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Spicing Up Your Life

By **Hugh Leong** • May 10, 2011



Spicing up your life Thai-style...

There is a basic difference between the philosophy behind western food and Thai food. Back home, a cook will make a dish the way it “should” be made. One might add to a dish by shaking a bit of salt and maybe a dash of pepper but if you want to insult the cook you can’t do better than dousing it with catsup or some hot sauce. In Thailand, you would be expected to add something.

Most dishes here are made generically, with the idea that each person has a different body chemistry and needs to add sweet, sour, hot, and salt to their own taste. When I first came to Thailand I wrote about my observations in a Bangkok Post article titled “The Noodle Polluters”.

Here’s what I observed: “I once saw a man add five scoops of sugar to his noodles, five scoops of vinegar, five scoops of chilies, and five shakes of fish sauce. When he tasted it I was sure he would have to spit it all out. He thought a second, added another scoop of sugar and a few more shakes of fish sauce and tasted again. I could tell from his facial expression that it was perfect.”

That is why you’ll see a tray of condiments on every restaurant table you’ll visit in Thailand. And of course, along with that comes a whole category of specialized vocabulary.

If your food is จืด /jèut/ (bland, tasteless), then it’s time to reach for that condiment tray.

Condiments...

The word เครื่องปรุงรส /krêuang-bprung-rót/ (condiment) is an example of how Thai words are often quite easy to understand even if you have never heard them before. If you have never heard the English word “condiment” you would only be able to guess what it means through context.

The Thai word เครื่องปรุงรส /krêuang-bprung-rót/ is made up of:

The thing which: เครื่อง /krêuang/ (has many meanings but here it is acting as a helper)

To cook, mix, blend, spice up, add flavor: ปรุง /bprung/

Flavor: รส /rót/

So เครื่องปรุงรส /krêuang-bprung-rót/ or the shorter version เครื่องปรุง /krêuang-bprung/ simply means “that which adds flavor”.

Let’s take a look at that ubiquitous condiment tray. On it you’ll find fish sauce.

Fish sauce: น้ำปลา /nám-bplaa/

น้ำปลา /nám (water) and ปลา /nám-bplaa/ (fish). Fish sauce is used by Thais to add a salty taste just as เกลือ /gleua/ (salt) is used in the west. Salt in the form of salt shakers is not often seen at a Thai table as the humid atmosphere here tends to clump up the salt and make it unshakable.

Sugar: น้ำตาล /nám-dtaan/

Sugar palm: ตาล /dtaan/ (which gives us a little linguistic-history lesson on where the first sugar in Thailand came from).

Chili (pepper): พริก /prík/

What you will usually see on the condiment tray is powdered chili พริกป่น /prík bpòn/. ป่น /bpòn/ is “to ground”. In English we use the word “pepper” to refer to 2 very different things. Thai distinguishes between พริก /prík/ (chili pepper), and พริกไทย /prík-tai/ (black pepper – literally “Thai pepper”). This distinguishing between the two tells us that black pepper is indigenous whereas the chilies that the Thais are so fond of originally came from somewhere else, most likely South America hundreds of years ago. I wonder what the Thai cooks did before chilies were brought here.

Vinegar, usually seen with floating sliced chilies: น้ำส้ม /nám-sôm/

Sour or orange (the fruit and the color): ส้ม /sôm/

น้ำส้ม /nám-sôm/ can also mean orange juice. So be careful when asking the waitress for น้ำส้ม /nám-sôm/. You might be surprised at what she brings you.

And we can never forget MSG. (Aside: When I was traveling in Costa Rica, IMO, the country with the worst tasting food in the world, their condiment tray consisted of shakers of salt, pepper, and MSG – a godsend.)

MSG: ผงชูรส /pǒng-choo-rót/

ผง /pǒng/ (powder) and ชู /choo/ (to boost flavor). Originally, the Thai word for MSG was อาจิโนโมะโตะ /Ajinomoto/ the Japanese brand of MSG still sold here. You can sometimes still hear this word used as a generic term for MSG.

If you want your food without MSG try saying อย่าใส่ผงชูรส /yàa sài pǒng-choo-rót/ “don’t add MSG”. You may or may not get MSG added to your food.

Dipping Sauce...

There are some foods in Thailand (fish, shrimp, chicken, pork, spring rolls, etc.,) that are required to have their own specific dipping sauce. It is brought in a small dish or bowl along with the food. It is more or less an art form to know which sauces go with which dish. What I do is I watch what everyone else does and then do the same, trying not to commit that terrible faux pas of dipping in the wrong dipping sauce.

Dipping sauce: น้ำจิ้ม /nám-jîm/

To dip in, to poke: จิ้ม /jîm/ (ex. someone in the eye)

The word จิ้ม /jîm/ is also part of the Thai word ไม้จิ้มฟัน /mái-jîm-fan/ (toothpick – literally: the wood used to poke at your teeth).

Cultural note...

Many westerners are off-put by the Thai custom of covering their mouth with one hand and using the other to vigorously “poke” at their teeth with a toothpick. No, they are not trying to gross you out. It is considered quite rude in Thai culture to show your teeth why excavating with a toothpick. So, it is completely acceptable, and in fact extra polite, to cover the mouth up and go at it. The Chinese though have no qualms about toothpick use.