

Private Lesson

A NIGHT WITH NONG:

A TASTE OF AUTHENTIC

Thai Cooking

By Anne Snape Parsons



As the setting sun cast a golden glow leading straight to my neighbor's elegant Martin's Point home, Nongkran Daks (Nong) and I appeared at the door armed with Thai cooking ingredients and an enthusiastic spirit. Our hostess was attracted to the idea of a combination cooking class and dinner that some local restaurants offer and thought it would be fun to plan a similar event in the privacy and comfort of her own home.

Multi-cultural and multi-lingual, Nong stays close to and delights in her culinary heritage. She grew up in the kitchen and worked in restaurants

**Sya Rong Hai
Crying Tiger**

Sya means tiger, Rong Hai is crying. The story goes that this appetizer was originally very spicy, even tigers cry trying to eat it.

Marinade Ingredients

- 2 lbs. flank steak
- 2 tbs. soy sauce
- 1 tbs. fish sauce
(Nong prefers 3 Crab label brand)
- 1 tbs. oyster sauce
- 1 tsp. chopped garlic
- 1/2 tsp. freshly ground black peppercorn

Dipping Sauce

- 1/2 cup fish sauce
- 1/2 cup lime juice
- 2 tbs. water
- 1 shallot, peeled, thinly sliced
- 1 tbs. roasted rice powder
- 2 tsp. chili powder (or to taste)
- 1 tbs. each, chopped fresh mint, cilantro and green onion



Method

Place the meat in the marinade and refrigerate covered about 4 hours or overnight in the refrigerator. To make rice powder from scratch, roast uncooked rice in a dry pan until golden in color. Then use a food processor or coffee grinder to reduce the rice to a powder. Grill the meat on a hot fire, until just done, about 5 minutes on each side. In the meantime combine all the ingredients for the dipping sauce and set aside.

To present, slice the steak as desired and arrange on small plates with sauce ladled into individual sauce bowls.

**Tom Yam Kung
Spicy Shrimp Lemon Grass Soup**

This is the most popular dish among newcomers to Thai food. You may add sliced fish, squid, and mussels to this hot and sour soup.

Ingredients

- 1/2 lb. raw shrimp, shelled and deveined, shells set aside
- 6 cups water or chicken stock
- 2 cups fresh mushrooms, thinly sliced
- 1 tomato, sliced into 8 pieces lengthwise
- 2 stalks lemon grass, crushed then cut into 2-inch sections
- 3 magrut leaves, torn into small pieces
- 3 coriander roots (also known as cilantro), crushed
- 4 tbs. fish sauce
- 5 tbs. fresh lime or lemon juice
- 2 tbs. Thai hot sauce (Nam Prik Pao)
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 green onion, finely chopped
- 1 sprig cilantro, finely chopped

Method

Simmer the shrimp shells in the 6 cups of water or stock until they turn pink. Strain out and discard shells. Add the lemon grass, coriander roots, and magrut leaves, return to boil and simmer for a while to allow the flavor of the spices to infuse the broth. Add mushrooms and tomato wedges. Add the shrimp last, cook 3 or 4 minutes until shrimp turns pink. Do not overcook. Turn off the heat. Stir in the Thai hot sauce, fish sauce, and lime juice. Ladle into as many as 8 bowls and garnish with green onion, and cilantro leaves.



during her college years in Bangkok where she earned a degree in agricultural economics. An incredible cook and dedicated teacher, Nong is serious about authenticity and has a flair for bringing Asian cuisine to life in its entire unadulterated splendor.

Described by Erin Zimmer of the *Washingtonian* magazine as a “cooking guru and the Thai Rachel Ray,” Nong is originally from Chumphon province in southern Thailand, where sustainable seafood, fresh vegetables and coconuts are plentiful. Not surprisingly, she revels in teaching the secrets of authentic Asian cooking, and she planned to impart that knowledge to the ten friends gathered together for a special evening of learning and dining.



In no time, everyone was engaged in the prep work in the extensively equipped, gourmet kitchen, intent on doing some serious cooking. Adorned in a variety of aprons, some brandishing chopping instruments and others coddling their special cutting knives, these young women (a relative term on the Outer Banks) stopped short as they saw the petite Asian woman with a huge smile on her face. “Ready,” she barked, “okay, let’s start.”

Looking around the kitchen, Nong said, “I’ll share some secrets of my

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dishes, offer some practical tips, and perhaps relate some stories.” Nong is the author of several Asian cookbooks, the owner of a successful restaurant, Thai Basil, in Chantilly, Virginia, and a member of Slow Food and Les Dames d’Escoffier (a society that accepts only women professionals – including chefs, wine experts, food journalists, publicists, cookbook authors and cooking teachers).

If you are lucky enough to take one of

her cooking classes, you will discover the secrets that make her dishes so appealing and, according to a number of reviewers, “the best Pad Thai this side of Bangkok.” As the cooking lessons got underway, Nong explained, “It is the layering of flavors that make Thai food so alluring. What sets this food apart from other cuisines is the fusion of flavours – spicy, sour, sweet, and salty. The menu tonight holds plenty of pleasures, and afterwards, you can share the sensual appeal of Thai food with your partners.”



As Nong passed around the menu with recipes for Golden Cups (small pastry shells filled with ground chicken and



vegetables), Lemon Grass Shrimp Soup, Crying Tiger (a Northeastern recipe of marinated flank steak with fresh lime-



garlic sauce and toasted rice powder), Pad Thai Noodles, and Sticky Rice with Mangoes. The students were thoughtful and serious as they read the evening's script. One student remarked, "It's hard to imagine that we can learn to cook all of these dishes in one evening, but I'm game." "Just remember," Nong replied, "that a major ingredient in a great dinner party is to bring to the table your appetite, your friends, and your conversation."

As the students spooned the filling into the chic little pastry shells, Nong



explained, "My ingredients are as fresh as possible. For example, it is better to grind spices rather than buy them ground - cheaper too! When I was about eight-years-old, I helped my sister-in-law, a caterer, grind spices for parties and, as a university student in Bangkok, I came home on weekends to cook for friends and family. I loved to study food and cook for others, especially after I married Larry, a Peace Corps volunteer, who later became a Foreign Service officer. Our travels took us to Laos, China, Hawaii and Taiwan."

In another nod to Thai tradition, Nong said, "I emphasize time-proven methods in cooking all my dishes." While it was clear that Nong's passion for Thai food obviously sets her apart from others of her ilk, a question was raised, "Remember we live on the Outer Banks and we don't have access to some Asian ingredients, so what do we do?" Nong pointed across the Russian olive hedge to

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my home. "That lady has lemon grass and Thai basil growing in her garden and a large pot with Kaffir Lime leaves on her patio. Other items such as fish sauce, palm sugar, noodles, galangal root, tamarind paste, and so on, you can find at the Asian stores in Virginia Beach and Raleigh, or, you can go online and order them."

She did express a quizzical concern that in Thai cooking, the root of the cilantro plant, when ground is an essential ingredient in many Thai foods, yet it is difficult to find. She uses a mortar and pestle to grind her spices, but said a food processor works well too. The Thai cook wastes nothing. While there are no Asian markets on the Outer Banks, local grocers recognize the growing popularity of Asian inspired meals and are stocking many of the ingredients.

As the party moved into the dining room, Nong smiled with quiet satisfaction as the women supped on the lemon grass soup. The general consensus among the guests was that the complexity and flavor was a combination not present in Americanized Thai food. Nong then demonstrated how to carve roses from tomatoes and use them as decoration with bunches of cilantro for the Crying Tiger steak that they had marinated and cooked on the outdoor grill. The aroma transported everyone back to the kitchen.

The next dish, Pad Thai, was greeted with huge kudos. Nong had earlier shown them how to take some tamarind paste and squeeze it into a cup of water, let it soak, and then put it through a sieve, reserving the liquid. This was one dish where Nong used a number of



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secret methods she shared with the group. Without a doubt, it was voted the "best Pad Thai ever tasted" by the students. Because one of the friends was celebrating her birthday, our hostess had asked for a special dessert. No bazillion calori ed cake here! Nong showed how to pair mango with a sweet, sticky rice – a delicious, and healthy, dessert – presented with a fan of mango slices and mint arranged around the rice. It was a light dessert and a superb finish to an enchanted evening.

Anne Snape Parsons is a co-author of the recently released book, Kitchen Memories, a legacy of family recipes from around the world, which includes a few Outer Bankers. She met Nongkran Daks while she was writing it and now, as friends, Nong enjoys visiting Anne on the Outer Banks. Teaching private lessons here gives Nong an opportunity to share her knowledge in an intimate social setting. More information about Nongkran Daks and her cookbooks is available at www.thaibasilchantly.com. ■