

# Judging Thai Food to Please Your Palate

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Thai food is becoming more popular every day. Where the choice in most towns was between one Chinese restaurant and one Japanese restaurant, there are now dozens of Asian eateries, including many serving the cuisine of Thailand. If you've eaten in more than one Thai restaurant, you already know the food can vary tremendously. If you'd like to know how to judge the quality and pleasure potential of this wonderful cuisine, read on.

The quick and easy formula for great Thai food is this:

- It looks good: The presentation on the plate is artful, balanced for color and shape.
- It smells good: The aroma created by combining the ingredients of the dish is complex and exciting.
- It tastes good: The flavor is balanced between sweet and salty, hot and pungent.
- It has satisfying texture: None of the ingredients are over- or under-cooked; foods that should be crispy snap, liquids are velvety smooth, and meats and fish are firm and tender.
- It leaves a savory, lingering aftertaste: The way the flavor of well-prepared Thai food lingers pleasantly for up the half-an-hour sets it apart from other cuisines.

I know I am in the presence of exceptional Thai cooking if the minute I see it, I'm drawn to it; the minute I smell it, I'm suddenly starving. The minute I take a bite, the taste jumps out and I am experiencing the indescribable pleasure of harmonious flavor. And then it lingers, a memory of the palate that makes me want more.

In order to rate Thai food, you also need to know a scenario of a complete composition of a Thai meal. Composition in great Thai cooking is aimed at creating a complexity in taste and flavor that blends together within the meal. The aroma, texture, taste and spiciness should compliment each other and create a unique, memorable experience.

The qualities usually at play include:

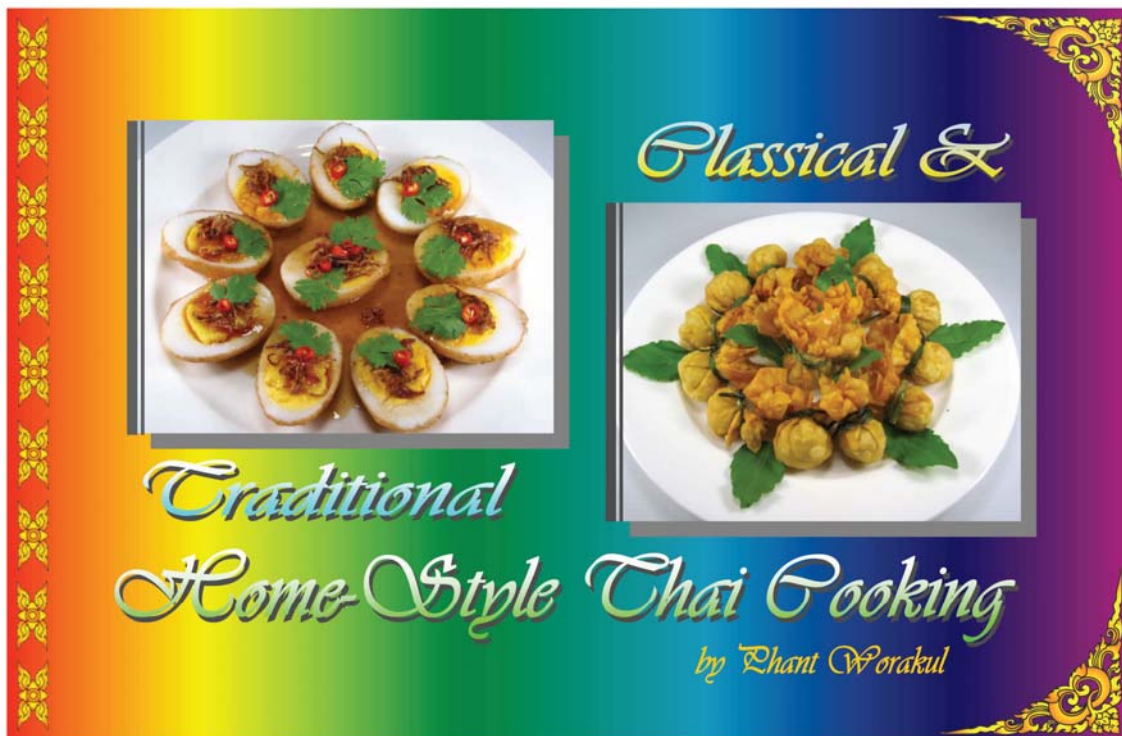
- *Sour*
- *Sweet*
- *Bitter*
- *Salty*
- *Buttery*
- *Linger*

For example to create an aspect of sourness in a dish, the Thai cook will use lime, lemon, tamarind, orange, or rice vinegar. The cook has to know the effect of each ingredient, because in Thai cooking, the business of pairing sweetness and sourness is one of the key factors of success. Where Westerners use salt and pepper as the main spices, Thais use saltiness and sweetness for perfecting taste. Furthermore, Thais combine all the tastes in one meal to create simultaneous and harmonious effects pleasing to your palate.

Thai dishes are unique in texture and flavor. Memorable Thai food consists of both complimentary and contrasting texture and taste. The way you eat it can bring out these qualities and enhance the experience: Follow a bite of curry with something buttery or salty. If you take a bite of salad, the next bite should be a stir-fry dish. This is also an excellent way for you to explore Thai food. The exception to this style of enjoying Thai food is the one-plate meal, like the popular Pad Thai, which stands alone and should not be served with other dishes.

It is worth developing your sensory awareness to recognize exceptional, authentic Thai cuisine. Possessing a great Thai cookbook with lots of background information and instruction is one way to advance your sophistication. Another way to gain knowledge and understanding of this extraordinary cuisine is to have an event catered by an expert.

Thai Essence in Sonoma County, California is happy to offer you both. In California and Thailand, I am known to many as Chef Phant (pronounced “Pon”), and I am available in the greater San Francisco Bay Area to cater large or small meals, with or without an entertaining and informative demonstration and lesson for the participants. I am also pleased to announce the publication of my comprehensive cookbook, *Classical and Traditional Thai Home Cooking*, available in both print and CD versions.



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