

Thai Cooking for Beginners

To the untrained eye, it may appear that there isn't a long or strong tradition of vegetarian cooking in Thailand, but appearances can be deceiving. It's safe to say that the majority of Thai food is meat based, most Thai people eat meat, and even within the Thai Theravada Buddhist community, meat is widely consumed.

There are, however, contemporary Thai groups - such as the Buddhist sect Santi Asoke – and individuals who eat and create only Thai vegetarian food, in keeping with their interpretation of the Buddhist precept 'to not kill'. In addition to contemporary influences, digging a little through Asian history reveals a tradition of Thai vegetarian cooking that has embraced diverse culinary influences, complementing the cuisine culture of the vibrant Asian food bowl.

You can easily come up with plenty of different Thai dishes using any old cooktop that you may have in your home. If you don't have one, we'd recommend that you check out a [best cooktop review](#) (click the link) and get one for yourself. They can also help with cooking any other type of food.



Historical Influences in Thai Vegetarian Cooking

While it's valid to note that a significant proportion of mainstream Thai food contains meat, it's also important to recognise that historically meat has not been the dominant force in Thai cooking. Thai's are comparatively light meat eaters, with many traditional Thai dishes including a little meat (primarily fish or seafood bases) or some dishes that include soy products, such as tofu, but no meat.

Using meat sparingly in traditional Thai cooking has most likely resulted from variations in the regional availability of meat and from the historical influences of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism, both of which advocate little or no meat eating.

Vegetarian Cooking in the First Kingdom of Thailand

During the establishing of the first Kingdom of Thailand (1238), Mahayana Buddhist and Hindu followers accounted for the majority, as a result of the Khmer influences that had dominated up until that time. King Ramkhamhaeng himself (the third 'Great King of Thailand') was educated during his formative years at a 'Rishi' school of the Vedic tradition, which favours little or no meat eating.

The 'Rishi' school was located in the former Khmer dominated Kingdom of Lavo, so it's likely that the young king would have grown up in a community where a vegetarian culinary tradition was present. It was however King Ramkhamhaeng who introduced Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) Theravada Buddhism in a successful effort to unify the people of the new kingdom in one religious following.



Theravada Buddhism, when compared with other Buddhist traditions, is more flexible in its interpretation of the Buddhist precept 'to not kill', therefore King Ramkhamhaeng's religious revolution would also have had a strong influence on the kingdoms culinary evolution, resulting in a phasing in of more meat based dishes.

Chinese-Thai Vegetarian Food

In addition to Buddhist and Hindu vegetarian influences, the 'jay' tradition of vegan style cooking was introduced to Thailand in the early 1800's by Taoist Chinese immigrants. Migration from China to Thailand was intense from 17th century onwards, resulting that today Thai's of Chinese decent makeup a large percentage of the population (estimated at 14%). Many Thais and Thais of Chinese decent continue to follow the tradition of eating 'jay' food and consequently there are hundreds of 'jay' restaurants throughout Thailand and an annual countrywide Jay Festival which promotes eating 'jay' food. In addition to Chinese 'pure jay' restaurant, which use no garlic, chilli, onion or meat products, Thai 'jay' restaurants tend to offer a choice of vegetarian food that includes the beloved chilli and flavoursome garlic and onion.

Regional Influences in Thai Vegetarian Cooking

Many wonderful Thai dishes come from Thai regions where meat has traditionally been a rare commodity. Isan - in the north-eastern region of Thailand - has a very hot and dry climate that often causes drought and low crop yield. As a result, meat has often been a luxury commodity. Impoverished of meat, but not ingenuity, the people of Isan have developed a Thai culinary tradition that is distinctly creative, and which includes meat substitutes, created using the high protein soy bean. Fermented soy bean pasted is an example of a widely used ingredient in Isan cooking. Used to substitute central Thailand's more commonly used 'kappee' (shrimp paste), it adds the salty and pungent flavor that typifies north eastern cuisine.

The Future of Thai Vegetarian Cooking

In contrast to mainstream Thai food - which predominantly demonstrates a well-defined and time-honored character - Thai vegetarian food benefits from both historic and contemporary influences that continue to evolve, and from less regimented etiquette that allow this genre of Thai cooking space for creativity and gastronomic evolution. Additionally, with more people in Thailand now choosing to eat vegetarian food for health reasons, the demand for Thai vegetarian food is on the increase. Combine increased demand with the genres openness to global culinary diffusion and Thai vegetarian food starts to look like a distinct culinary culture with a very flavorsome future.

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