

Thai Spas

By Chami Jotisalikorn

Thai spas may be known the world over for their pampering and rejuvenating treatments, but what few people realise is that the feel-good factor of these Thai spa treats comes from their origins as ancient health and beauty therapies in the Thai healing tradition that have been practiced by local people for centuries.

Thai traditional healing is based on the use of herbal remedies and traditional practices such as massage and heat therapies. In olden times, each village had a traditional healer who used a combination of herbal knowledge and shamanism to cure their patients. Traditional healing carried with it elements of spirituality, such as the performance of rites and rituals when picking certain plants and flowers. Traditional practitioners believe that herbal healing is based on the healer's belief in the power of nature and earth, and the ability to harness the power of plants and minerals for energy. The practice of traditional healing was kept within families, and the knowledge was passed down orally from generation to generation, thus certain families in some provinces gained fame for their particular skills.

Like many aspects of Thai culture, certain aspects of traditional Thai healing were brought over in the 2nd and 3rd centuries BC from India with the spread of Buddhism. Buddhist missionary monks brought with them knowledge of ancient Indian healing techniques, which were absorbed by local folk healers. Thus, many people may be surprised to learn that the stretching and twisting poses performed by the masseuse during a traditional Thai massage are derived from the stretching poses of Indian yoga.

Aside from massage, other techniques that migrated from India were the heat-based therapies, such as herbal sauna, herbal steam and heated herbal compresses - techniques originating from the ancient Indian healing practices of Ayurveda. The olden-time practitioners knew that heat applied to body helped relax the muscles as well as prepare the skin for treatment. For example, the use of steam and sauna opens the pores and softens the skin, enabling the skin to easily absorb the therapeutic properties of herbs. While heat acts as the catalyst, the real power of the traditional Thai techniques comes from the curative properties of plants. It was not just the ancient healers, but the local folk who knew that certain herbs, roots and flowers had specific abilities to rejuvenate the body and nourish the skin and hair. The herbs used in Thai health and beauty treatments have beneficial effects on the body both inside and out - for example, the same herbs used in the famous Thai Tom Yum soup are also used as ingredients in typical Thai beauty treatments, and can be easily found in any grocery store.

One of the most effective and versatile of the Thai healing herbs is turmeric, a relative of the ginger family that is used in many Thai curries and beauty treatments as well. Turmeric has anti-bacterial and disinfectant properties that help soothe irritated skin and aid the healing of blemishes and scars.

Kaffir lime, the bumpy green Thai citrus fruit, the leaves of which lend its tangy aroma to Tom Yum Soup, is an age-old beauty remedy used by Thai women through the centuries as a natural beauty remedy to make the hair soft and shiny. Its effectiveness as a beauty treatment is so entrenched in Thai grooming practices that it remains a popular ingredient in modern day Thai shampoos.

Another popular cuisine ingredient that doubles as a common beauty remedy is Tamarind. This curvy brown fruit adds the delicate, sour flavour to Som Tam Papaya Salad, Gaeng Som and some sauces - and it's the high-acid content that made this fruit a cheap and easy skin exfoliator for generations of Thai beauties - long before modern cosmetic companies began marketing AHA exfoliating creams to consumers.

Another kitchen cabinet beautifier is the common papaya. While most people delight in its rich sweet taste, few may realize that a scoop of ripe papaya, mashed to a pulp and used as a face or body mask, will exfoliate and soften the complexion instantly, with its high AHA and high moisture content.

Fragrant Thai Lemongrass, recognized by food buffs as the key ingredient in Thai cuisine, is used by Thais as an aromatic remedy to calm the mind and soothe the senses.

Citronella, a grass-like herb in the same family, has a similar lemony smell that is used as a skin disinfectant and an insect repellent. The luxuriously sweet scent of Thai flowers such as jasmine and ylang ylang have long been used as ingredients in traditional Thai smelling salts for their ability to rejuvenate the senses, and in modern spas their scents are put to use in aromatherapy treatments to calm and de-stress the mind and body.

Aromatherapy may be the buzzword in today's spa treatments, but Thais have long used the healing power of scent to soothe and nurture the mind and body.

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