

Bangkok's markets

11 Dec 2004 by JR

It was just before noon on a Saturday in the lobby of The Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Bangkok when the shadow of Bob Halliday first fell across me.

It is a substantial shadow. Halliday in physique, girth and animated manner of speech quite closely resembles Britain's Patrick Moore and both share the same passion for their chosen subjects. But while Moore's is for the intangible, planets and galaxies, Halliday's is for the food of south east Asia and Thailand in particular where he has lived since moving here from Washington DC over 30 years ago. For more than 20 years he wrote the restaurant column for the Bangkok Post under the pseudonym Ung Aang Talay or Sea Toad until giving it up a couple of years ago in what seems to have been an unsuccessful attempt to lose weight.

During this period Halliday has also been the first point of reference for any visiting food or restaurant writer keen to understand the rich history and intricacies of Thai cuisine, a role which I, as one grateful beneficiary, hope will one day be recognised by the Thai government.

On our taxi ride through Bangkok's Chinatown, Halliday's enthusiasm for food became increasingly obvious. On the right he pointed to the Hong Kong Noodle House, one of the best in his opinion. Further on he showed me where once had stood an excellent Muslim restaurant which he had obviously visited so often that "the owner's wife always tried to get me interested in one of her daughters". His face darkened only when he caught sight of a particular branch of Kentucky Fried Chicken. "I wish someone would blow that place up," he growled, "The restaurant that was there used to serve the best duck and noodles in town."

Over the next 24 hours I learnt a great deal about Thai food and culture from Halliday and what follows are some more general guidelines. Specific restaurant recommendations will follow next week.

The first is that even middle class and upper middle class Thais care little about any restaurant's décor or ambience. The food is the thing and as a result some of the more authentic places may not suit every Westerner's taste. At one place Halliday sent me for what he accurately described as the "best noodles in town" (and certainly the most expensive at 200 baht or three pounds a plate) there were at one point more dogs ambling through the restaurant than fellow human beings sitting at other tables. The Thai food available at The Oriental, the Four Seasons or the recently opened Erawan Tearoom in the Grand Hyatt will be much safer but these are not the kind of places that Thais go to entertain one another or with their families.

As a result these places are hugely democratic. One restaurant boasted a large blown-up photograph of the owner sitting down next to the Thai Prime Minister while Ban Klang Nam, a popular open air fish restaurant on three pontoons on the river, operates an unwritten policy of keeping the smallest, most intimate of its three piers for any visiting VIP, politician or member of the Thai royal family. Several of the larger restaurants have private rooms upstairs (extremely popular after funerals, I was told) but in Halliday's opinion the food is invariably better on the ground floor.

Outside the hotels little money is spent on interior design. There may be no shortage of Buddhas, family photographs or offerings to anticipated good fortune but most of the best places to eat in are pretty basic. The one exception is a plethora of fairy lights although as Ron Batori, an American wine consultant who has lived in Bangkok for the past 12 years, succinctly summarized it, "sadly there seems no phrase in Thai for 'too many fairy lights'".

That small caveat aside, Thais are particularly discriminating eaters. Thailand remains one of the few countries where frozen food has failed to find a significant market. The frozen food section of Thai supermarkets is restricted predominantly to ice cream and a little frozen meat but frozen meals are anathema with the closest approximation being a ready-made tray of fresh ingredients to be cooked together to produce dinner. Although obesity is sadly on the rise here as elsewhere, it is a tribute to their natural diet that so many Thais eat so often, so quickly and with such enthusiasm and yet remain so thin.

Thais also go about choosing their restaurants differently. Not for them the national theme, perhaps Chinese, Indian, Japanese or, increasingly over the past decade, Italian, but rather which restaurant most skillfully prepares the specific dish they crave. As a result Thai restaurants frequented by Thais tend to be famous for one dish, whether for the best beef balls, the best satay or the best roast duck (and each restaurant may serve as many take away customers as those eating in) with subsequent trips then undertaken to the best place for the unctuous sticky rice to go with their luscious mangoes. The one exception to this rule is the Thai fondness for open air seafood restaurants, ideally along the banks of the Chao Phraya river, where the fish are kept in tanks until they are ordered and consequently can be enjoyed more freshly than at home.

Perhaps the most notable feature of every Thai meal I enjoyed was the speed of service, a tribute not just to the preparation of the ingredients into such small pieces but the heat of the woks that they are cooked in. For Christophe Mengel, the executive chef of the Ritz Carlton, Singapore who has spent 11 years cooking in Asia after a classical training in France, it is this difference of heat, from initially gentle to hot in the West to instantly and blazingly hot in the East, that is the most basic technical divergence between the two cultures.

As I discovered in one restaurant however, the Thais and the French adopt a similar 'buyer beware' approach towards their customers. When we pointed out that our prawns were not as fresh as they should have been there was no question of an apology or a refund – a shrug of the shoulders was all we received. That was however from the manageress rather than the far more attentive but lowly waitress and it was on this occasion that I learnt the correct etiquette on tipping: that whatever is left with the bill will go to the management but whatever is handed directly to the waitress will remain hers. And it will invariably be greeted with an enchanting smile.

If I thought that Halliday seemed a happy fellow talking to restaurateurs and chefs, this was as nothing compared to the expression on his face (and I have to say mine) as we visited the Aw Taw Ka food market the following morning.

This market, just past the city's flower market, close to the..... subway station and opposite the far more renowned Jataujak weekend market which sells everything other than food, is slightly more expensive than others in the city but is still remarkably inexpensive by Western standards. Produce aside, it is further distinguished by its size – big enough but neither too big nor too exhausting in the Bangkok heat – and the natural kindness of those behind the stalls for whom offering a taste of absolutely everything they have to sell seemed to be the reason they are there.

Making up an exceptional array of colours were tiny mouth-sized mangoes, known as transvestite mangoes; horseshoe crabs whose eggs are used in salads; pork with sweet crackling; plump scallops, large river and even larger mantis prawns; and sacks of rice ranging from £6 for 15kg of old rice to half that price for the new season's; and prepared trays of durian, the extremely smelly fruit that is definitely an acquired taste. But in one corner was the stall we found most difficult to walk past. Here, in a large wok, a man was creating the most delicious sweetmeats; bananas coated in sesame and then fried in coconut milk; peanut crackers; and small rice flour rounds filled with coconut cream, palm sugar, diced onions and chives.

The Aw Taw Ka market made me fully appreciate why Halliday has tarried so long in Bangkok.