

A Thai village with a passion for food

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Two stalls by the estuary in a fishing village just to the north of Cha-Am in Thailand will delight any chef or seafood lover. Behind the first sat a woman swinging her axe at a mound of oysters. Once the shells had been prised apart, she used a small knife to remove the meat, which was then placed in a plastic bag filled with water. A bag of 20 oysters costs the equivalent of less than £1.

The women and children behind the next stall responded to my order for blue swimmer crabs by running to the narrow bridge and hauling them up in buckets from the water, each crab's claws carefully contained by an elastic band. These cost £5 a kilo, although for an extra 50p someone would carry them to a stall directly opposite to have them steamed.

Cha-Am, with its long beaches, is only a two-and-a-half-hour drive south-west from Bangkok, on the Gulf of Thailand. As a result, many living in the capital have holiday homes there. While the town has less in the way of shopping and nightlife than other resorts, it more than makes up for it by giving full vent to the Thai passion for food.

This was evident on my visit to the town's night market, which is one of the biggest in the country and caters almost exclusively to the local population. The stalls selling cheap clothes, mobile phone covers and toys seem to be far outnumbered by those selling all types of food – some I simply did not recognise, as well as some particularly garish sweetmeats.

The full bounty of what is available locally only really became obvious the next morning, however, when I followed the chef Thanunya Kaikaew into the town's large food market.

Kaikaew, 37, told me she had been cooking since the age of seven, her obvious passion enhanced by an apprenticeship at the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok, before she took up her current position as Thai executive chef at the smart, very modern Alila Hotel just outside Cha-Am. She was to give me my first lesson in Thai cooking that morning.

Our first stop was the fish stands at the back of the market where we bought half a dozen seawater prawns, whose size surprised Kaikaew and would have shocked any European chef. They were vast, the size of my forearm, and immediately dictated a change in the menu. Instead of pad thai, the national dish of noodles, diced prawns and peanuts, these monsters would now be grilled and served with a tamarind sauce. Into her shopping bag also went a sea bass, clams and scallops. The latter, topped with diced ginger and soy sauce, would be cooked for precisely two and a half minutes in the hotel's pizza oven.



Eggs Benedict and Patata Salata (below) at the Alila Hotel, Cha-Am

Next to the prawns were two local specialities. Stingray, which I said I would pass on, and horseshoe crab, gunmetal in colour, which is grilled to release the eggs that lie under the shell. The crab would later be served with a sauce of chillies, green mango, sugar, lemon juice and Chinese celery and, although it delighted the local chefs back in the hotel kitchen, it is not a dish I would order again. All texture and not enough flavour.

But it was the next stands – where we spent far less money – that were, for their colour and sheer vitality, even more exciting. These were the ones piled high with wild ginger; Thai basil, a local basil with a strong verbena aroma; mounds of mint; small, green Thai aubergine; green papaya and green mango; coriander, the root of which is common to many Thai dishes; powerful dill; limes, and morning glory, the wonderfully invigorating green vegetable of south-east Asia.

Back in the kitchen, I began by shelling the prawns, removing the central vein and then cleaning all the scallops and clams. I watched with admiration as Kaikaew elegantly removed the entire bone structure of the sea bass before stuffing the fish with long, thin slices of ginger and coriander and then pouring chicken stock, white pepper, soy and oyster sauce over it. It would be steamed for 15 minutes.

I then turned vegetable chef, dicing shallots, ginger, coriander and squeezing the limes before the fun started: my 15 minutes of fame as a wok chef.

This stint included making a tamarind sauce with tamarind-infused water, palm sugar, ginger and fish sauce; stir-frying the medium-sized prawns with chopped garlic and soy; turning the wok up to cook the clams with lemon basil, oyster sauce, chilli paste and chicken stock; and, in a pan, I made a local soup with the smallest prawns, diced Thai aubergine and wild ginger, shallots and shrimp paste – all ground together in a pestle and mortar – and very hot stock.

For the morning glory, which had seemed the simplest dish, I had to make way for an expert because this necessitates turning the wok to its highest heat. Into my place stepped a female chef. It took her 90 seconds to transform the stems of this vegetable, also known as Siamese watercress and water spinach, into a delicious dish with the addition of chillies, garlic and soya bean paste. It took me about the same time to eat it.

