

Dining in Phuket, the fabulous four

Thailand is renowned for its fresh-tasting food with a somewhat fierce kick. The southern regions of Thailand boast sharp and spicy food heavily influenced by neighbouring countries Indonesia and Malaysia. Persian, Arabian and Portuguese traders also brought spices, recipes and cooking techniques and added them into the eccentric mix of multifarious cuisine. Old Town Phuket is already known for its eclectic art scene; the food movement is quickly following suit, placing the colourful Sino-Portuguese community firmly on the map.

The joy of sharing food underpins family life. Thai families are very traditional and centred around food. You'll notice a significant amount of markets, stalls, and carts dotted throughout the bustling streets, not to mention the extraordinary collection of restaurants with diverse menus, thought-provoking ingredients and a provocative fusion of flavours. Chefs from around the world enthusiastically use tamarind, lemongrass, galangal, prik kaleang chilli and kaffir lime in their dishes.

Breakfast, like the rest of the world, is the most important meal of the day. Phuketians wake up to coffee brewed with gloriously strong, bitter beans that are strong enough to raise the rafters and served with sweetened condensed or fresh milk. Breakfast food is influenced by Chinese immigrants and consists of Dim sum, steamed dumplings, fish, bean curd, pork spare rib soup (Bak Kut The) and salted misua noodles. Malay inspired dishes including roti topped with a fried egg and served with chicken, fish or beef curry.

Lunch is really a noodle fix with Chinese and Malay Mee Hokkien, a dish made with thick yellow noodles braised in a dark soy sauce with fish cakes, pork, squid and cubes of pork fat fried until it's crispy, or Mee Hoon rice vermicelli noodles which are otherwise known as Singapore Noodles. No lunch is complete without O-Aew, shaved ice with various sweet toppings and jelly.

A hearty and flavoursome dinner brings families and friends together to discuss their day. Southern food is strong in flavour and colour; turmeric produces a rich golden hue and a playful taste that plays an integral part in spicy, sour or sweet dishes. One of Phuket's favourite dishes is the south's famed Mee Hun Kaeng Poo, a deliciously creamy curried crab with little nests of noodles, Nam Phrik Kung Siap, a favourite shrimp dish with chilli paste and Pla Sai Thot Kamin, scrumptious deep-fried fish with fresh turmeric.

One Chun Café and Restaurant in Phuket Old Town is often applauded as one of the best local restaurants in Phuket. The restaurant takes over a traditional brick house fantastically decorated with vintage clocks, radios, televisions, an old cinema projector and other cool retro paraphernalia. The menu is extensive and includes some southern Thailand favourites, including Khanom Jeen Kang Poo, a divine yellow curry made with coconut, flakes of soft, fresh crab and heaps of Thai basil, served with crunchy vegetables and Khanom Jeen, whorls of sticky noodles.

Day and Night is another glorious restaurant in the heart of Old Town, the artsy-quarter of Phuket. It has a slightly industrial feel with its warehouse design, high ceilings, polished concrete

walls, cleverly mismatched furniture, and contemporary metal lighting. Moveable step ladders allow mixologists to retrieve your favourite spirits from high up shelves for moreish cocktails. The food is a smorgasbord of international and local cuisine that's served on gorgeous crockery and slate. You can have everything from Spicy Crispy Vongole Pasta with Hokkaido Scallop, crispy wafer-thin homemade pizza, al dente Truffle Alfredo or piquant Fried Chilli with Sea Bass. The clever interiors seamlessly take you from cosy inside dining to lavish alfresco seating for balmy evenings.

If you are into steampunk, chainmail and rustic interior design, Dibuka is the place for you. This energetic restaurant is set in a mining-style building (Phuket is famous for its tin mining). Oversized tables accommodate various groups of diners for a communal dining experience. Toe-tapping live music is played regularly, so be sure to reserve in advance. The extensive menu is packed with a fusion of southern Thai cuisine, and the offerings include their favourite Tom Yam Seafood pizza.

For those that are more traditional, Tu Kab Kaow is located in a grand Sino-Portuguese building. It has an almost royal atmosphere with deep velvet sofas and comfortable freshly plumped cushions, gracefully arched doors and thick draped curtains. The walls are lined with old photographs that pay homage to the royal family. The menu is created by passionate owner Khun Linchii and happily nods to traditional southern Thai cuisine.

Arrive a little early and explore the vibrant streets of Old Town Phuket. The centre is relatively small so that you won't get [too] lost. Take time to wander down the higgledy-piggledy maze of highly-graffitied narrow lanes and pose with cartoon hawkers, birds, a crazed rabbit and even a pineapple.