



Performing Pad Thai

ALEXANDRA DOMRONGCHAI

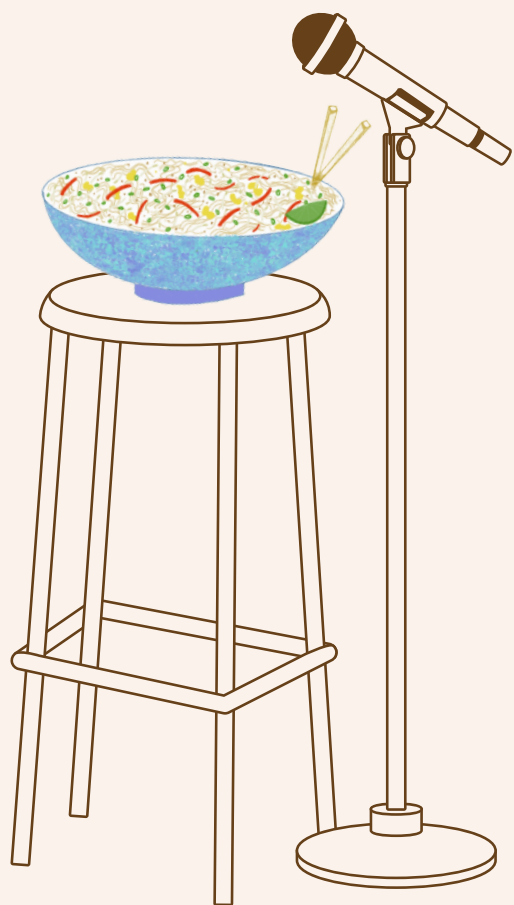
TASTING THAI

Thailand's food is renowned worldwide, and for good reason. That spicy, salty, sweet, and sour seductive blend is the guiding principle behind each Thai dish—including Pad Thai. This cookbook introduces you to the heavenly flavors, fresh aromas, and captivating spices that make Thai food so alluring. The following is a delicious culinary journey through one of Southeast Asia's most captivating food cultures.



Just kidding, that's not what this is. But, to prepare for this cookbook and write the gross appropriative excerpt above, I did read a bunch of old Thai cookbooks and travel blogs—I'm not far off. The romanticization of Pad Thai and Thai cuisine among the people creates false authenticity and ownership of the dish by non-Thais. Instead, this cookbook examines the ways that descriptions and recipes of Pad Thai dominate Thai cuisine and asks more broadly how we can think of a future without culinary exoticization.

Performing Pad Thai



American consumers situated Pad Thai as the all-encompassing symbol of Thai food—on a pedestal performing nationalism, culture, and deliciousness. It is regarded as one of the world's most delicious dishes (No. 5) with fascinating origins. Pad Thai literally translates to stir-fried noodles, and it is composed of rice noodles, tamarind, fish sauce, garlic, and chili peppers. In these simple ingredients, Pad Thai combines four distinct tastes—sour, salty, sweet, and bitter—and is a global sensation.

Despite the dish's fame and claim to Thai authenticity, Pad Thai could hardly be found in Thailand not too long ago until Plaek Pibulsonggram, former Thai Prime Minister, introduced it to the people in the 1930s. In fact, the popularization of noodles was just one of many measures taken by Thai authorities to westernize the country during the 1930s and 1940s in order to avoid becoming colonized. As part of the reforms, the name of the country was changed from Siam to Thailand, local languages were banned from the nation's schools, and the word 'Sawasdee' was promoted as a greeting. In *Materializing Thailand*, Penny Van Esterik wrote that one of Pibulsonggram's nation-building strategies was establishing the "Thai Great Tradition" in order to demonstrate the unity of the Thai people.

Performing Pad Thai

Pad Thai is fascinating not just because of its interesting background, but also because it cannot be considered a real Thai dish. Not only are rice noodles a quintessentially Chinese ingredient, just about every other ingredient in Pad Thai is not native to the people after whom the dish is named. Because Pad Thai's birth was both a plea and symbol for nationalism instead of an actual representation of culture and people—its foundation is subject to change. This fabrication of Thai culture has had a lasting effect on the continuing mold of Thai culture and affects notions of authenticity and what constitutes Thai food. Bolstered by support from the United States, Thailand manufactured a homogeneous culture that was easy for Americans to consume and control. In this, I believe that Pad Thai is a performance in various regards that pushes Thai people, including my family, to perform elements of false authenticity—and I say enough! Let me and my wonderful family exist without the expectations and confines of food!



Authenticity is a Sham

Notions of authenticity are at the core of what keeps Pad Thai exclusionary and on its pedestal. Robert Ji-Song's *Dubious Gastronomy* deconstructs notions of authenticity by illuminating how it is both an illusion and a trap. For example, Ji-Song writes Kimchi comes in all “colors, shapes, sizes, and degrees of heat.” Despite this, Americans and Koreans alike hold in the authenticity of kimchi cabbage. Unlike the red hot chili pepper, which is the sole ingredient responsible for the fiery taste and crimson hue most non-Koreans expect to see in kimchi, there was no mention of the other item considered synonymous with kimchi like cabbage. As part of a “soft power” strategy to promote the country and its culture abroad, the Korean government has invested heavily in supporting kimchi producers, kimchi research, and kimchi marketing campaigns. I believe Pad Thai exists in a similar vein—to promote Thai culture and economy abroad. Its recipe consists of ingredients rather than quantities, leaving room for much interpretation even though people relish its presumed authenticity. Now, I'm all about getting that bag, don't get me wrong, but I wish people would drop the authenticity act with the dish. Pad Thai's original purpose was to promote nationalism and unite a nation. It now exists as a way for non-Thais to feel super interesting and cultured over their hot takes on a dish that in essence was created for them.

I, as a Thai person, am calling for an end to the authenticity sham (grandma we can talk about this later)! Pad Thai literally translates to stir-fried noodles and I believe the dish can and should be more than a way for non-Thais to stake a claim to my ethnicity. Also, for all of the thousands of inaccurate and downright upsetting Pad Thai recipes, I'm ready to admit defeat and cook them too.

Notes

Before we begin, I have a few things I need to get off my chest. I believe two things firmly: (1) because Pad Thai itself is not inherently authentic, no Pad Thai is authentic AND every Pad Thai is authentic (meta, right?), and (2) one's first encounter with Pad Thai is foundational to their view of Pad Thai and its authenticity.

Also, to get some housekeeping out of the way, even though my grandmother shames my dad for it—my dad thinks that bottled Pad Thai sauce isn't always a bad idea to use as long as it's Pantai brand.



Squid fish sauce, to my family, is the **ONLY** fish sauce one should ever use when cooking Thai food. You do you though.

I can't control what you do in your own home but please don't use linguine noodles. Get rice noodles. When you do use the rice noodles, make sure you soak them for half an hour in warm water before cooking.



To cook Pad Thai, or really any other stir fry dish, a wok is necessary. It's the only thing that can get hot enough to bring the ingredients together.

Remember: taste is subjective, don't be insensitive, and enjoy what *you* like!

Grandma's Pad Thai



PREP 5 MIN



COOK 15 MIN



COMFORTABLY
FEEDS 4



Ingredients

stir fry

8 oz rice noodles
8 oz chicken thigh
3 eggs
1/2 container tofu
1/4 cup vegetable oil
shallot and garlic
1 cup bean sprout

sauce

2 tbsp fish sauce
tamarind juice
3 tbsp palm sugar
1 tsp paprika

garnish

1 tsp hot chili flakes,
peanuts and green onion

Directions

1. Thinly chop chicken and tofu
2. Put the oil in the HOT wok and fry shallot and garlic until fragrant.
3. Add in chicken, eggs, tofu noodles, and a little water to keep the noodles soft.
4. Add in sugar, fish sauce, paprika, and tamarind juice.
5. Garnish with bean sprout, green onion, and peanut.

I'll admit, even I have my own prejudices. My first introduction and forever favorite Pad Thai is my grandmother's. To me, nothing will *ever* compare to hers. I felt such a deep connection to this Pad Thai that to me, any other Pad Thai that came after this I scoffed at. This summer, I had the opportunity to relive my childhood by being with my grandparents and eating her delicious Pad Thai. Her recipe, she claims, is THE authentic Pad Thai recipe. I believe her and you should too. I apologize in advance, as recreating this one might be hard, as my grandma makes sure to add copious amounts of love and I had a hard time getting exact measurements. After making it with her throughout the summer, this is what I got.

Dad's Pad Thai



PREP 10 MIN



COOK 15 MIN



COMFORTABLY
FEEDS 4

Ingredients

stir fry

8 oz rice noodles
8 oz chicken thigh
1 tbsp corn starch
1 tbsp Thai soy sauce
3 eggs
garlic
¼ cup oil
8oz firm tofu

sauce

2 tbsp fish sauce
2 tbsp palm sugar
2 tbsp tamarind juice
1 tbsp oyster sauce
1 tsp paprika

garnish

green onion, peanuts, bean
sprouts, lime

Directions

1. PREP EVERYTHING FIRST

- Chop chicken into thin strips and marinate with corn starch and Thai soy sauce for a bit.
- Prep the tofu, garlic, and green onions. For the green onions, dice the white part very thinly and the rest into 2-3 inch slices.
- Whisk together the Pad Thai sauce ingredients

2. Heat the wok and add some of the oil and the chicken. After it cooks, remove the chicken and add the rest of the oil with the thinly sliced green onion and garlic.

3. Before it burns, add the soaking noodles.

4. Push noodles to the side while you scramble the eggs.

5. Add back in the chicken and tofu.

6. Pour Pad Thai sauce in.

7. Garnish!



My dad is an incredibly talented artist and chef. Even though he cooks a delicious Pad Thai, to me, it has always come second to my grandmother's (hi dad, I promise it's not personal, your Pad Thai is extremely yummy). That being said, our many non-Thai family friends claim that my dad's, often their first encounter with Pad Thai, is their favorite. Even though this recipe is fairly different from my grandmother's, because it's authentic to him, it's authentic to me. His Pad Thai recipe is a hit amongst many and extremely scrumptious.



Ketchup Pad Thai



PREP 5 MIN



COOK 15 MIN



COMFORTABLY
FEEDS 4

When I started this project, I researched hundreds of different Pad Thai recipes. And to no surprise, there were a plethora of very Americanized replications. After researching recipes with my dad and making them my own, he responded with:



Dad

Those are both a little strange

Once we both put aside our pride, we decided to put ketchup in the stir fry. I'm ready to admit that it's not bad (again, I'm sorry grandma). Ketchup is actually a good replacement for tamarind that performs that 'traditional' orange color. Though we enjoyed the dish despite the ketchup, we still remain a bit unsettled with the added peanut butter. But to each their own!

Ingredients

stir fry

8 oz rice noodles

1 large chicken breast

2 eggs

1 cup bean sprouts

1/3 cup sliced green onions

1/4 cup sliced white onions

1/3 cup chopped cilantro

sauce

1/4 cup ketchup

2 tbsp fish sauce

2 tbsp sugar

1 tsp minced garlic

1 tsp peanut butter

juice of 1 lime

1/2 tsp crushed red pepper flakes

1 tsp soy sauce

Directions

1. Chop chicken and then season with salt and pepper to taste.
2. Cook chicken in a large wok and set aside.
3. Mix together sauce ingredients and put aside.
4. Crack eggs on the wok and add the onions and bean sprouts.
5. Add back in the chicken and sauce. Add noodles and toss to coat the noodles in the sauce.
6. Stir in green onions and cilantro and garnish if desired!

Vegan Pad Thai



PREP 5 MIN COOK 15 MIN COMFORTABLY
FEEDS 4

Ingredients

stir fry

- 8 oz dried rice noodles
- 2 tbsp vegetable oil
- ½ bunch green onion
- 2 red Thai chiles
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ cup bean sprout
- 8 oz firm tofu, cubed

sauce

- ¼ cup rice vinegar
- ⅓ cup soy sauce
- ⅓ cup brown sugar
- ¼ cup vegan
Worcestershire
- ¼ cup tamarind paste

garnish

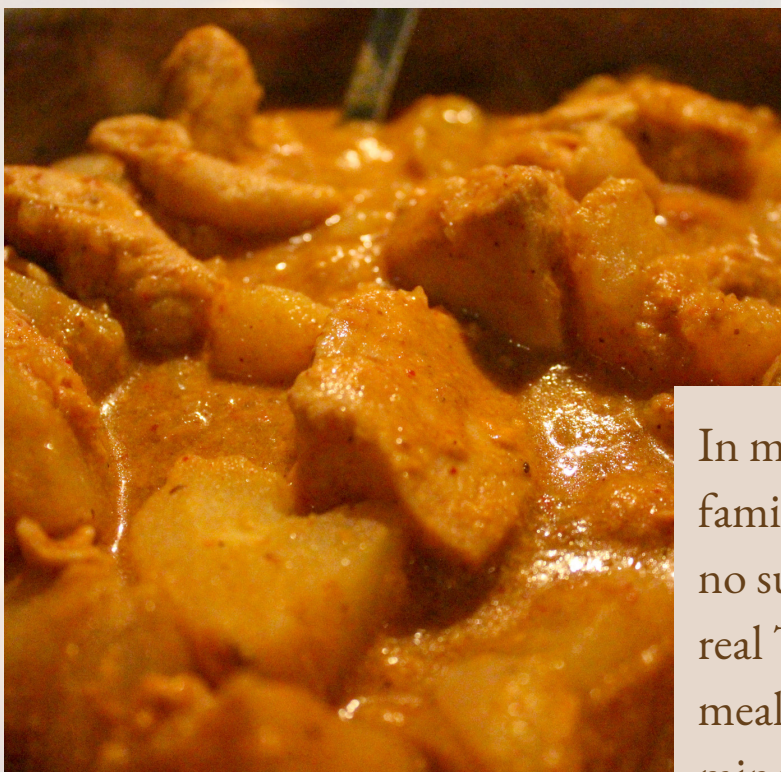
- peanuts, bean sprouts,
cilantro, lime



Directions

1. In a saucepan over medium-high heat, whisk together the rice vinegar, soy sauce, brown sugar, vegan Worcestershire sauce, and tamarind paste. Bring the mixture to a boil, then reduce the heat to low and simmer for a few minutes. Take the sauce off the heat and keep it aside.
2. In a heated wok add the oil, scallions, chiles, and garlic. Stir for roughly 2 minutes, until scallions have softened.
3. Stir in rice noodles and evenly distribute all ingredients before adding sauce and combining.
4. Stir the tofu into the sauce, then remove the pan from the heat.
5. Garnish with peanuts, bean sprouts, scallions, and red chiles, if desired.

I used to be vegan, and though my family was supportive, it was met with some resistance. Now, I don't know why during the 4 years of my veganism I never thought to make Pad Thai. It's on the sour side, and the absence of fish sauce is very noticeable. Despite the fact that this Pad Thai doesn't taste like traditional Pad Thai, it still serves that bold flavor one looks for in the dish. My family didn't hate it, though my dad said multiple times that it wasn't Pad Thai. But if I've learned anything from this project is that Pad Thai is subjective and made out of availability and is subject to change. If you are vegan, this is a great substitute for a traditional Pad Thai.



Massaman Curry



PREP 5 MIN



COOK 30 MIN



COMFORTABLY
FEEDS 4

Ingredients

- 1 lb chicken breasts cut into cubes
- 4 oz can massaman curry paste
- 1 tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 can coconut milk
- 1 large potato boiled, peeled and cubed
- 3 large carrots cubed
- 1 medium onion cubed
- 2 tsp fish sauce
- 1 tsp palm sugar

Directions

1. Heat up cooking oil and add the massaman curry paste to fry it. Cook for a minute and then add the chicken and cook for a few minutes.
2. Add the can of coconut milk, mix well, and cover for 5-10 minutes.
3. Add the onions, boiled cubed potatoes, carrots, fish sauce, and sugar.
4. Let sit and simmer for at least 20 minutes.
5. Serve as is or with jasmine rice.

In many ways, Pad Thai has branded my family. It is Thailand's national dish, it's to no surprise that when thinking about what real Thai people consider their favorite Thai meal, curry is usually the first to come to mind. Massaman curry, my grandmother's favorite Thai dish, is a celebration dish. In Thailand, it is served for weddings, birthdays, and celebrations of all types. When I think about food that is authentic to me and my family, I think about curry and the warmth it brings. Though it isn't always the first thing non-Thai's think of when they think about Thai food, it's ours and that's all that matters.



Maesri is the only acceptable curry paste. It's easy, convenient, and grandma-approved.

Your Favorite Pad Thai Recipe





Most of the knowledge-building surrounding contemporary Thai cuisine stems from racialized cookbooks that pushed Thai Americans to perform a cuisine that wasn't inherently theirs. As a result of my research and fieldwork in this project, I have learned how valuable cookbooks can be as a method of changing the narrative on cuisine. If you are left with anything after this cookbook, please enjoy your Pad Thai but let's work together to envision a world free of culinary exoticism.

