

Q&A WITH
**DAVID
THOMPSON**

THAI TO DIE FOR

AN INTERVIEW BY: RON GLUCKMAN





COMO's Metropolitan Hotel

Meeting one of the world's most successful Thai chefs can be slightly shocking. David Thompson's skin is pale, his face dotted with stubble, and despite his fondness for Thai food, culture and history, there is no mistaking the obvious: he's not Thai.

Yet this Australian has had a lifelong association with Thai food, beginning with his own Darley Street Thai and Sailors Thai restaurants in Sydney in the 1990s.

Later, he earned the first Michelin star ever awarded to a Thai restaurant at his Nahm in London. Nowadays, he's immersed in the 'delicious environment' of Bangkok, where for four years he's run his acclaimed Nahm at COMO's Metropolitan Hotel.

A scholarly chef, he's also authored two landmark books, *'Arham Thai'* (Thai Food), an authoritative study on the origins and history of Thai cuisine, and *Thai Street Food*,

focusing on the simple recipes that are his passion. In February, Nahm was not only honoured as Asia's best Thai restaurant, but took Number 1 overall at Asia's 50 Best Restaurants Awards in Singapore. We meet this celebrated chef to discuss why Thai food is so delicious, his success, and his new Long Chim restaurant concept.



COMO's Metropolitan Hotel

Hotelier International: What was your reaction to being named the top restaurant in Asia's 50 Best? What has been the impact?

David Thompson: Astonished, really. I honestly bet against myself. I just never expected it. So much of these things are a mix of luck, the number of judges and the location. Since it was in Singapore, with so many wonderful, deserving restaurants there, I had every belief that one of them, or another equally deserving, would win.

I was surprised at the awards last year (Nahm took third in the Asia's 50 Best, but also ranked 32 in the World's 50 Best awards), but of course, it's no surprise that Thai food is getting this recognition. This is

truly one of the great foods in the world. This award is great for Thailand, and great for Thai food.

HI: You have spent years cooking within a hotel environment. We came from an era and cultures that did not associate fine cuisine with hotels. Are hotels the best places to be for ambitious chefs?

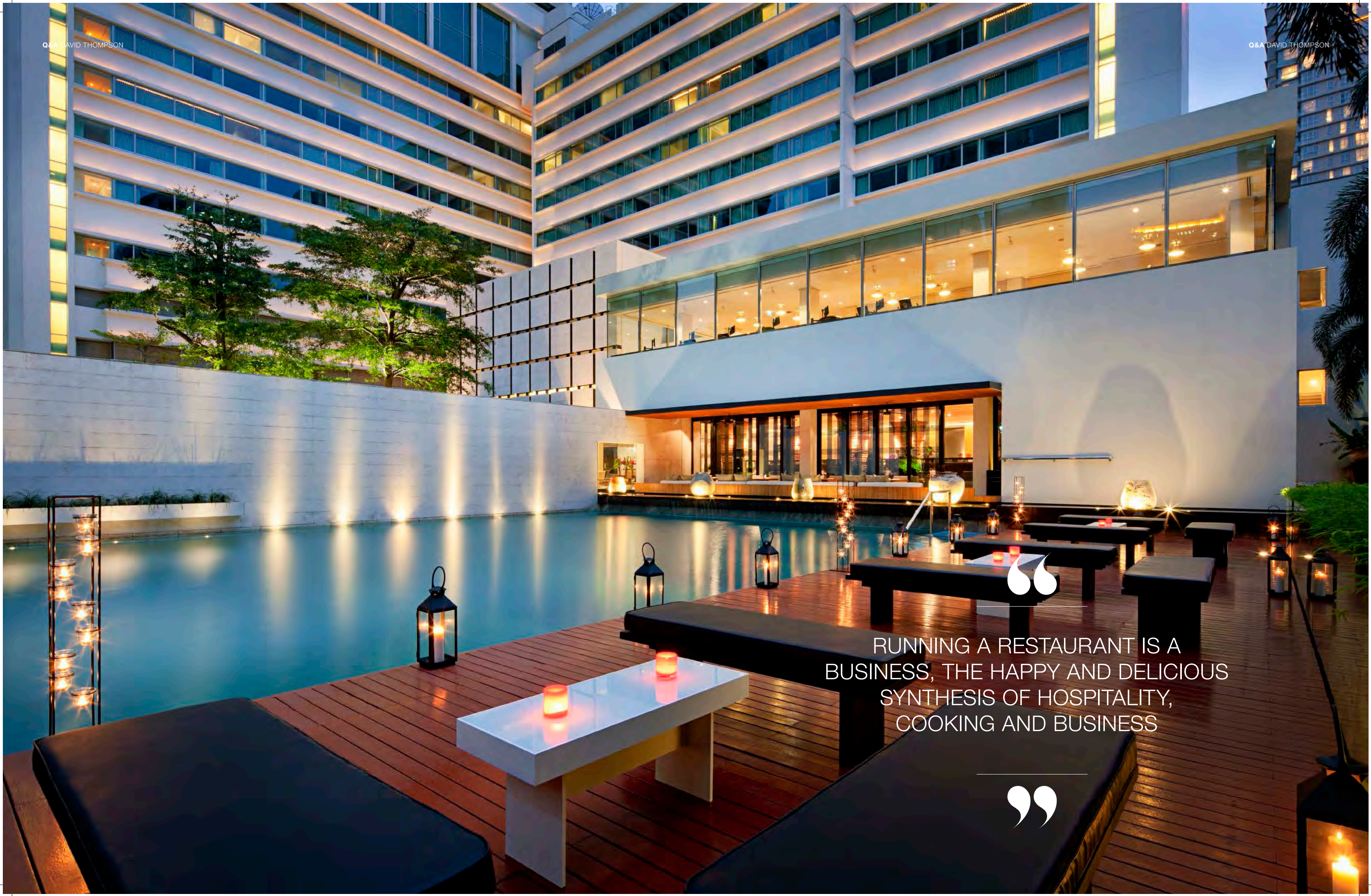
DT: Being in a hotel can be a double-edged sword. There are both constraints and benefits. Of paramount importance is the slowness of decisions made by committee, which can take weeks. When you are on your own, it's like this (snaps finger).

On the other side, you have the financial aspect, where you have departments that analyze figures and provide data that is

essential. I always say running a restaurant is a business, the happy and delicious synthesis of hospitality, cooking and business.

In the old days, I'd never eat in a hotel. But things have changed. Hotels realise they are good at renting rooms, but perhaps not so much at running restaurants. Good restaurants need bite, decisiveness, a personality. With the case of [Metropolitan Hotel owner] Christina Ong, who brought me to London, and here at the Metropolitan in Bangkok, she knew this early on. She brought Nobu to London before it was famous. She's been astute like that."

HI: In Bangkok, we are seeing more signature restaurants associated with



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hotels, often as showcases of established chefs. This is common in cities around the world but seems a new trend here. Your take?

DT: I think it's great to see so many restaurants focused on cuisine and authenticity, like Apia, which is a true Roman trattoria. We've seen a lot of Italian pasta and pizza places in the past. What is happening is that Bangkok is becoming a center of action, as seen previously in Singapore, London and New York. That kind of focus of activity, and excitement, is now happening in Bangkok. It's like a zeitgeist, so many things happening at once, the affluence here, and all the people coming. I've been a few places like this where it happened, in Sydney in the 1990s, in London in the 2000s, and now Bangkok. Bangkok has always been a wonderful city, a large city filled with lovely people and great

food and history, but now it's becoming a truly great city, soulful, so cosmopolitan with so much to do and enjoy. It's attracting people from all over, it's really world-class. And there is so much local talent here ready for the opportunities, plus Thais with world-class talent from overseas are coming back. It's a great time.

Hi: What about your next project, the Long Chim restaurant in Singapore? What's the concept? And it's another hotel restaurant?

DT: The name means 'Come and taste', something like that. It's Thai food, but street food, a restaurant and concept I've been thinking about for a long time. I really felt, after Nahm in London, I couldn't cook this kind of food again outside of Asia. We are very concerned about flavor and the quality of ingredients, and it is just too hard to get some things outside of Asia.

Street food is more transportable. It's not as dependent on the ingredients as more conventional food. Some recipes have only three ingredients; here at Nahm, dishes may have 20. But it's wonderful food. I love Thai street food. It's really the kind of food that most people think of when they think of Thai food.

The restaurant really isn't in a hotel; it's part of the Marina Bay Sands, but within the shopping complex. It's big, maybe 150-160 seats plus a bar; we had 70 seats here in the original Nahm (plus private seating). It should open by October, and this is just the first one. It's a concept I've had in mind for a long time, but now have the right partners. I'm really excited. We are thinking Hong Kong next, and then other Asian cities.