



# 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

**T**HE PATH TO the heart is said to be through the stomach. And just as seductively, great cities around the globe woo visitors with food, flavours and dining.

Bangkok has been famed for aeons for its fiery cuisine and scrumptious street food. Food tours and TV chefs have long swarmed the city's colourful food markets and street stalls, extolling the intoxicating aromas of Thai cuisine. Yet Bangkok's dining scene itself had always lacked diversity — until fairly recently.

"Things have been exploding," says chef and restaurateur Gaggan Anand. "In the last 10 years, the entire landscape of food in Bangkok has changed. And the next 10 years will be amazing."

He should know: in March, his Gaggan restaurant won top prize at Asia's 50 Best Restaurant Awards — for the fourth year running. Gaggan's unique Indian molecular dishes (imaginative items like what seems to be an egg on a spoon, but is really a dollop of yoghurt filled with mango chutney, or a spicy Indian sauce spread across a plate spelling out the words 'Lick it up!' — and diners do) have won worldwide acclaim, resulting in three-month advance bookings for inventive tasting menus that can run up to an incredible 25 courses.

Bangkok's epicurean depth is emphasised by other winners: Sühring, run by twins Thomas and Mathias Sühring, serving takes on their native German food (tasting menus run eight to 12 courses); Eat Me, boasting Tim Butler's modern Western cuisine (fresh seafood and meats, drawing on Asian flavours such as butter-poached lobster offset with Thai Tom Yum sauce); and The House on Sathorn, offering Southeast Asia's only upscale Turkish culinary journey, run by Turkish chef Fatih Tutak.

Tutak's latest creation features a charcoal-roisserie quail served with red grapes and a rainbow of spices 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 before visiting their wives or lovers.

## DETAILS

**Blue Elephant** 233 South Sathorn Rd, Kwaeng Yannawa, Khet Sathorn; www.blueelephant.com/bangkok. **Bo.lan** 24 Soi Sukhumvit 53 Klong Toey Nua, Wattana; www.bolan.co.th. **Eat Me** Convent Rd/Soi Pipat 2, Silom, Bangrak; www.eatmerestaurant.com. **Gaggan** 68/1 Soi Langsuan, Ploenchit Rd, Lumpini; www.eatatgaggan.com. **Issaya Siamese Club** 4 Soi Sri Aksorn, Chua Ploeng Rd, Sathorn; www.issaya.com. **Le Du** 399/3 Silom Soi 7, Silom, Bangrak; www.ledubkk.com.

**ABOVE** Issaya Siamese Club. **OPENER, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Thailand's famous tuk tuks; chicken, prawn and mackerel dishes from Bo.lan; quail, rainbow chard and red grapes from The House on Sathorn; Michelin-starred restaurant Sühring; Tim Butler, chef at Eat Me.



**CLOCKWISE FROM THIS IMAGE** Jasmine flower panna cotta from Issaya Siamese Club; The House on Sathorn; Paste's chargrilled pork; interior of Paste.



However, this isn't to suggest that foreign food has conquered Thailand. Bongkoch Satongun was named Best Female Chef in Asia, and her restaurant Paste (opened in 2013 with her husband, Australian chef Jason Bailey) debuted on the list at number 31. The name refers to the array of rich pastes they concoct to flavour their dishes, drawing on traditional recipes often forgotten. Their chargrilled organic pork is glazed with wild honey, fennel seeds, and a smoked eggplant and tomato relish that is heavenly.

Le Du, run by young Thai chef Thitid Tassanakajohn 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 Pim Techamuanvivit, 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 Isan. 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."

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## DETAILS

**Nahm** 27 South Sathorn Rd, Khwaeng Thungmahamek, Sathorn; [www.comohotels.com/metropolitan/bangkok/dining/nahm](http://www.comohotels.com/metropolitan/bangkok/dining/nahm). **Paste** 3rd Floor, Gaysorn, 999 Ploenchit Rd, Lumpini; [www.pastebangkok.com](http://www.pastebangkok.com). **Soul Food Mahanakorn** 56/10 Sukhumvit Soi 55; [www.soulfoodmahanakorn.com](http://www.soulfoodmahanakorn.com). **Sühring** No. 10, Yen Akat Soi 3, Chongnonsi, Yannawa; [www.restaurantsuhring.com](http://www.restaurantsuhring.com). **The House on Sathorn** 106 North Sathorn Rd, Silom, Bangrak; [www.thehouseonsathorn.com](http://www.thehouseonsathorn.com).



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

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 ➤



**FROM LEFT** Exterior of The House on Sathorn, a 128-year-old colonial mansion and Thai national heritage home; the spicy 'Nahm Prik 2 Ways' dish, served with chillies and chilli dip, at Soul Food Mahanakorn.

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.

"Bangkok is really moving now," admits Tassanakajohn (also known as Chef Ton), probably the hottest young Thai chef right now. After finishing a degree in economics — and realising he hated it — he moved to New York in 2008, and found his passion in cooking. He took his degree from the

## STAY

**Anantara Siam Bangkok Hotel** (155 Rajadamri Rd; [www.siam-bangkok.anantara.com](http://www.siam-bangkok.anantara.com)) has gone through change as the Regent and then Four Seasons, but remains a grand central hotel with sprawling garden pool, and is host of the annual food extravaganza, World Gourmet Summit. **Cabochon Hotel** (4/29 Sukhumvit Soi 45; [www.cabochonhotel.com](http://www.cabochonhotel.com)) is seemingly set in a colonial-era mansion, but it's actually a new build, decked in antiques and butterfly collections. The rooftop pool offers a tranquil roost amid soaring high-rises. **Sofitel So** (2 North Sathorn Rd; [www.so-softel-bangkok.com](http://www.so-softel-bangkok.com)) is a buzzy new hotel with great views over Lumpini, often featuring live symphonies and weekend festivals.

famed Culinary Institute of America, worked Michelin-starred restaurants like The Modern and Jean-Georges, then returned to Bangkok, opening his standout Le Du in 2013.

Tassanakajohn serves fresh, sustainable seafood and meat, but opts for bold flavours and exotic pairings, such as octopus with crab mayo and chorizo, as well as traditional Thai treats with a modern twist. His signature dish is a grilled river prawn served with a sauce that references — but isn't quite the usual — Thai curry. His prawn and pork balls come with grated radish and salted fish, but also a surprising scoop of jasmine ice cream.

"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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