
savour *dine*



BY GILLIAN RHYS



ASIA'S BEST
Hot and Sour Soup of
Fish. Inset: Chef David
Thompson.

HIGH THAI-D

Australian chef David Thompson is proving a worthy ambassador for his adopted cuisine

Spend a morning with Chef David Thompson and it's apparent that his knowledge of and passion for Thailand is not limited to the food for which he is celebrated. It also extends to the Thai people, their culture and history.

As we travel on foot and by long-tail boat, through the backstreets and food markets, and along the klongs of Bangkok, Thompson offers a running commentary – and not just about the bountiful vegetables on sale and the oyster omelettes that we tuck into. He imparts an impressive knowledge of the history and daily life of the Thai capital's streets and waterways.

An enthusiasm for all things Thai is one reason the Australian has come to be fêted as an expert on the country's cuisine, even among locals. Thompson, who will soon open his new restaurant, Long Chim, at Marina Bay Sands, first visited Bangkok in 1986

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and he has been in love with the city ever since. “It is home to me,” he says in a singsong Aussie-Thai accent. “It feels like I’m obtaining some of the recipes and gaining some understanding of them when I try to learn about the history and sociology of Thailand.”

Thompson lived and worked in Bangkok for several years before returning to Australia in the mid ’90s to open two successful restaurants in Sydney: Darley Street Thai and Sailors Thai. The establishments are credited with lifting the status of Thai food in the city from take-away staple to fine-dining favourite. In 2001, he was approached to open Nahm, a high-end Thai restaurant in London. Although now closed, within just six months of opening it had become the first Thai restaurant to be awarded a Michelin star.

Since 2010, the chef has been based permanently in Bangkok. There he has written two books on Thai cuisine and opened a second branch of Nahm, to arguably even greater acclaim: earlier this year the Bangkok restaurant scooped Asia’s Best Restaurant award at a ceremony held in Singapore. A television series, recently filmed, will soon broadcast Thompson’s explorations into Thailand’s culinary culture and history.

Despite his increasingly high profile, the chef plays down his celebrity, attributing Nahm’s success to kitchen and front-of-house staff, and he is charmingly deprecating about his own place in the industry. “After living in Bangkok for a while I thought maybe I could play around and try to recreate all these dishes,” Thompson says, referring to his culinary beginnings. “Somehow I managed to make a career out of it. Now I look back and I realise I had no idea what I was doing.

“Of course I experienced obstacles when I started, and the Thais taught me great lessons. When I meet Westerners who say that they cook Thai food very well I’m a little wary about it, because sweet chilli sauce and a bunch of coriander does not equate to a Thai dish. But after 25 years, if I’m not a little bit adept at what I’m doing, then there’s something wrong with me.”

Thai food varies across the country and there are four main culinary regions: the north, northeast, south, and the central plains, including Bangkok. Each has its own cooking style according to available ingredients and local taste, so travelling in the country is a culinary adventure. “Thailand is a lucky country when it comes to food and it’s almost impossible to eat very badly there,” says Thompson. “In the provinces you can find unexpected dishes of exceptional quality in the most unlikely of places.”



STREET FOOD
Prawns Roasted
with Vermicelli.



MASTER CHEF

Thompson's London restaurant Nahm was the first in the world to win a Michelin star for Thai food. Above: Thai food is known for its use of fresh herbs and spices.



Diners in Singapore will soon be able to experience Thompson's expert Thai touch, with the opening later this year of Long Chim at The Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands. "Long Chim means 'come and taste', and that is exactly the sort of menu and experience we're going to create at Marina Bay Sands," says Thompson. "It's a broad, happy invitation for people to have authentic Thai food as it is served on the streets of Thailand. It will be simple, accessible and affordable."

Compared with the more formal dining experience offered at Nahm, Long Chim will be casual and easy going – a model, says Thompson, that can be implemented without compromising quality. "Opening Nahm in Bangkok made me realise that it's the only place where I

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THAI TASTE
Beef Stir Fried with
Oyster Sauce.

WHERE TO DINE

Long Chim

Opening soon at Atrium 2, L2-O2, The Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands

“We don’t disdain or discard dishes just because they’re popular. Of course, we’ll have mango sticky rice”

can operate a restaurant of that nature,” he says. “Street food, however, is by definition easier to ‘hybridise’ and more transportable, making it a logical choice for an overseas venture. Hong Kong is definitely on the cards. If we can make it in Singapore with its discerning diners, we can make it anywhere.”

The menu will include familiar favourites such as green curry and papaya salad. “We don’t disdain or discard dishes simply because they’re popular,” says Thompson. “We may have some expected design elements but with unexpected qualities. Of course, we’ll have mango sticky rice because despite the fact that it seems common, we understand why it should be everywhere. And we’ll also do coconut puddings. Whatever you see in the streets, we’ll have it here.”

There will be grilled mussels, Thai chicken biryani and basil-fried rice with pork too. Produce will be sourced from Singapore’s Chinatown and the Golden Mile (the city-state’s Little Thailand) as far as possible, as well as imported from Bangkok. “I’ve had this idea for several years now and it has come together very nicely with Marina Bay Sands,” says Thompson. “I’ve always loved Singapore and feel that it is a city at the height of popularity when it comes to food, even internationally. It’s the perfect place to launch a new concept.”

While Thompson plans to remain hands-on at Long Chim, with regular visits from Bangkok, he has chosen a chef who worked with him in the London restaurant, Matthew Albert, to head up the kitchen. The team will include a number of Thai natives as well as Singaporeans.

“One of our priorities will be to train the local chefs in the art of Thai cuisine,” says Thompson, who has taken his role of mentor seriously through the years. Indeed, among his former protégées is Thai chef Duongporn “Bo” Songvisava, who now runs her own Bangkok restaurant, Bo.lan, and was voted Asia’s Best Female Chef last year by the experts behind the respected Asia’s 50 Best Restaurants list. Thompson is keen to hone the potential of more promising young chefs – in Thailand and beyond. **S**



CUISINE COUP
Squid Stir Fried with
Chillies.