

# T SURVIVING THAI CUISINE

*A Guide to the 37 Most Weird Foods  
Waiting To Surprise You In Thailand:  
From Ant Eggs ... To Water Bags*



Terence Doyle

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Surviving Thai Cuisine

A Guide to the 37 Most Weird Foods Waiting To Surprise You In  
Thailand

From Ant Eggs...To Water Bugs

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## SURVIVING THAI CUISINE

### *WEIRD FOODS WAITING FOR YOU ...*

#### *... FROM ANT EGGS TO WATER BUGS*

Every visitor to Thailand is interested in the country's ubiquitous bug carts. Those cute two wheel trolleys pushed along the night streets by smiling vendors selling – well, selling bugs.

Their usual menu runs the gamut from grasshoppers to scorpions.

But bugs as a gourmet treat are only the most obvious of the many food challenges awaiting unwary visitors. Other surprising ingredients range from dancing shrimp to rats.

Even apparently harmless dishes, like a soup, a salad or a glass of water, can be dangerous for the unsuspecting.

**Surviving Thai Cuisine** will guide you past most of the main culinary minefields. At the same time, it also offers an introduction to Thai food generally and to many other aspects of Thai culture.

## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to saving you from the perils of everyday eating in Thailand by warning you about the many unappetizing ingredients that are liable to end up on your plate if you visit.

It is not meant to dishearten anyone by suggesting that Thai cuisine generally is dangerous. Don't worry. Thailand offers one of the leading cuisines of the world with a profusion of exotic flavors and fragrances in its many complex and exciting recipes.

There are 100s of interesting (and, you may be relieved to know, harmless) Thai dishes – including favourites such as *Pad Thai* (Stir fried rice noodles) and *Gai* (Deep fried chicken) - which, even if they are prepared in a more radical way than in Western lands, are unlikely to challenge any but the most delicate of palates.

In short, it can be a joy to eat in Thailand.

However, the popularity of its best known dishes – especially in their highly sanitized Westernized versions - has led to a dangerous ignorance about the other, less palatable foods that are common in the country.

Be warned: The local menu is a culinary minefield that can leave the unwary dismayed, distorted, discombobulated, distressed.

For there are a lot of dishes in Thailand that feature, one, intimidating ingredients or, two, odd methods of preparation, either of which can pose a serious threat for all but the very bold.

If pressed, Thais themselves will acknowledge the existence of these dishes and that some of their tastes are a bit unusual. Foods that might make even the brave blanche and will surely concern anyone less adventurous who may be confused by what is on offer and worried about eating something dangerous without realizing.

Any country that favors larva, ants, lizards, snakefish,

and stinky fish paste deserves to come with some form of consumption warning.

You may think that you are not in danger because you don't venture very far in the culinary stakes when you are abroad. Alas, this is no guarantee of protection. In Thailand, not only are the food stalls ubiquitous but you may well find yourself invited to a Thai BBQ where you will definitely be confronted with the raw ingredients for you to cook, many of them looking very strange and all without identifying labels.

This can be a problem for anyone who is slightly squeamish at times and prefers to eat familiar things or, if trying new things, at least trying things that it is easy to believe will be good.

Some visitors may also be lulled into taking comfort from the fact that most of the unusual food is served in Issan, in the far North East. Avoid Issan and you will not have a problem. But, in reality, challenging foods can be found throughout the country, so let your defenses down at your peril.

*“Wait a minute. What’s that crawling up the wall over there? A spider or cockroach or hornet or lizard? Looks tasty. Oh, yes, I might just have a bit of that — Yummy. Dead or alive.”*

Yes, the biggest shock for visitors is invariably the Thai appetite for insects, Although these bugs are frequently described as less offensive than they might seem at first glance – they taste “a bit like popcorn”, some clever pundits suggest – they remain a challenge for most newcomers.

But full size insects are perhaps the least of the threats to your dining pleasure, if only because they may be easily identified and avoided (and they are universally regarded as fairly tasteless, so if you happen to swallow a few, the risk of distress is minimal).

Likewise, it can be easy to avoid eating fully formed rats and snakes because they are also instantly recognizable, even if the sight of them hanging up for sale might be off putting.

More subtle, and therefore more worrying, is that these animals and other rodents, when skinned, look much the same

as chicken, and whatever their form, they can all too easily find their way into otherwise harmless looking dishes, like soups.

Perhaps the real dangers come from hidden ingredients, disguised meats, and oddly prepared foods that you can have a tough time detecting or identifying.

Don't expect anyone on the ground to forewarn you about a dicey dish. They are reluctant even to mention if a dish is searingly hot let alone confide that it is made from some strange animal parts or worse. And it is hard to ask! Most visitors have trouble mastering the complicated Thai language well enough to say "*Hello*" let alone some really useful but much more convoluted phrases like: "*Is this meat chicken or rat?*"

In short, dining out in Thailand – anywhere in Thailand, anytime - is always liable to be daunting and never without its perils.

Even meal times can be a problem with various foods that are relatively inoffensive in themselves, perhaps even almost edible, late in the day, being served for breakfast, which makes them weird.

Ditto the Thai practice of serving all dishes – starters, main courses and desserts - lumped together can be a problem.

So if you are a traveler who is sometimes wary of the way your food is prepared (that is, if cleanliness and cooking methods are an issue) and you worry about how your food is treated after it is cooked (perhaps left out in the baking sun all day?) - let alone fret about what ingredients went into it in the first place - read on, for this little book can be a life saver. Literally.

## ANT EGGS - *KAI MOT DAENG*

***Hard To Catch ...***

***... Harder To Avoid Eating***

***Weird Rating: Maximum***

It is universally acknowledged the some foods are more versatile than others and can be enjoyed in many different ways. In Thailand, ant eggs are an excellent example of this admirable versatility.

You may be marveling that anyone would care to eat ants – or ant eggs - at all. But in Thailand they are highly valued as food and regularly consumed in a wide variety of ways: they appear raw or slightly cooked in salads (*Yam Kai Mot Daeng*), in soups (*Kaeng Kai Mot Daeng*) and in omelettes, mixed in with ordinary eggs and vegetables (*Kai Jiow Kai Mot Daeng*) or they can be lightly roasted and salted, then munched on their own as a snack (*Kai Mot Daeng Op*).

There is even a paste of the green weaver ant served as a condiment with curry.

So if a few ants don't wind up on your plate one way, they may well get you another. Nervous diners should watch out for them.

Vigilance requires a sharp eye because the eggs are both easy and difficult to spot. They are usually served in an unappetizing heap, their soft white outer skin enclosing the larvae, making them look deceptively like large grains of overcooked rice or small white beans. A telltale sign is the presence of full grown red ants – the parents – on the plate, either milling about in the heap or inert, having died trying to save their eggs.

For many Westerners, these eggs are as unappetizing to look at as they are to think about. And yet in Thailand they are not only routinely on offer, they are super expensive, mainly because the difficulty in collecting them from their nests means supplies are very limited.

The supply problem begins with a relatively short harvest season, mainly December to January, sometimes stretching into May.

Next and more scary, the melon-sized nests of eggs are made out of leaves and awkwardly hung in trees, where they are staunchly defended by thousands of virulent parents armed with a hearty bite.

Hunters have to manually extract the nests, prompting swarms of red ant attacks, and hurriedly dump the lot into a bucket of water. There the eggs sink to the bottom while the furious adult ants struggle on top, making it relatively easy to separate the two. In some markets, if you are lucky, you can buy the nest intact.

What are they like to eat? How do they taste? The shells are crunchy but the raw larvae themselves soft and juicy, with an appealing creamy or jelly-like texture and a slightly sour / bitter lemony taste.

If it is any comfort to you, note that should you ingest one accidentally, they are apparently full of nutrients.