

MEMORIES OF THAILAND LAURA KELLEY



17.02.16

Before sunrise, pots bubble on the gas stove of a small family kitchen dimly lit by a few oil lamps. The scent of burning oil, lime, and cumin blend together as a small lizard darts across the floor. Outside, the steady patter of the morning rain is broken by the sound of bare feet softly padding up the damp concrete path. A young, bald man stops at the screen door, adjusts his turmeric-colored robes across his smooth chest, places his palms together in front of him and bows his head in greeting. With a nod from the cook, I bow in return and grab a spoon and a bowl of rice as I walk to the door. As I open the door, the novice monk pulls a large gourd bowl from his side and holds it out. Bit by bit, I carefully place rice into the depths of the bowl, taking pains not to touch the sides of his bowl with my spoon. He watches each passage of the spoon into the bowl carefully to make sure that his bowl remains *pure* and untouched by the spoon. I add some curried vegetables to the rice, and bow when the morning offering is complete. The man murmurs a few blessings for me and my family, then bows and goes on his way.

When I was in high school, I spent several months in Thailand, in a small southern village near Haddyai, Songkla. The home I stayed in had no running water, and no electricity or telephone. Happily off the grid, I learned a great deal about Thai language, customs, and culture; spent some time as a Buddhist nun; chewed bitter betel; and learned how to batik really well. I also learned a lot about Thai home cooking.



A bowl of pat sataw.

Since then, Thai food has become very popular in the west, but I've found, much to my disappointment, that few of my favorite dishes are ever offered on restaurant menus. Where is the *pat sataw* – that fiery, garlic-and-onion-laden stir fry of tree beans? Where is the curried fish for breakfast? And where are the sweet treats made of sticky rice and sliced fruit that are tied up in banana-leaf packages? Also missing is the freshness of the meal ingredients: rice and vegetables from the fields behind the house, and fish from the river running nearby. In my mind, I can still see one of the sarong-clad local men running up a coconut palm to knock a few of the barely ripened seeds to the ground for the women to cook. He crashes a

machete through the green shell and sips the fresh coconut juice inside before he hands me the other half. I bring the coconut-cup to my lips and take a little sip of heaven.

During my sojourn in Thailand, I also spent some time on Phuket and Phang Na, long before they had been developed as resort destinations. Of course there were a few bungalows for rent – but these were occupied by vacationing Thais. For the most part, the west had yet to discover these islands and they were still unspoiled tropical paradises. When I was there, there was little to do except relax in freeform or study at one of the local monasteries. For every Eden, however, there is always a Lilith or a snake, and the waters around these islands were prowled by sharks which often came into the shallows and in some places there were incredibly strong rip tides that could transport swimmers far out to sea. Islanders often spoke about the predatory seas and tallying the ocean-related injuries and deaths was something of a local hobby. In microcosm, the sea held captive the danger that was absent on land, like the sea monsters that lurk just offshore on antique maps.

A decade later, I was working as a research fellow at a hospital on the upper east side of New York City. It was a long way from Phuket. On one of the many Saturdays that I gave over to my project, I was in the lab working. Around lunchtime I went to one of the hole-in-the-wall noodle shops for some mai-fun. It was an ordinary lunch on an ordinary day until I noticed that the woman working the cash register had on a Club Med Phuket t-shirt. I froze, unable to move or speak as I stared at her shirt, aware that my memories of the island, the monks, and the brief life I had known there shattered. I should have known that it was inevitable. That someday the world of the carrot-and-desire would overrun the island despite all of the monk's efforts to stave off the wheel – even if only by prayer. But I was young enough and naïve enough to have thought that since my memories persisted, then so did the Thailand that those memories were made of.

The cashier gave my forearm a shake, and I snapped out of it. I stammered something incomprehensible, paid for my noodles, and stumbled back to my office, unable to eat or work. The ideal forms of my childhood paradise were gone, and all I was left with the basso-continuo hum of the microscopes around me.



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Half a life later, I started writing *The Silk Road Gourmet*. I started writing it to share my knowledge of Asian food and the forces of religion, trade, and politics that had shaped the modern cuisines. But I also started writing it for more personal reasons – to remember who I once was. Sometimes the treadmill of success, marriage, children, and life moves too fast and we can lose sight of things that were once important to us. My need for solitude and contemplation got casually tossed aside when there were babies to feed and deadlines to meet. Remembering Thailand in the course of writing my book, allowed me to recapture pieces of myself that I had lost along the way.

Despite what our senses tell us, life and time are not straight lines. It is possible to go back; to move pieces of ourselves from memory and bring them back into the present. And there is nothing like food to help us remember. The scent of freshly ground curry paste brought back the experience of feeding the monks. Lemongrass, carelessly lounging in the sun on a warm winter's day. The taste of sticky rice and banana let me think of the troop of children who followed me around the family compound all day.

Though the Thailand of my childhood memories is gone, writing has given breath to what had been lost. It has allowed me to reincorporate pieces of that time, and who I was, back into daily life. Without the sadness that often accompanies idyllic memory, I remember wondering at a completely different set of stars in the sky and I remember the midnight songs and the clattering on the tin roofs of the big cats that were twice the size of the emaciated felines we call Siamese in the west. And yes of course, I remember my favorite dish – the *pat sataw*.