



Clockwise from above: durian flesh, to be used in a refreshing salad; The Thai House is the epitome of tranquility; the mortar and pestle is an essential element of Thai cooking; the school's architecture harks back to the temples of Ayutthaya

the thai house, thailand

A world away from bustling Bangkok lies a haven of Thai flavours

WAVES LAP GENTLY at the sides of the longtail boat as the driver submerges the propeller. Bangkok's Chao Phraya is the thoroughfare for a great deal of the city's traffic, and we're using the river for our 25km trip to The Thai House cooking school in Nonthaburi. The 45-minute journey provides a serene and fascinating view of city life away from the gridlocked streets, and as we venture into the smaller *khlong* (canals), the route becomes more domestic and less industrial. The wooden houses – some rustic and dilapidated, others glorious – perch over the water, and splashing children wave as we pass.

Arriving at The Thai House, we are greeted by Khun Pip (in Thai, *khun* is used to denote "friend" or peer) and welcomed to her home. Built from teak in the traditional style of Ayutthaya (the old capital), The Thai House offers accommodation for up to 16 people, set among 2ha of tropical bush. Decorated with traditional Thai silks, the rooms are elegant and simple, but also feature Western amenities. Traditional carvings have been incorporated and the unmistakable winged roofs are inspired by ancient temples.

Downstairs, we're shown the dining room and sheltered patio. We gather in the covered outdoor kitchen, and Pip begins by introducing the many ingredients that typify the fresh, tantalising food that is Thai cuisine. We learn how to prepare chilli, galangal, lemongrass, ginger, kaffir-lime leaves and basil. We're shown the importance of cutting lemongrass in different ways, depending on whether it's to be used as an ingredient or decoration; how to store ginger; we even learn that *mai phet* means "not spicy" and *phet nit nawy* means "a little spicy".

Khun Pip hands out our recipes for the day – the morning session includes spicy tom yum soup, laap muu (pork salad) and pad thai. She guides us through how to use the various cooking implements and wok technique. We marvel at what we've created as the ingredients start to come alive, serve up immediately and enjoy lunch in the lush surrounds of the patio.

We are ready for more advanced dishes now: kaeng kari kai (yellow chicken curry) and pha-naeng neua (coconut beef curry). We pound our own paste for the curry and are thrilled to see a colourful, aromatic mixture appear. Next, we fry up our paste, add the meat, simmer with coconut milk, and another delight appears in the wok.

On longer courses, each day has new menus and includes a trip to the markets. In all our cooking, Pip stresses the two rules for creating great Thai food: keep it simple and keep it fresh.

By the afternoon, a light rain has started to fall as Pip sees us out to the minibus for the trip back into the city. We leave with some great recipes in hand, and a whole new appreciation for this intriguing cuisine.

ROSALYN PAGE

Savoir Faire Reservations, 34 Esther Rd, Mosman, NSW, phone (02) 9960 8781, fax (02) 9960 8782, www.savoirfaire.com.au/tth, offers one-day cooking courses at The Thai House including meals and Bangkok transfers, plus two- and three-day courses that also include accommodation.

The Thai House, 32/4 Moo 8 Tambol, Bangmaung, Ampur, Bangyai, Nonthaburi, Thailand. Bangkok reservations office, phone +66 2 280 0740, fax +66 2 280 0741.

Joanne Lawrence