



thai traveller

David Thompson has devoted his career to bringing the true flavours of Thailand to the world, from Sydney to London and now Bangkok.

RECIPES DAVID THOMPSON WORDS SARAH MACDONALD PHOTOGRAPHY MARK ROPER STYLING KRISTINE DURAN-THIESSEN



guest chef.

Cured kingfish salad (recipe p 115).
Opposite: scallop salad with
grated coconut (recipe p 116)

David Thompson is the first to admit that his life has taken an ironic twist. Today, the Australian chef is regarded worldwide as a master of Thai food, but nearly 30 years ago, when he bit into his first fishcake in a Bondi restaurant, a career built around the nuances of this complex cuisine couldn't have been further from his mind.

"I still remember those fishcakes – they were rubbery and oily and I hated them," David recalls. "Then I tried lemongrass, and it was gritty and fibrous and not quite lemony – I thought it was the most dreadful thing I'd ever tasted."

In 1986, after that rather inauspicious encounter in Curlew Street, David travelled to Thailand, where he met his partner Tanongsak Yordwai and his views on Thai food began to change. "I was beginning to understand that there was more to it than fishcakes and lemongrass," he says. David had been living in Bangkok for a few months and, as he puts it, had only a cursory knowledge of the cuisine. Then Tanongsak introduced him to Sombat Janphetchara (an elderly woman whose mother had trained as a cook in a royal palace). When David tasted her sour orange fish curry, he experienced something of a revelation. "The poised measure with which the dish was seasoned was remarkable," David recounts. "It was my first inkling of how good Thai food could be."



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Over the next six months, David spent countless hours with Sombat, learning how to cook traditional Thai cuisine. It was during this time that he was also introduced to the peculiar custom of memorial books, which are published and given out during a person's cremation ceremony.

"They document a person's life, habits and interests. And for most Thais, that means food," David explains. Since then, David has collected around 600 memorial books, some of which date back 100 years. "Some have only two or three recipes," says David. "But quite a few have 20, 30 or even more." The multi-layered recipes gleaned from Sombat and the memorial books informed David's first book, *Thai Food*, a hefty tome that's regarded by many as the bible of Thai cuisine.

After many years spent honing his craft in Sydney kitchens (most notably at Darley Street Thai and Sailors Thai in The Rocks), David now splits his time between the UK and Thailand. His London restaurant, Nahm, has held a Michelin star since opening in 2001 (the world's first Thai restaurant to claim the honour), and he's set to open a spin-off in the Metropolitan Bangkok hotel mid-next year.

"It'll be more relaxed than Nahm in London, but I think it'll be more exciting because we'll be in situ," David explains. "I'm looking forward to retranslating some of those old recipes with Tanongsak; reviving dishes and throwing them on a plate."

David's hoping that the winners of this year's Appetite for Excellence Awards will be among the first to see the Bangkok eatery, too. He visited Australia in August to play the role of guest judge and mentor, "gossiping like a batty old aunt who's had just a little bit too much sherry" with the talented finalists. Matthew Dempsey, Alice Heath and Danielle Gjestland – winners of Young Chef, Waiter and Restaurateur respectively – will all head to Nahm London as part of their prize, and Bangkok too, if the timing's right. "I want them to see a new restaurant in all its fresh, glorious chaos," David quips.


In the meantime, he's back on our shores to launch his new book *Thai Street Food* (Lantern/Penguin, RRP \$100). "I used to disdain food from the streets – I loved eating it, but would never cook it myself," David explains. "But I'm starting to relax a lot more now."

The new recipes he shares with us here signal a departure from the staggering ingredient lists of *Thai Food*. "They're all pretty straightforward – much simpler than what we'd do at Nahm." The dishes may be more accessible, but the quintessential balance of hot, salty, sweet and sour remains. Take the kingfish salad, for example. "There's the sourness and salt, the fattiness of the fish, the peppery scud chillies, the clean mint flavour and perfume of lemongrass." Try a few of his recipes yourself and who knows, you might even have your own Thai revelation.

guest chef.



Fruit & vegetable salad with tamarind dressing (recipe p 116)



**stir-fried water spinach
with shrimp paste
(pak bung pat gapi)**

Serves 4 as part of a shared meal

- 1 large garlic clove
- 1 long red chilli
- 200g water spinach (see p 118), cleaned,
15cm stem trimmed, cut in 3cm lengths
- 1 tsp Thai shrimp paste (see box p 118)
- 1/4 cup (60ml) sunflower oil
- 2-3 green Thai bird's-eye chillies (scuds,
see p 118, optional), finely chopped
- Steamed rice, to serve (optional)

Using a pestle and mortar, roughly pound the garlic with a pinch of salt. Add the whole red chilli and lightly bruise with the pestle. Toss the garlic mixture with the water spinach in a bowl. Whisk the shrimp paste and 2 tablespoons water together in another bowl until dissolved.

Heat a seasoned wok over high heat and add the oil when smoking. Add the greens and stir-fry for 2-3 minutes, tossing to wilt the greens slightly. Add the shrimp paste mixture and simmer for 1-2 minutes. If you're daring, add the bird's-eye chillies! Moisten with 3-4 tablespoons water and boil for 1-2 minutes. It should taste quite rich and smooth, oily, spicy and salty. Serve with rice, if desired.

**southern coconut
curry of barramundi
(geng gati plaa grapong)**

Serves 4 as part of a shared meal

Store leftover curry paste in a sealed container in the fridge for up to 1 week.

- 1 tsp grated palm sugar*, plus extra pinch
- 1 lemongrass stem, pale part bruised
- 6-8 thin slices galangal*
- 2-3 kaffir lime leaves*,
plus extra thinly shredded to serve
- 200g barramundi fillet (or other white
fish), roughly chopped
- 2 tsp fish sauce, or to taste
- 300ml good-quality coconut cream,
plus extra to serve
- Juice of 1 lime or kaffir lime*
- A few green bird's-eye chillies
(optional, see p 118), bruised

Geng gati curry paste (makes 3 tbs)

- 3 dried long red chillies, seeds removed
- 2 small dried red chillies
- 3 small red chillies
- 1cm piece peeled galangal*, thinly sliced
- 2 tbs finely chopped lemongrass
- 1 garlic clove
- 1cm piece fresh red turmeric*,
peeled, thinly sliced
- 1 tbs wild ginger (see p 118)
- 1 tbs Thai shrimp paste (see p 118)

For the paste, soak dried chillies in water for 10 minutes or until softened slightly. Squeeze to remove excess liquid, then roughly chop chillies. Place soaked chillies in a mortar and pestle with the remaining ingredients and pound to a fine paste. (You can cheat by pureeing in a blender with a little water or stock.) Set paste aside.

Place pinch of palm sugar, lemongrass, galangal, lime leaves, a pinch of salt and 1/2 cup (125ml) water in a pan. Bring to the boil over medium-high heat. Add fish and simmer rapidly for 3-5 minutes, stirring to gently break up the fish, until cooked. Stir in fish sauce and 1 cup (250ml) coconut cream, then simmer for 2-3 minutes.

Work in 1 tbs curry paste, reduce heat to low and simmer for a further 2-3 minutes. Check the seasoning, adding lime juice, a little more palm sugar or fish sauce and



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Southern coconut
curry of barramundi

the remaining coconut cream to taste. Simmer for a further 3-5 minutes until rich, creamy and slightly dry. Remove from heat, cover and set aside to rest for at least 20 minutes to help the flavours develop.

Check seasoning – it should taste hot, salty, rich and creamy with a lingering length of taste. Stir in shredded lime leaves, and chilli if using. Serve garnished with 1 tbs coconut cream and any remaining lime leaves. Serve with rice.

* From Asian food shops (kaffir lime and turmeric also from selected greengrocers).

**cured kingfish salad
(plaa plaa insri)**

Serves 4 as part of a shared meal

- 5-7 green Thai bird's-eye chillies
(scuds, see box, p 118), seeds removed
- Juice of 1 large lime
- 200g sashimi-grade kingfish, thinly sliced

- A dash of fish sauce (optional)
- 2 lemongrass stems, pale inner core
very thinly sliced
- 1 cup mint leaves
- 3 Asian (red) eschalots*, thinly sliced

Soak chillies in water for 2-3 minutes to reduce their intensity. Drain and cover with more water and a pinch of salt. Stand for 5 minutes, then drain well. (When rinsed and salted, use chillies without delay, or they'll soften and oxidize.)

Stir lime juice and a good pinch of salt in a bowl to dissolve. Add fish and use your hands to work the mixture and allow the flavours to penetrate. Set aside for a few minutes to 'cure' it. Splash in fish sauce (not too much), add chillies and remaining ingredients and toss to combine. The salad should be hot, the dressing sour and salty. * Available from Asian food shops and selected greengrocers.

SCALLOPS: ANTIQUE THAI CARVING FROM ORIENT HOUSE. KINGFISH SALAD: CLEAR. LUMEN: TUMBLER FROM COUNTRY ROAD. DRAGONFLY PLATE IN TURQUOISE FROM BY DEB TAYLOR FROM WOODPAPER SILK. VEGETABLE & FRUIT SALAD: AUGUSTA CUTLERY FROM GENEVIEVE LE THU. DINNER PLATE FROM ALL HAND MADE. WATER SPINACH: SOUP PLATE BY PURE FROM CAMBODIA HOUSE. FRENCH METAL TRAY FROM THE BRONTE TRAM; CHOCOLATE DIPPED BREAD PLATE FROM COUNTRY ROAD. STOCKIST DETAILS: P 164

guest chef.

beef stir-fried with oyster sauce, onions and thai basil (neua pat nahm man hoi)

Serves 4

I always season my wok before stir-frying. Heat a wok over high heat until smoking. Wash out, then reheat again with oil. This tempers the wok and helps to give a smoky, slightly metallic tang to the stir-fry.

200g beef rump, thinly sliced across the grain into 5mm-thick slices

Pinch of white pepper

Pinch of white sugar

Pinch of star anise powder

1 tsp good-quality fish sauce

2 tbs oyster sauce

2 garlic cloves

2cm piece of peeled ginger

1 large white onion, cut into thin wedges

2 tbs peanut oil

1 cup Thai basil leaves*

Steamed rice, to serve

Place beef, pepper, sugar, star anise, fish sauce and a pinch of salt in a bowl. Toss to coat, then drizzle with 1 tbs oyster sauce.

Pound garlic, ginger and a pinch of salt to a coarse paste in a mortar and pestle.

Heat a wok over high heat. Add onion and stir-fry for 3-5 minutes until starting to colour and slightly char. Add beef and stir-fry for 1-2 minutes until starting to colour.

Add oil, garlic paste and remaining oyster sauce. Stir-fry for 1-2 minutes. Add basil.

Check seasoning, adding oyster sauce, pepper or sugar to taste. Serve with rice.

* From Asian food shops and greengrocers.

scallop salad with grated coconut (plaa hoi shenn)

Serves 4

10 cleaned scallops

1/2 cup grated fresh coconut

2 lemongrass stems, pale inner core very thinly sliced

3 Asian (red) eschalots*, thinly sliced

1/2 cup mint leaves

3 kaffir lime leaves*, thinly shredded

A few slices of long red chilli, to serve

Steamed rice, to serve (optional)

Dressing

1/2 cup (125ml) good-quality coconut cream

Juice of 2 limes

Pinch of good-quality grated palm sugar*

2-3 red Thai bird's-eye chillies (scuds, see p 118), thinly sliced

2-3 tsp fish sauce, to taste

For dressing, stir coconut cream, lime, sugar, chilli and a pinch of salt in a bowl. Stir in fish sauce, then check seasoning – it should be rich, sour, hot, sweet and salty.

Half-fill a pan with water and a pinch of salt and bring to the boil over high heat. Blanch scallops for 30 seconds until just opaque. Remove and cool briefly, then halve through centre and mix with dressing. Add remaining ingredients, toss gently, and serve garnished with chilli.

* From Asian food shops and greengrocers.

fruit & vegetable salad with tamarind dressing (yam pak)

Serves 4

While not every suggested vegetable is necessary, a good selection gives a rounded balance to the salad.

1-2 rose apples (see p 118), quartered

1-2 wingbeans (see p 118), thinly sliced

2 tbs shredded long-leaf coriander (see p 118)

1/2 small green mango*, peeled, shredded

1/4 cup each mint, dill sprigs & Thai basil*

4 apple eggplants (see p 118), thinly sliced

2 tbs pea eggplants (see p 118), halved

2 mangosteens (see p 118), segmented

1 pomelo segment (see p 118), chopped



Beef stir-fried with oyster sauce, onions and Thai basil

guest chef.



Black sticky rice
with custard apple

Tamarind dressing

1/2 cup tamarind pulp*
4 Asian (red) eschalots*, thinly sliced,
deep-fried (to give 2 tbs, see Note),
plus extra to serve
1 tbs sesame seeds, toasted,
plus extra to serve
1/3 cup grated palm sugar
Light soy sauce, to taste

For the dressing, mash tamarind pulp with 1/4 cup (60ml) water. Strain, reserving liquid. Pound fried eschalot and sesame to a rough paste in a mortar and pestle. Stir in sugar, then 3 tbs of reserved tamarind liquid and a little soy to taste. The dressing should be sweet, sour and very slightly salty. Lighten with 1-2 tbs water.

Combine salad ingredients in a large bowl. Toss gently with dressing. Serve scattered with extra eschalots and seeds.

* From Asian food shops and greengrocers.

Note: You can buy deep-fried eschalots, but they're better if homemade. Half-fill a small pan with oil and heat to 180°C (until a cube of bread turns golden in 30 seconds). Turn heat up slightly and add eschalots, stirring with tongs until they begin to colour. Drain on paper towel. Keep in an airtight container for up to 2 days.

black sticky rice with custard apple (kao niaw dtam noi nar buat chii)

Serves 4

1 cup black sticky rice*, soaked
overnight, rinsed
2 pandanus leaves* (see box,
above right), knotted separately
2 cups (500ml) coconut cream
1 tbs rice flour
1/2 cup (110g) caster sugar
1 large, ripe custard apple, halved

Thai ingredients

You'll find most of these in good Asian food shops or specialist Thai grocers.

- **Bird's-eye chillies** are tiny, intensely hot Thai chillies. (I call them scuds.)
- **Long-leaf (or saw-leaf) coriander** is more pungent than regular coriander.
- **Mangosteen** is a tropical fruit with a thick outer skin and sweet, white segments. Substitute lychees.
- **Pandanus leaves** are used to add flavour and fragrance to desserts.
- **Pomelo** is a large, low-acid citrus fruit. Substitute pink grapefruit.
- **Rose apple** is a small, crunchy, pear-shaped pink fruit. Substitute apple.
- **Thai eggplants (apple and pea)** are small varieties that can be used raw.
- **Thai shrimp paste (gapi)** – ask for one that's rich, aromatic and not too salty.
- **Water spinach (long choy)** is a long-leafed Asian green with hollow stems.
- **Wild ginger (grachai)** is available fresh or pickled (drain and rinse before use).
- **Wingbeans** have flat 'wings' running the length of their pods. Substitute regular green beans.

Place drained rice in a saucepan with 1 pandanus leaf and a large pinch of salt. Add enough water to cover by 1cm. Bring to the boil, then reduce heat to low and simmer for 35-40 minutes, topping up water if necessary, until tender. Drain off most of the excess liquid, leaving a little in with the rice. Set aside to cool slightly.

Meanwhile, combine coconut cream and remaining pandanus leaf in a saucepan and bring to boil over medium heat. Whisk rice flour with 3 tbs water until smooth, then whisk this into the coconut cream and simmer for 2-3 minutes, stirring. Add sugar and a pinch of salt and stir for 3-5 minutes until sugar dissolves. Scoop out and chop custard apple flesh, discarding seeds. Stir into coconut mixture, remove from the heat and stand for a few minutes.

Spoon sticky rice into bowls and top with the custard apple mixture.

* Available from Asian food shops. **d.**