

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN FLAVORS

Southeast Asia is home to a rich cross-cultural table with every country providing a distinctive cuisine that, at the same time, shares similarities with its neighbors. The Chinese, Arabs, and Indians early on established many trade routes and influenced local cuisines. In the early sixteenth century the Portuguese arrived in Indonesia and Malaysia setting up prosperous trading posts. Perhaps their most notable contribution were chiles which they brought from their explorations in the new world. The Dutch followed them and then the English who influenced them and Myanmar (then Burma) and Singapore (then Temesek). The French brought their food to Indochina, now Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The Bahn Mi sandwich using rice flour baguettes is now a well-known fusion/contribution in all parts of the world.

Street foods are no doubt the best source for eating in this part of the world. Rustic restaurants abound everywhere but it is at street stands and stalls that treasures are found. They exist singly or in night markets (which makes sense because of the hot day time temperatures). Often, they only offer one dish which they have perfected over years of preparation and are famous for it.

I've been able to travel to this part of the world several times always to discover and eat. Like Anthony Bourdain, I think this broad mashup of cuisines is my favorite. A Vietnamese chef that I had the pleasure of cooking with, describes the flavors there as emanating from the "Four Flavor Gods":

- Sour/tart from lime juice, tamarind, or vinegar.
- Salty from fish sauce (never from granulated salt)
- Sweet from palm or brown sugar
- Hot from chiles

These are present in many dishes and the strategy is to adjust them to your taste. You'll see this in some of my favorite recipes following.



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## **THAI CASHEW SALAD** *(Yam Med Mamuang)*

Serves 4 – 6

Cashews are grown in Thailand in abundance. I have fried the cashews here, but you could also toast them in a 375-degree oven for 5 – 6 minutes, turning once or twice. These are delicious with a cold Thai beer.

1/2 cup vegetable oil  
1/2-pound large raw cashews  
2 tablespoons thinly sliced shallot  
1 small green onion, sliced thinly on the bias  
1 lemongrass stalk, tender center only thinly sliced  
2 tablespoons chopped fresh mint  
1 small red jalapeno chile, stemmed and seeded and thinly sliced  
1/4 cup cilantro leaves for garnish

### Dressing

2 tablespoons lime juice  
2 teaspoons fish sauce  
1 teaspoon palm or brown sugar

Add oil to a wok or sauté pan and place over medium heat. Slowly heat oil to 325 degrees using a deep fry thermometer if you have one. Add cashews and fry stirring frequently until nuts are a light golden brown, about 3 minutes. With a slotted spoon transfer to paper towels to drain.

Place the still warm cashews in a bowl and add the shallot, green onion, lemon grass, mint and chile. Toss gently to mix.

Mix dressing ingredients together in a small bowl and whisk or stir until sugar dissolves. Adjust flavors to your taste. Pour over the salad and toss well. Place in an attractive bowl and top with cilantro leaves.

## **GREEN PAPAYA SALAD (SOM TUM)**

“Som” translates to sour and “Tum” refers to the pounding sound from crushing the ingredients in a mortar and pestle. This salad is eaten by itself and served with grilled meats and fishes.

Green papayas are the unripe version of the familiar orange fleshed papaya which is a sweet fruit. Green papayas are more like a vegetable version, made into a kind of

“vegetable coleslaw”. Available in Asian markets you could substitute unripe green mangoes or chayote or cucumbers or even coleslaw mixes. If you have a mandolin, preparing the peeled papaya is a snap. If you don’t have one, there are inexpensive peeler-slicers available which work just fine with the julienne step.

4 cups finely julienned firm green papaya (1 medium)  
1 tablespoon finely chopped garlic  
2 small fresh hot chiles, stemmed and seeded (or to taste)  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
3 tablespoons fresh lime juice  
2 tablespoons Asian Fish Sauce  
2 teaspoons sugar (or to taste)  
10 cherry or grape tomatoes, halved  
1 cup finely julienned peeled carrot  
1/3 cup roasted unsalted peanuts, finely chopped

Garnish: Fresh cilantro leaves

Soak the papaya in cold water for 10 minutes or so. Drain and gently squeeze out the excess water. Refrigerate in a colander until dry. With a mortar and pestle or a mini food processor pound or process the garlic, chiles and salt to a smooth paste. Whisk in the lime juice, fish sauce and sugar. Toss the papaya and carrot in the mixture until well coated. Sometimes they are also pounded gently to release flavor. Stir in the tomatoes and top with the peanuts. Garnish with the cilantro and serve.



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## **SHRIMP RICE PAPER ROLLS WITH SPICY DIPPING SAUCE**

Makes 12 rolls

Edible rice paper makes a wonderful wrap for all kinds of things. In Vietnam, the traditional fillings include aromatic herbs such as mint, cilantro, Asian basil, fresh cucumber, and rice noodles. Beyond that all kinds of things are added. The idea is to roll the ingredients tightly without tearing the softened paper. It takes a little practice but it's easy to do. For a fun gathering you might try placing all the ingredients on a table and let your guests "roll their own"!

- 6 ounces fine rice "stick" or vermicelli
- 12-nine-inch round rice papers
- 1/2 cup each tender mint, cilantro, and basil leaves
- 2 cups finely shredded green cabbage
- 1 cup bean or daikon sprouts, rinsed
- 1 cup or so cucumber; peeled, seeded, and cut in julienne

1 cup carrots or jicama, peeled and cut in 3-inch-long fine julienne  
10 ounces cooked medium shrimp, cut in half lengthwise  
Spicy Dipping Sauce (recipe follows)

Place the vermicelli in a bowl of hot water and allow to soak for 15 minutes or until soft. Drain and cut into 4-inch lengths and reserve.

Place 3 of the rice papers into a large bowl of warm water and gently turn them for 30 seconds or so until they are just beginning to soften. They will still be stiff in spots. Remove and lay flat on a clean dry surface to soften until pliable. This whole process will take just a couple of minutes.

Place leaves of mint, cilantro, and basil in a line across the lower third of the wrapper, leaving about an inch on both sides. Top with some of the vermicelli forming it into a compact log. Top this with some of the lettuce, sprouts, cucumber, carrot, shrimp, and mushrooms. Fold the bottom of the paper up over the filling snugly up over the filling and roll halfway. Fold each side in on top of the cylinder and “crease” all the way to the top of the wrapper and then continue to roll it up gently but firmly. The paper will seal by sticking to itself. Repeat with remaining wrappers and filling. Serve the rolls cut in thirds with dipping sauce on the side.

#### Spicy Dipping Sauce

Makes about 1 cup

1/2 cup fresh lime juice  
4 tablespoons Asian fish sauce  
1 teaspoon minced fresh red chile or to taste  
2 teaspoons finely minced garlic  
1 tablespoon rice vinegar  
5 tablespoons sugar or to taste  
1 tablespoon cilantro leaves, coarsely chopped

Combine all ingredients and stir until sugar is dissolved. Let stand at least 30 minutes before serving for flavors to develop. Adjust salt/sweet/tart/hot flavors to your taste.



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## LEMON GRASS SOUP (TOM YUM)

Serves 2 to 4

This is one of the most popular dishes in Thailand. It is eaten all through day, year-round even in hot weather. This recipe calls for tofu, but you can use any protein instead including chicken (*Tom Yum Gai*), shrimp (*Tom Yum Goong*) or mixed seafood like calamari or mussels. Other ingredients like rice noodles, cabbage, bean sprouts can be added.

Ingredients are readily available in Asian markets. Prepared Tom Yum soup bases are available in those markets and are ok in a pinch but working from fresh is better and not difficult. Lemon grass is available in many supermarkets. Makrut, also known as kaffir lime leaves, galangal and Thai chile paste (*nam prik pao*) are available at Asian markets. Galangal and makrut lime leaves are also often found in the freezer case. Do not use dried galangal or makrut.

2 tablespoons fish sauce

2 tablespoons fresh lime juice or to taste

1 tablespoon Thai red chile paste (*nam prik pao*) or substitute chile garlic sauce or sambal oelek

1 stalk lemon grass, cut into 2-inch sections and crushed  
6 thin slices (about 1 ounce) galangal or ginger root  
3 makrut (*kaffir*) lime leaves, torn into small pieces or a few wide strips of lime peel  
3 cups chicken or vegetable broth  
6 ounces drained soft tofu cut into 3/4-inch cubes  
3/4 cup drained straw mushrooms or sliced oyster mushrooms  
8 cherry or grape tomatoes, each cut in half  
1 scallion, white and light-green parts, thinly sliced on the diagonal  
Cilantro leaves

Whisk the fish sauce, lime juice and chile paste together in a small bowl.

Combine the lemon grass, galangal, makrut lime leaves and broth in a medium saucepan over high heat. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer for 5 minutes. With a slotted spoon discard all the solids. Note: Depending on the cook these solids can be left in the soup but I prefer to discard them.

Add the tofu, mushrooms, and tomatoes to the pan. Simmer for 3 or 4 minutes. Remove from the heat; stir in the fish sauce mixture, scallions, and cilantro. Serve hot.

## HAINAN CHICKEN RICE

Serves 6

The roots of this dish go back to the island of Hainan in the South China sea. Considered the landmark dish of Singapore, you will find a version of this at any shopping mall or food court there and in Malaysia where there will be at least one stall selling Chicken Rice. The quality of the chicken is all important so get a good organic, free range bird for best flavor. The bird is traditionally dipped in an ice water bath after it is cooked to give it a silky and tender texture. This is known as *Bai Ji* or white chicken. At a stand, a single serving of chicken rice comes with the chicken on rice, slices of cucumber, a bowl of hot stock, chilli sauce and sometimes a ginger sauce. Thick sweet soy or hoisin also accompanies.

1 3-1/2 pound organic chicken, fat removed  
Kosher salt  
4 green onions each cut in half  
4-inch finger of peeled ginger, smashed

### For rice:

2 cups fragrant long grain white rice such as Jasmine or Basmati  
2 tablespoons vegetable oil  
3 tablespoons peeled and finely chopped ginger

2 tablespoons finely chopped garlic  
4 cups reserved chicken stock

Seasoning Sauce:

2 tablespoons chicken stock  
1 tablespoon soy sauce  
2 tablespoons toasted sesame oil

For the table:

Chilli Sauce (recipe follows)  
Ginger Sauce (recipe follows)  
Cucumber slices  
Cilantro Sprigs  
Dark soy sauce or hoisin sauce

Rub the outside of the chicken with a handful of salt to get rid of any loose skin and to firm it up. Rinse it well, inside and out and now season generously with salt inside and out. Stuff it with the green onions and smashed ginger.

Place in a large pot fill with cold water to cover chicken by 1-inch. Bring to a boil over high heat, and then reduce heat to a simmer and cook covered for 30 minutes more. Check for doneness by inserting a small knife into the flesh of the leg/thigh where juices should run clear and meat is very tender.

Transfer the chicken to the sink and rinse with cold water for about 3 minutes, till cool. Alternately you can put it in an ice bath. Set aside. Strain and reserve poaching liquid for cooking the rice and more.

To cook rice: Heat the oil in a deep saucepan over moderate heat and fry the ginger and garlic till fragrant (about 2 minutes). Add rice to the pan and fry stirring until it's well coated with the oil. Be careful not to burn the ginger and garlic. Add the stock, salt to taste and the pandan leaves if using and bring to a boil. Immediately turn heat down to a simmer. Cover and cook for 15 minutes or so or until liquid is absorbed. Remove from heat and let sit with lid on for 5 minutes or so. Fluff rice with a fork before serving.

Heat the remaining poaching stock (you should have at least 6 cups) and season to your taste with salt.

To serve: Cut the chicken into serving size pieces. Spoon rice into deep bowls, top with the chicken and a ladle of broth. Mix the seasoning ingredients and drizzle over the chicken. Serve the chicken rice with the chilli sauce and ginger sauces, cucumber slices, cilantro and Dark soy or hoisin sauce on the side for each diner to add as they wish.

Chilli Sauce

6 red or green fresh jalapenos, or to taste  
2 teaspoons chopped garlic  
1-inch finger peeled ginger, chopped  
1 tablespoon or so fresh lime juice  
2 teaspoons sugar  
2 tablespoons reserved chicken broth  
Salt to taste

Add all to a blender and blend until smooth.

Ginger Sauce:

3-inch finger of peeled ginger, grated  
2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil  
Salt to taste

Mix all together.



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**LARB GAI**

Serves 4 to 6

Larb Gai is a dish usually made with ground chicken. It is very popular in Laos and Isan, a neighboring rural section of Thailand. You can also use finely chopped beef or pork. Traditionally, this dish uses roasted rice powder that is prepared by toasting raw rice in a wok, then grounding it to a powder. You can find premade roasted rice powder at Asian

markets. Do not skip it — it adds a nuttiness that is essential to the authentic flavor of the dish.

1/4 cup raw sticky rice or 2 tablespoons roasted rice powder  
16 ounces coarsely ground or finely chopped dark meat chicken (lean beef, such as sirloin, can be substituted)  
1 teaspoon hot chile powder, preferably Thai or Lao or red chile flakes  
2 tablespoons fish sauce  
3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice  
2 teaspoons sugar  
1/3 cup finely slivered red onions or shallots  
3 tablespoons chopped cilantro  
2 tablespoons thinly sliced scallions  
12 torn mint leaves, plus more for serving

For serving:  
Lettuce leaves  
Cucumber spears, for serving  
Cooked sticky or glutinous rice, if desired

To make roasted rice powder, heat a wok or skillet over high heat. Add raw rice and cook, stirring often, until rice is toasted and golden brown, about 5 minutes. Remove from wok and set aside to cool. Grind to a coarse powder in a mortar, blender, or coffee grinder; set aside.

To cook chicken, heat a wok or skillet over medium-high heat. When hot, add 2 tablespoons water, then add chicken, stirring constantly to break up any lumps. Cook just until cooked through, about four minutes, then transfer to mixing bowl. While chicken is just warm, add remaining ingredients (except for serving garnishes) and roasted rice powder. Mix gently but thoroughly. Taste and adjust seasonings. Mixture should be tangy, salty, and pleasantly spicy.

Spoon onto serving plate and surround with additional mint, lettuce, and cucumber. Serve with rice. If using sticky rice, pinch some off, mold into a small ball and dip into larb, scooping up a little of each ingredient. Or scoop larb into lettuce leaves.

## **LITCHI SORBET WITH FRESH FRUITS**

Serves 4

I have included the recipe for this simple sorbet below. Use whatever fresh fruits and berries are best in the season. Certainly, include a tropical fruit or two such as mango

and pineapple. Litchi is an Asian fruit with a distinctive flavor. I'm using canned litchis here but, in the summer, you can find them fresh in Asian markets. Also look for its hairy cousin Rambutan.

1 can (15 ounces) litchis in syrup  
1/2 tablespoon unflavored gelatin  
1/2 cup sugar  
1/4 cup water  
1 tablespoon finely grated lime or lemon zest  
Fresh fruits of your choice attractively cut

Drain off 1/2 cup of the litchi syrup, reserving the rest and transfer to a small bowl. Spoon gelatin over syrup; set aside for a couple of minutes for gelatin to soften.

Meanwhile, heat the sugar and water in a saucepan over medium-high heat until sugar dissolves; remove from heat. Whisk in the gelatin mixture and set aside.

Put litchis and reserved syrup in blender or food processor (remove seeds if they are still in the fruit) and puree. Add gelatin mixture and zest and process for 15 seconds or so or until very smooth. Freeze in an ice cream maker according to manufacturer's instructions. Or alternately pour into shallow container; freeze 12 to 24 hours, stirring often to keep crystals from forming. Serve with fresh fruits of your choice.

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