

T E S T A M E N T T O G O O D T A S T E

It's safe to say that in many cities, necrological literature – essentially, extended obituaries of the recently deceased – doesn't exactly fly off the shelves. However, for several of Bangkok's top chefs, digging through “funeral memory books” has lent support to the notion that everything old is new again in the Thai kitchen

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“Not many people cook these dishes anymore, so a special feeling comes from their rarity”



Close to the Chao Phraya River in historic Bang Rak district is Bangkok's first thoroughfare, Charoen Krung Road, which was built in 1861. Along it and on nearby narrow streets are some of the Thai capital's oldest eateries.

At Pan Lee Bakery, which dates back to 1955, the founding family's fourth generation makes barbecued pork buns and pandan custard buns based on original family recipes. Down the road at the Muslim Restaurant, the third generation of an Indian Muslim family that moved to Bangkok a century ago serves the same pungent Thai-Indian curries they've been turning out for 70 years. Around the corner, Mr Soong has been selling his version of *khao na phed* (Thai-Chinese roast duck and rice) for more than half a century, while a short stroll away, near Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, customers slurp big bowls of *yen ta fo* (red noodle soup) at a 50-year-old noodle shop.

Heritage cuisine is a mainstay on the streets of Bangkok, served at food stalls and small family-owned eateries where recipes are passed down from one generation to the next. But until recently, it was rare to find heritage dishes at fine-dining restaurants, which tend to serve Thai standards like spring rolls, fish cakes and the ever-popular red and green curries.

Notable exceptions include Australian chef David Thompson's Nahm, which earned the top prize at this year's edition of the Asia's 50 Best Restaurants awards, and Bo.lan, the brainchild of Thai chef Duangporn "Bo" Songvisava and her husband, Australian chef Dylan Jones, which also made the list.

In accordance with Thai tradition, tribute is paid to the recently deceased through the publication of obituary-like

"funeral memory books" that often contain recipes. Such books are the source of many of the recipes used at Nahm and Bo.lan. Thompson, a fluent Thai speaker, has been collecting funeral memory books since moving to Bangkok in the late '80s, finding them largely through booksellers.

Thompson's beef massaman curry at Nahm is from the book of Thanpuuying Plian, the wife of a late 19th-century courtier. He does a duck soup based on a recipe of Jip Bunnag, the granddaughter of Thanpuuying Plian, which dates to around 1920, and a prawn dip of similar vintage. The dip is made with fermented rice, fresh coconut cream and minced prawns, and is eaten with banana blossoms, white turmeric and smoky pork.

Another of Thompson's recipes, for an aromatic chicken curry called *gen gari gai*, is 120 years old. Its source is a courtesan who was also a famous musician, whose book – from 1895 – was among the first ever published in Thailand. The chef believes the recipe could be even older, given the homogeneity of Thai culture at the time.

Thompson says he had been cooking Thai food for more than a decade when he began to question his knowledge of the cuisine that had been a source of fascination for so long. "I knew nothing about its history, its past, how it developed," he says. "Luckily, I met a very old woman who cooked with an inherent skill that helped me to understand how exotic Thai cuisine was."

Of the woman's many recipes, Thompson vividly recalls one for a sour orange curry made with deep-fried fish, shrimp paste and tamarind leaves. "It was a very simple dish but it was beguiling and it made me realise that Thai cuisine was so very



AWARD WINNER
Chef Thompson's dishes won him top honours at Asia's 50 Best

FAMILY RECIPES
 Chef Kittichai
 creates dishes
 inspired by his
 childhood



“It was a very simple dish but it was beguiling and it made me realise that Thai cuisine was so very different to what I understood. The food transformed me...”

different to what I understood. The food transformed me and led me to investigate more.”

It was a challenge to bring the old dishes to life, he says, because the recipes left so much room for interpretation. One that he managed to adapt successfully was for a “jungle curry” made from the meat of a bird that was tough but full-flavoured. “We tried it and it was all right, it had interesting characteristics, but after we added more chillies and shrimp paste, it started to come to life,” he says. “Bit by bit, we moved the dish from the 19th century to 2010.”

Chef Duangporn Songvisava came across her first funeral memory book while conducting research at a university library. Ever since, she’s sought them out at libraries and book fairs. Sometimes, customers give them to her as gifts.

“One recipe, for *geng nok mor*, which translates as ‘the soup outside the pot’ came from an antique cookbook produced by an association of female journalists,” Songvisava says. Another favourite recipe – for a red curry featuring pork and green banana – is about 100 years old and comes from one of Thailand’s first cookbooks. “Not many people cook these dishes anymore,” she says. “So a special feeling comes from their rarity.”

At Issaya Siamese Club, his two-year-old restaurant, chef Ian Kittichai creates dishes based on recipes from his childhood. As a boy, Kittichai rose before dawn to accompany his mother to the market and after school he sold her curries from a food cart. “I cook the way I cook because it’s the way I was taught by my mother and family,” Kittichai says. “I was very close to my mother and she has always been my inspiration.”

Kittichai says that while he does a lot of research and finds ideas everywhere, the past is a particularly useful source of knowledge. “I really appreciate what David and Bo do,” he says. “Thai cuisine is broad and very deep and I think there’s room for all styles of Thai cuisine.”

Also drawing on his family history is Thanaruek “Eh” Laoraowirdoge, owner of stylish shophouse restaurant Supanniga Eating Room in Bangkok’s Thonglor district, whose dishes are based on recipes handed down by his grandmother Somsri Chantra. Born in a small town near the city of Trat on Thailand’s east coast, “Khun Yai” moved inland to the city of Khon Kaen, in the north-eastern region of Isaan, just after the marriage of Eh’s parents. Her recipes reflect the culinary styles of both regions. “Our family had every meal together and my grandma cooked the delicious dishes,” Eh recalls. The family

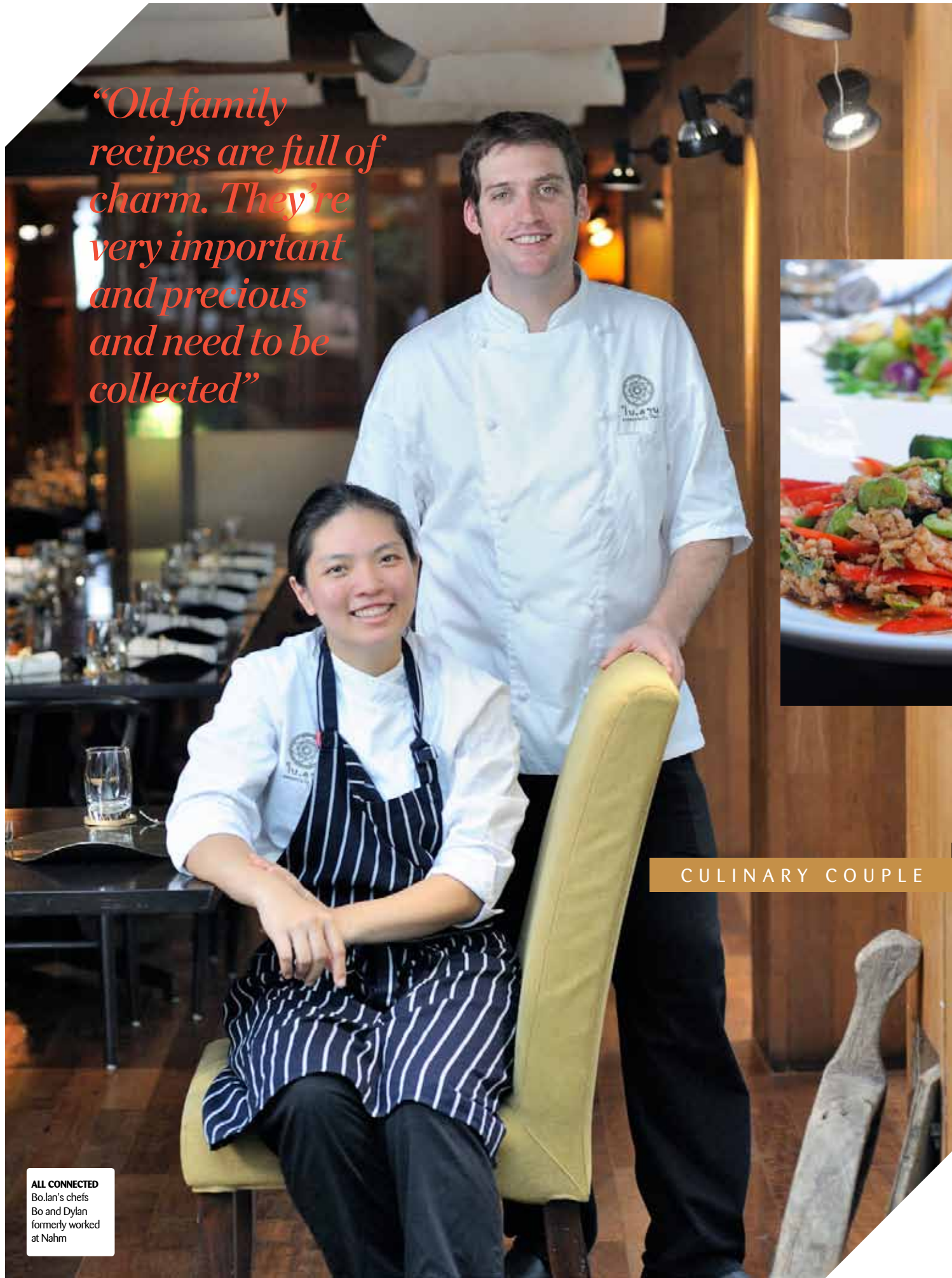


FAMILY RECIPES

Thai funeral memory books

Compiled as a way of honouring the dead and distributed as mementoes at funerals, “funeral memory books” typically include biographies, family photos and details of the dishes that the person liked to cook. Thais of all classes and income levels produce and publish such books with the aim of preserving the spirit of their ancestor and keeping their family’s cultural traditions alive. The books range from rudimentary pamphlets with cardboard covers to properly bound and embossed books. Chef David Thompson, who has an extensive collection of funeral memory books – the oldest of which dates back to the late 1890s – plans to have his collection digitized as part of efforts to set up a culinary archive for chefs and researchers.

“Old family recipes are full of charm. They’re very important and precious and need to be collected”



ALL CONNECTED
Bo,lan's chefs
Bo and Dylan
formerly worked
at Nahm

CULINARY COUPLE



Other
restaurants
to try



STEVE CAFE

A Thai grandma prepares dishes based on old recipes from southern Thailand at son-in-law Steve's riverside eatery.

THE LOCAL

Heritage cookbooks are displayed in a small museum at this restaurant, where the menu includes many dishes based on old family recipes.

THAI LAO YEH

This place offers rare dishes from north and north-east Thailand, as well as Laos, that you're unlikely to find elsewhere.

started to collect their grandmother's recipes two years before she died, helped by a maid and an assistant cook who had lived with the family for 20 years.

Specialities at Supanniga Eating Room include *kaeng moo cha muang* (tender pork meat stewed with Thai herbs and cha muang leaves) and *nam prik khai pu* (a spicy dip of sea water crab roe and crab meat served with fresh vegetables). “Guests love these dishes because the family home dining culture is starting to fade and the dishes remind them of the home-cooked meals they had as children,” Eh says. “Old family recipes are full of charm. They’re very important and precious and need to be collected.”

Down the road at Soul Food Mahanakorn, founder and former food writer Jarrett Wrisley says he first became familiar with many traditional recipes thanks to the restaurant's staff meals, when the chefs would prepare things they'd never consider adding to the menu. While Soul Food Mahanakorn isn't about embracing old-school recipes, the chefs here employ traditional, “slow-food” techniques of the sort that are common in Thai homes. That said, the offerings amount to Thai with a twist.

“We might take a dish such as duck larb, cure the duck and throw it in the smoker before making the dish. Chef

Thompson would never do that, but he forgives us for our sins,” Wrisley says with a laugh, adding that he has enormous respect for what Thompson (and Bo,lan's co-proprietors) have done for the Thai dining scene. “It's hard to underestimate how much David, and Bo and Dylan, have elevated the idea of the Thai restaurant here, and how much they've raised awareness of Thai food as a fine, complex cuisine.”

For them and others at the forefront of the local food scene, building on Thailand's proud culinary history just comes with the territory. “It's special for me because I believe that continuing cooking heritage dishes is the only way to make them last, by passing them on to the next generation,” Bo says. “Otherwise, the possibility of losing them is very high.”

Kittichai has a slightly more optimistic take on the matter. “These recipes live on through Thai cooks and families all over Thailand,” Kittichai says. “It's just the rest of the world wouldn't know about them.”

For Thompson, the older recipes have a dimension, a difference and a distinction that separates them from modern-day dishes. “They have a rich and delicious depth that only something rooted in the past can have,” he says. **15**

Restaurant
details



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LINEAR FORM
WHICH
RESTAURANTS
ARE THESE
FROM



Check out our
destination guide
on page 92
and book
your flights at
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แถบเจริญกรุง ย่านเก่าของกรุงเทพฯมีร้านรวงดั้งเดิมมากมายเหมาะสำหรับผู้ชอบเสาะหา ขอ
งอ่อยๆ เริ่มที่ขนมปังไส้หมูแดงและสังขยาใบเตยจากร้านปั้นสี่เปเกอรี่ ต่อด้วยร้านอาหาร
มุสลิม ที่ขายแกงมากกว่า 40 ปี และข้าวหน้าเป็ดนายสูง
ร้านอาหารเหล่านี้เป็นมรดกสืบทอดสูตรดั้งเดิมจากปู่สู่รุ่น ให้เราได้ลิ้มลอง
ร้านอาหารไทยที่ได้รับการโหวตว่าเป็น 1 ใน 50 ร้านอาหารยอดเยี่ยมของเอเชีย อย่างร้าน
น้ำ ของเชฟเดวิด ทอมป์สัน และร้านโบราณ ของเชฟโบ ดวงพร ก็รวบรวมสะสมสูตรอาหาร
ดั้งเดิม ตั้งแต่สมัยศตวรรษที่ 19 มาให้บริการลูกค้า เชฟเดวิดกล่าวว่าสูตรอาหาร โบราณนั้น
มีความแตกต่าง โดดเด่นและเป็นเอกลักษณ์กว่าอาหารสมัยใหม่ มีความอร่อยและสัมผัส
อาหารรุ่นใหม่ไม่มี เมนูพิเศษที่หาากินยาก อาทิ แล้งว่า ม้าฮ่อ และ แกงนอกหม้อ
ส่วนเชฟเอียน เชฟชื่อดัง เจ้าของร้านอียา สยามมิส คลับ ปูรอาหารจากสูตรของ
ครอบครัว โดยเฉพาะจากคุณแม่ของเขา ผสมกับการสั่งสมความรู้และประสบการณ์ที่หาได้
ทั่วไป เชฟเอียนเชื่อว่าสูตรอาหารนั้นอยู่กับครอบครัวไทยทั่วประเทศ และไม่มีทางสูญหาย
ไป อาหารไทยมีความหลากหลายและสัมผัส
ทำให้สามารถปรุงรสออกมาได้หลากหลายรูปแบบ