Thai Up

With a wealth of newly launched eateries appearing across the city, Bangkok’s culinary reach is growing.

Words RON GLUCKMAN  Photography CHRISTOPHER WISE
before visiting their wives or lovers.

“People took quail from the bazaar. ‘I call it ‘Feast at the Harem(),' he says, explaining that quail was traditionally the favourite meat of sultans, and they would feast on the bird with red grapes and a rainbow of spices — charcoal-rotisserie quail served with wild honey, fennel seeds, and a smoked eggplant and tomato relish that is heavenly.

Le Du, run by young Thai chef Thitid Tassanaakajohn, leaped to 14. And the list was rounded out by Thai mainstays like Issaya Siamese Club and Nahm, the internationally lauded temple to traditional Thai cuisine launched by Australian David Thompson. He recently left Nahm, but continues to focus on Thai cuisine with his Long Chim restaurants in Singapore, Seoul, Perth, Melbourne and Sydney. Nahm’s new chef is Pum Techamaanwittaya, a celebrated Thai chef who earned her own Michelin star after launching Kin Khao in San Francisco.

In all, Bangkok placed eight restaurants on the list, three in the Top 10 — Gaggan, Sühring and Nahm. The latter two received a star each in Michelin’s first guide to Bangkok restaurants, released in December 2017 — Gaggan scored two.

Thai food is finally getting recognition as one of the great cuisines of the world,” says Michael Ellis, international director of the Michelin Guide. “It has all the taste sensations — sweet, sour, pungent, savoury — often in the same dish. Thai food is simply amazing. So much flavour in your face.”

Concurrent with this international recognition comes a revolution across the local dining scene: “It’s really a recent phenomenon,” says Jarrett Wrisley, an American who moved to Bangkok in 2008 to open Soul Food Mahanakorn, focusing on Thai food from the north-eastern region of Isaan. He calls the region a marvel of cuisine, and even the simplest dishes offer explosions of flavour, like his ‘Nahm Prik 2 Ways’ a
spicy dip with chargrilled green chillies, served with pork and tomato-chilli dip. He’s since added other restaurants, including Appia, a popular Roman-style trattoria, and several Peppina pizzerias with partner Paolo Vitaletti.

“Bangkok has gone from a fledgling market for international cuisine to a very mature market in five years,” says Wrisley. He credits a variety of factors, including affordable rents and low labour costs, with much more manageable start-up costs than other Asian cities such as Hong Kong or Singapore.

Thompson and Gaggan recall how, when they came to Thailand, there were few restaurants outside of hotels, and the choices beyond Thai food were largely limited to Italian. “We were among the first ones to try something new,” Gaggan notes.

Mason Florence, the Southeast Asian chair of Asia’s 50 Best Restaurants, says few cities are like Bangkok nowadays. “Bangkok is a playground for chefs. They can do crazy things, really break the moulds. It’s an open-minded place that has a long history of revering food, which creates a fertile environment for experimentation.” Florence points out a pair of key factors that have contributed to the take-off of the local food scene. “There has been a total revolution in products, both what you can source locally and internationally.” Thailand has always been a major agricultural centre, but farms and dairies now produce the premium poultry, meat, herbs and vegetables demanded by fine-dining establishments. As the restaurant scene has expanded, it’s also created markets for speciality Thai coffee roasters, tea farmers, gin distilleries and a fledgling — but rapidly expanding — craft brewery industry.

“The other thing is that there is this genuine shared passion and camaraderie among Thai chefs,” he adds. This can be seen in all the collaborative events, non-stop food festivals and pop-ups. “Bangkok has just totally gone crazy for all kinds of food.”

Chefs describe the scene in terms of distinct waves. The first one came when chefs started opening showpiece kitchens independent of hotels. Besides Gaggan and David Thompson were Thai talents like Nooror Somany Steppe, who returned from Europe to open Blue Elephant, and Ian Kittichai, the international restaurateur and TV chef who is behind the iconic Issaya Siamese Club. Nooror had already achieved fame for her Thai cooking in Belgium in the 1980s. “In the old days, in Thailand, the fine-dining concept was still limited,” she says. But in 2002, she came home to open Blue Elephant, serving royal Thai cuisine in a stunning heritage building. “Thailand is my motherland and Bangkok is a city of gastronomy,” she says. “I wanted to bring back a European way of fine-dining to be adapted with Thai cuisine.”

Kittichai’s remarkable career has taken him across the world. One of eight children in a working-class family, he attended culinary schools in London and Australia, then had whirlwind postings internationally. From 2001 to 2014 he hosted a weekly cooking show, Chef Mue Thong (Golden Hand Chef), screened in more than 70 countries. His Kittichai

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**DETAILS**

**Nahm**
27 South Sathorn Rd, Khwaeng Thungmahamek, Sathorn; www.comohotels.com/metropolitan bangkok-dining nahm. **Paste**
3rd Floor, Gaysorn, 999 Ploenchit Rd, Lumpini; www.pastebangkok.com.

**Soul Food Mahanakorn**

**Sühring**
No. 10, Yen Akat Soi 3, Chongnonsi, Yannawa; www.restaurantsuhring.com. **The House on Sathorn**

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**FROM TOP**
Sühring, run by twin chefs Thomas and Mathias Sühring, is known for its German dishes; chef Bongkoch Satongun at Paste.

**“Bangkok is a playground for chefs. They can do crazy things, really break the moulds.”**
Restaurant in New York propelled him to cover-boy status and he launched restaurants from Spain to India. But he came home to Bangkok to open his flagship Issaya Siamese Club in late 2011.

The second wave followed as entrepreneurs like Wrisley and other young chefs opened experimental outlets — and lots of them. Suddenly, new restaurants were the buzz, like Bo.lan, run by Thai chef Duangporn ‘Bo’ Songvisava and her husband, Australian chef Dylan ‘Lan’ Jones, who met while they were both working at David Thompson’s Nahm in London.

This presages what many call the third wave for Bangkok dining, already underway — a new generation of culinary experimentation by chefs stepping out of established kitchens with their own innovative concepts.

“To me, Thai cuisine has been stuck in time for like 50 years. And everywhere else, food has been exploding,” he adds. “Cuisine is a living thing, it must change, improve.”

Tassanakajohn says it took time to gain acceptance, but Le Du is popular with both Thais and foreign diners, and he’s opened two additional restaurants: Baan, serving comfort Thai food, and an experimental farm restaurant, Backyard by Baan.

“I’m lucky,” he says. “All these guys — Gaggan, Thompson, Tim Butler at Eat Me… they paved the way, otherwise Le Du could never have happened. Or survived.” Tassanakajohn is excited that younger Thais won’t have to go overseas and train, but can work in local kitchens, then step out with their own ideas, a pathway that didn’t exist previously. “Bangkok is changing dramatically — we need it, a new generation of Thai cooking.” He adds, “I’m very happy with how this is working.”

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