and wun sen – on my notepad. I asked her what she was looking forward to eating most when she returned home. Her answer was simple; fluffy steamed rice cooked in her rice-cooker, not the fragrant jasmine rice of posh eateries (kao suai), not the stir-fried kao pad with pork, prawns and sometimes crab, not brown rice, not red rice, not the sticky rice that's roasted inside lengths of bamboo – just plain rice with its unique, tantalising gentle aroma.

In Thailand there is no direct correlation between décor and the quality of a meal. A pork sausage stuffed with fermented rice threaded on a skewer, grilled over embers and sold by a street hawker for ten bahts may match the best eating that the Shangri-La, Sukkothai, Lebua or Peninsula hotels can offer. Jok's is an obscure 'shophouse'

in a Yaowarat (Chinatown) alley with one simple round table next to the owner's desk, on which a half-empty bottle of Black Label stands beside a heap of scattered invoices. Jok's day job is as a crab farmer-cum-exporter. To eat his food, you book weeks ahead. You arrive. You drink water or beer. You sup on what he decides to feed you that day, whether it's smoked duck, ducks' tongues and pork, slowly steamed crab, snow fish, river prawns with ginkgo nuts or more crab mixed with scrambled egg. It's outstanding.

Much of Bangkok life, as well as many of the best restaurants and hotels, centres on the Chao Phraya river. Both blessing and curse, its floodwaters bring freshwater bream, eels, succulent salty crabs, shrimp, edible beetles, frogs, water rats (for roasting), morning glory, and lotus leaves and stems. On its long journey through Thailand's central plains, it irrigates land that feeds Thais their staple diet – *gin khao reu yung* (have you eaten rice?) is a common greeting – but it can also drown it. Generous, but potentially —————>>



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BOTTOM, FROM LEFT: FRESH GREEN VEGETABLES AT THE MAEKLONG MARKET; BANGKOK BUS. OPPOSITE, TOP: BANGRAK AREA OF BANGKOK; GREEN CURRY AT THE NUT POB RESTAURANT. BOTTOM: SQUID SALAD AT THE BLUE ELEPHANT SCHOOL; PANDANUS LEAF CORDIAL AT KHUN AELL'S; CHOPPING HERBS; DOG TIRED BETWEEN THE ORANGE AND SWEET STALLS

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Currency is the baht (£1=65 THB). Bangkok is seven hours ahead of GMT. It is the world's hottest city, as temperatures do not vary much by hour or season from an average of 27°C. The cool season, when days are sunny and nights balmy, lasts from November to mid-February. UK visitors can obtain a visa on arrival, which is valid for 30 days.

GETTING THERE

Eva Air (020 7380 8300; evaair.com) has one daily direct flight from London Heathrow to Bangkok, five days a week.

Thai Airways (0870 606 0911; thaiairways.co.uk) has two daily direct flights from London Heathrow to Bangkok.

TOUR OPERATORS

Tell Tale Travel (0800 011 2571; telltaletravel.co.uk) is a UK-based company which specialises in authentic holidays off the beaten track. Its flexible gourmet itinerary, 'the Lemongrass Trail', takes in cooking lessons as well as shopping in local markets and fishing trips on the Adaman Sea. It costs £1,575 per person, including flights, transport, activities, accommodation and most meals.

dangerous, the river is a good metaphor for a country whose favourite sport is kick boxing, where fighting-cocks are national treasures, and coups occasionally occur. On the outskirts of Bangkok, in his seventh-floor apartment overlooking the river, ex-monk and cookery writer Sirichalerm Svasti, also known as McDang, jokes about the way his people are viewed elsewhere in south-east Asia: 'They say: if you meet a Thai and meet a snake, hit the Thai first.' The great-great-grandson of King Rama IV, he insists that while rice is fundamental, the history of his country's cuisine isn't so straightforward. 'We borrow everything,' McDang insists, 'but we make it our own.'

Until the 18th century, the basic cooking utensils were the mortar and pestle, knife and pot. Only then did Chinese immigrants introduce the wok along with their culture of stir-frying. Foi thong (strands of duck egg yolk trailed like thread into a pan of simmering syrup) and saffron-coloured desserts, together with the extended use of coconut milk in savoury recipes, are all down to Maria Guimar, daughter of a Portuguese father and Japanese mother, who was appointed head of the royal household during the reign of King Thaisa (1703-1733), when the ancient city of Ayutthaya was the capital.

It's the wealth of raw materials, their treatment and a passion for eating verging on obsessive that makes Thai food sumptuous. If it's alive and they can catch it, they eat it. If it grows and doesn't poison them, they eat it. 'The saltiness comes from fish sauce, the sweetness from raw palm or coconut sugar, the sourness from tamarind from India, and the hotness from chillies,' says McDang. —————>>





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LEFT: DEEP-FRIED RAT; COOKING NOODLES; BRAHMIN COW AND CALF. OPPOSITE, TOP: DEEP-FRIED WATER COCKROACHES; INCENSE AND PLASTIC FIGURES AT A TEMPLE. CENTRE: GIRL AT MAEKLONG; LOTUS FLOWER; PADDLING HOME FROM SCHOOL. BOTTOM: DRYING HORSE MACKEREL; RICE FLOUR AND MUNG BEAN SWEETMEATS; TRADITIONAL HAT

Step carefully or you risk treading on a sack of frogs or overturning a bucket of eels. One moment the scents of holy basil are wafting through the air, the next it's fermented dried fish

His regular column in *The Nation*, an independent newspaper, exudes enthusiasm. He can bring a prawn head back to life: 'I usually take my spoon to dig out all the coral, or better still pour it out over my hot steamed rice, season it with the dipping sauce and mix well with my rice and eat it like fresh fried rice. Ah! What heaven! It is creamy, rich, sour, salty and delicious.' Over lunch at the Nut Pob, a suburban roadside eaterie with the atmosphere of a transport café, he treats us to a feast of rice stick noodles with beef in a broth, a green fish curry with pea aubergines and pork, steamed and fried line-caught horse mackerel with a fishy nam prik sauce, stir-fried morning glory, lotus stems and coconut cream ices sweetened with raw sugar and scented with pandanus leaves.

In startling contrast is Sirocco, 63 floors up the State Tower, where the surroundings correctly suggest high prices. The aberrant design is topped with a cupcake dome, and a cocktail from harassed bartenders serving a crush of *farangs* (foreigners) would keep a backpacker in rice, satays and peanut sauce for a fortnight.

Thailand's Chinese population, roughly six million, isn't easily pigeonholed because immigrant males have been marrying Thai brides for centuries. It was only in the last century that economic workers from Teowchew, Hainan and Canton started bringing wives with them to settle. This continuing process of intermarriage and assimilation (the king has Chinese blood on his mother's side) creates a cultural blurring, nowhere more so than in the markets and among the hawker community. Overseas visitors to Bangkok imagine boating their way round the picturesque canals of the floating market. Pretty though it is (and it's fully 110 kilometres from town), it doesn't compare with the inner-city reality of Thewet (at Thanon Krung Kasem), with its mind-boggling Thai foods, or the massive weekend market at Chatuchak (Thanon Phahon Yothin, Kamphaengphet).

If you have time, make the detour to the provincial Maeklong railway market at the end of a branch-line going from Maeklong in the province of Samut Songkram to Bangkok (90 minutes by car, three hours by rail). The market runs on both sides of the tracks, and traders on both sides of the rails lift up awnings every time a train rumbles past their stalls. Here, it's step carefully, or you risk treading on a sack of frogs, or overturning a bucket of eels. One moment the scents of holy basil and coriander roots are wafting through the air, the next —————>>

TRAVEL INFORMATION

RESOURCES

Tourism Authority of Thailand (0870 900 2007; tourismthailand.co.uk). The official tourism website has listings covering accommodation, destinations, activities and a calendar of events and festivals. You can also order free brochures.

Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok (Nancy Chandler Graphics, £6.95). Once you get the hang of this quirky guidebook-cum-street-map, it's the best and most helpful way of surviving the sprawling strangeness of Bangkok.

FURTHER READING

Bangkok and Beach Escapes (Time Out, £12.99). Compiled by a team of local experts, this comprehensive guide has details and up-to-date listings of Bangkok's best restaurants and hotels, as well as some good background information.

Bangkok Encounter (Lonely Planet, £6.99). This small guide fits comfortably in your pocket and comes with a detailed map. It is easy to carry around and offers tips on everything from streetside snacks and shopping to spas and restaurants.

For the price of a packet of crisps, you can buy crisp flying ants with a hint of lemon grass and crunchy chilli crickets



WHERE TO STAY

Shangri-La 89 Soi Wat Suan Plu, Thanon Charoen Krung (00 66 2 236 7777; shangri-la.com). The largest hotel on the Chao Phraya river, it has two wings with a swimming pool each. There's a 'butler' to each room and more staff than guests. The renowned spa treatments are the perfect antidote to the heat of the busy Bangkok streets. Double from £110.

The Peninsula 333 Thanon Charoennakorn (00 66 2 861 2888; peninsula.com). Elegant hotel, also on the river, whose stylish rooms offer amazing panoramic views. There's plenty of contemporary Thai art on the walls. Double from £130.

The Metropolitan 27 Thanon Suth Sathorn (00 66 2 625 3333; metropolitan.como.bz/bangkok). This designer pad has a sleek and contemporary oriental look. The minimalist rooms are big, with kitchenettes and floor-to-ceiling windows. Double from £70.

Ibrik Resort 256 Soi Wat Rakang, Thanon Arunamarin (00 66 2 848 9220; ibrikresort.com). With only three rooms, this boutique hotel by the river is a peaceful retreat and boasts a beautiful view of the Grand Palace. Double from £45.

Chakrabongse Villas 396 Thanon Maharat, Phra Nakorn (00 66 2 622 3356; thaivillas.com). Set in lush gardens and furnished with teak furniture and silk fabrics, these three private apartments are right in the heart of Old Bangkok. Double from £80.

it's fermented dried fish scratchings or shrimp pastes. Blink and you'll miss a bowl of giant water beetles – only the females are edible.

Bugs, wheeled through the streets, are snack food. For the price of a packet of crisps, you can buy crisp flying ants with a hint of lemon grass, crunchy chilli crickets, or dried and rather tasteless torpedo-shaped bamboo weevils. But this isn't the kind of food dished up in the air-conditioned sanctuary of the Blue Elephant's cookery school, where, in the course of a morning, a motley group of *farangs* will learn to cook a green or red curry, a salad, a hot and sour soup and fried fish with nam prik. Our little party included an off-duty Air France pilot, an Australian vet and his wife, an American expat entertaining her mother-in-law, a couple from Hong Kong and some Japanese tourists. A practical introduction to Thai cooking, it's a hands-on-thump-in-a-mortar experience of bashing lemon grass, galangal, kaffir lime zest and leaves, garlic, coriander root, chilli and shallots.

Thai curries have a freshness that makes them instantly recognisable. It's the 'small print' that distinguishes one from another. We watch our guide, Kuhn Pok, pounding galangal, krachai, garlic, chillies and kaffir lime in a mortar. He's preparing green curry. 'It takes time,' he says. 'If you cook in hurry, not good.' When it's done, he will set some aside to take to the *wat*. He adds extra red chillies to strengthen the colour and boils away the coconut milk to concentrate the taste. The Shangri-La's Salathip restaurant treats curry sauce more like a fragrant broth —————>>



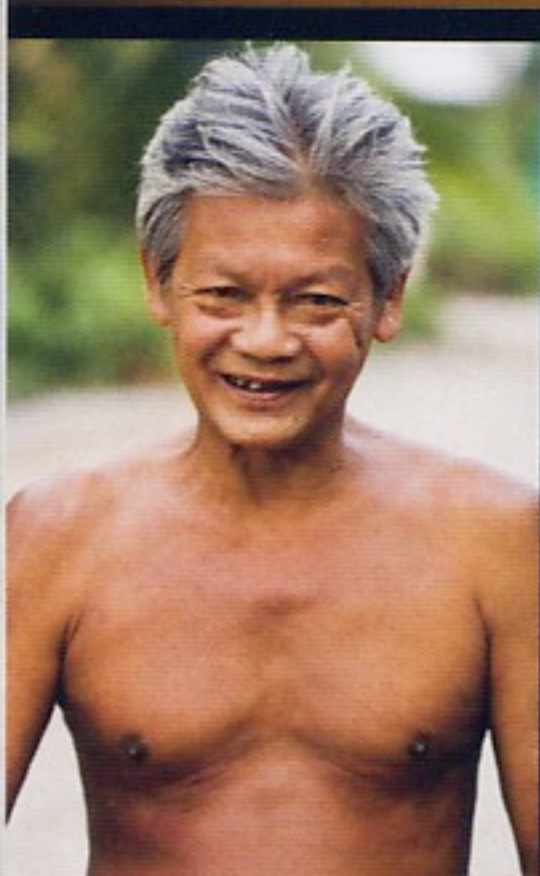
OPPOSITE PAGE: OVERLOOKING THE CHAO PHRAYA FROM THE SHANGRI-LA; FISHERMAN, AND TUK TUKS AT AYUTTHAYA (ALSO TOP RIGHT). THIS PAGE: MAEKLONG MARKET (ABOVE, TOP CENTRE, ABOVE RIGHT) AND (RIGHT) FISH DRYING. LEFT, DISCARDED CHOPSTICKS. BELOW: A TEMPLE AT AYUTTHAYA







TOP: BUDDHIST MONKS IN A BEMO; ELEPHANT AT AYUTTHAYA. ABOVE AND ABOVE RIGHT: CHOPPING MEAT AND GRINDING RED CURRY PASTE. LEFT: BANGKOK BUS. RIGHT: CHILLIS. FAR RIGHT: FRIED NOODLES ON BANANA LEAVES. BELOW: FRUIT AND VEGETABLE STALL IN THE CENTRE OF BANGKOK



in which to seed prawns and sculpted squid. At Ruenros, a beautiful restaurant by a small lake at suburban Sammakorn Village, a mild red curry combines perfectly with grilled duck breast and lychees. Frog curry may be a bit slippery for most European palates.

Upstream from McDang's apartment, ten minutes by long-tailed boat, is Koh Kret, a popular destination for Bangkok trippers. It's an enclave of the Mon community, an ethnic group sprinkled over south-east Asia and related to the Burmese. The visitors buy unglazed red clay pottery and eat khao cher, rice in iced, scented jasmine water served with side dishes of mee krob (fried noodles) and pickled vegetables. Almost certainly they'll treat themselves at Ban Khun Aell, a Thai dessert house abutting the river, eating foi thong (looking like golden shredded wheat) or tong yip, like miniature sweet omelettes, poached in sugar and shaped into five petal flowers.

Together with the tacky sweetmeats made from mung beans tipped with gold leaf, and lokum-like jellies tasting of pandanus, coconut and chrysanthemum, these manage to be both cloying and moreish. Khun Aell, who started the business 20 years ago, learnt her skills from her granny. This grey eminence is the immortal behind nearly all Thai cookery. Kuhn Pok told me his parents divorced when he was six and he was raised by a grandmother who taught him how to make his curry. Recipes à la Delia, with precise quantities or cooking times, are anathema. Instead, Thais trust their eyes, nose, mouth and ears. When a granny dies, if she's literate her personal 'cookery book' passes down to the next generation, a ledger of her life in the kitchen. □

Michael Raffael and Carl Pendle travelled to Bangkok courtesy of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (0870 900 2007; tourismthailand.co.uk) and Tell Tale Travel (0800 011 2571; telltaletravel.co.uk).



LEFT: PRAWN SALAD; MONK AT AYUTTHAYA; FRESH CATCH AT THE MARKET

WHERE TO EAT

Ruenros Restaurant Sammakorn Village, Ramkamhaeng Soi 110 (00 66 2 373 6389; ruenros.com). Overlooking a lake in a Bangkok suburb (the English language website has a map you can print to give the taxi driver), it's a restaurant that has no language problems and the cuisine, especially the red curry with grilled duck, is excellent and not overpriced. You can eat very well for about £10 per head in comfortable alfresco surroundings.

Jok's Kitchen 23 Trok Issaranuphap, Phiap Chai Road (00 66 2 221 4075). Hard to find and hard to book a table, but the cooking is superb, especially for crab addicts. About £12 per head, including beer.

Nut Pob 29 Moo 7, Piboonsongkram Road, Suanyai, Muang, Nontaburi (00 66 2 525 2699). It has a Chinese name, but the cooking is hybrid Thai-Chinese. There is no need to book. Try and order a soup, a salad, a curry, a vegetable dish (the lotus stems are highly recommended) and a whole fish, with coconut milk ice with palm sugar and popped rice to finish. About £10 per head.

The Blue Elephant 233 Thanon Sathorn Tai, Bangrak (00 66 2 673 9353; blueelephant.com). The Blue Elephant is almost a global brand now, but the original – in a building that was commandeered by the Japanese high command during World War II – is both a luxury restaurant and an excellent cookery school that initiates allcomers into the basics of Thai cuisine. About £10 per head.

Ruen Mallika 189 Sukhumvit Soi 22, Sukhumvit (00 66 2 663 3211; ruenmallika.com). Delicious Siam specialities based on recipes by celebrity chef ML Terb Chomsai. Sit outside in the relaxed garden or inside the early 19th-century traditional teak house, and tuck into huge plates of deep-fried flowers or crispy noodles with sweet and sour pork. About £8 per head.

Khrua Nai Baan 94 Soi Lang Suan, Pathumwan (00 66 2 252 0069). Located in a simple white house, this popular place specialises in seafood, fresh from the big tanks at the front. The steamed squid in lemon sauce is delicious. About £8 per head.