

## Thai Food Takeover

*How food from the land of Siam became an American mainstream*

The first time I came across Thai food in mainstream western media was when I saw *Spider-Man: Homecoming* a month before my move to the United States. Peter and Aunt May went out for Thai food where they were served *laab* (a sour/salty/spicy salad) and sticky rice pudding. Even though the pronunciation for *laab* was butchered and the characters ate it with chopsticks instead of a spoon and fork, the scene got me thinking about Thai food in America. Thai cuisine must be significantly popular if dishes casually appear in a Marvel movie. And if westerners were enjoying *laab*, then the common Thai perception of foreigners being unable to handle fish sauce and spiciness, is at least partially incorrect. It seemed there would be tastes of home waiting for me when I went off to college.

The following four years in Atlanta only further cemented my perception of Thai food's popularity. Almost all of my friends have had previous experience with Thai food before college. Whenever an Uber driver found out I was Thai, the surefire follow-up sentence was "I love Thai food!" Thai restaurants were everywhere, with my go-to even being one a mile uphill from Emory's campus. Some tasted better than others, some had menus resembling childhood school lunches, some were upscale. For a city with a [Thai population of 4,000](#), there were so many more restaurants than I expected. I started to wonder how Thai food became so popular.

Compared to Chinese, Japanese, and Korean foods that have been in the States since the end of WWII and were completely established by the 1950s, Thai cuisine had a later start. Thai food first came to the States towards the end of the Vietnam War, during which Thailand was an ally. US military forces occupied Thai Air Force bases. Soldiers, journalists, diplomats would spend their off time exploring the nearby towns and cities. When those Americans returned, [they brought Thai food to suburban homes](#). The cuisine manifested itself as home recipes and cookbooks. In these early days, Thai food had the notion of [being exotic and less political](#) (compared to Chinese food) due to Thailand and the States having positive political ties.

The first Thai restaurants would come around the 1970s when Thai students studied abroad in the States. [Restaurants were opened by Thai students](#) for themselves, with more restaurants appearing in cities where students accumulated. Unfortunately, authenticity was often difficult to achieve because many traditional Thai ingredients, including kaffir lime leaves and fish sauce, were difficult to come by, leading to well-intentioned but ultimately strange-tasting substitutions. Instead of tamarind, chefs would have to use a [mixture of sugar, vinegar, and ketchup](#). The game changer was the opening of Bangkok Market in Los Angeles. This Thai grocery store supplied common ingredients for Southeast Asian foods and also imported Thai products.

[Los Angeles](#) is the US city with the highest population of Thai immigrants, consequently making it the heart of the Thai food scene in North America. In the 80s, Thai cuisine's close proximity to Hollywood meant it was only a matter of time before celebrities joined the trend. [Prince seemed to have enjoyed Thai cuisine](#), while Madonna supposedly frequented the [Siamese Princess so often that she had her own booth](#). With celebrity visits comes publicity, and a "cool" factor of

eating the same cuisine as superstars. By the 1990s, Thai food was a big hit, with the [States alone having 500 Thai restaurants](#). The popularity of Thai food abroad was growing, and the Thai government noticed.

The Global Thai Restaurant Company was established in 2001 and the Global Thai campaign launched in 2002, both founded and funded by the Thai government. Its plan: to increase the number of Thai restaurants around the world which would boost the Thai economy and encourage tourism by introducing foreigners to Thai cuisine. The food marketing angle would also help Thailand move away from its reputation for sex and pleasure. This approach of using food to promote cultural understanding and forge political connections has now been coined [“gastrodiplomacy.”](#)

The strategy for Global Thai was to open 3,000 new Thai restaurants abroad, including 1,000 in the States, to attempt to build the “McDonald’s of Thai food.” The restaurants were meant to be a chain of consistent, government-approved Thai cuisine. The following year, the Thai government also launched The Kitchen of the World campaign. Similar to Global Thai, The Kitchen of the World campaign also involved opening more Thai restaurants abroad, but the goal was to bolster the demand for Thai agricultural products. By 2004, the Kitchen of the World campaign had a 500 million Baht (roughly \$15 million) budget.

The Ministries of Commerce, Labor, Foreign Exports, and even Public Health were all involved in implementing the gastrodiplomacy strategy. Government officials trained Thai chefs and helped them go abroad, facilitated the import of Thai products at locations, and gave out financial loans. Immigration arrangements were also made to facilitate Thai chefs’ work in other countries, such as [New Zealand’s Thai Chef visa](#). There was a government seal of approval called “Thai Select” that was established and given to restaurants for excellent authenticity, decoration, and service. Thai food was a brand and the government was marketing it at full strength.

And it worked. While a McDonald’s-style standardized chain never came through, the number of Thai restaurants overseas exploded, from 5,500 Thai restaurants abroad in 2001, [to around 7,000 in 2003, to over 20,000 restaurants today](#). Thai populations in the U.S. have doubled in the past 15 years and they have 5,500 Thai restaurants to choose from. The cuisine growth could indirectly have given [Bangkok’s status as the world’s most visited city](#). In one way or another, the promotion campaign was a success. Inspired, [South Korea, Peru, Taiwan, Malaysia, and even the U.S.](#) now have campaigns working in gastrodiplomacy.

With so many restaurants all over the world, and some being worse in taste than others, there was some concern that the Thai food brand would be tarnished. The Thai Delicious Committee works to remedy the issue by [producing standardized Thai recipes](#). One of their efforts made news in 2014, with the invention of E-delicious, a robot that would taste test dishes from Thai restaurants abroad and score them. The project is completely government funded and was meant to uphold a consistent standard of what should be considered Thai food. News on the E-

delicious robot has since been quiet, so who knows what that technological tongue has been judging.

Thai food in the United States is still going strong, and recent trends capture a growing variety. Some restaurants are aiming to be more specific with their menus, such as focusing particularly on cuisine from the northeast *Isaan* region or on Thai seafood. Today, *Food Network* and *Cutthroat Kitchen*'s celebrity [Thai chef Jet Tila spearheads the spread of Thai food](#) in the States with the online series "Thai Food at Home with Jet Tila" produced by the Thai Trade Center in Los Angeles. The series has grown popular during the pandemic and has over 12 million viewers.

As a Thai, food has always been a cultural point of pride. I enjoyed bragging about Thai food: how it's delicious and fresh and boasts so many strong flavors. Even if there was a wave of government-supported restaurants in the early 2000s, it doesn't change that food is a way to connect peoples and cultures. I've produced so many fond memories with my closest friends just hanging out at Thai restaurants or trying to cook Thai dishes in our college apartment. So I still walk into restaurants to order *gai tod* (Thai fried chicken) and *som tum* (papaya salad), knowing that food is what brings people together, and that Thai food in the States is here to stay.

#### **Hungry to learn more about Thai food and gastrodiplomacy?**

- [NPR | Gastrodiplomacy: Cooking Up a Tasty Lesson in War and Peace](#)
- [Food Theory | The Undercover Mission of Thai Food! \(video\)](#)
- [The Splendid Table | How Thai Food Took Over America \(audio + transcription\)](#)
- [KCET | The Decades-Long Evolution of Thai Cuisine in Los Angeles](#)
- [USC Center on Public Diplomacy | Eight Great Gastrodiplomacy Nations](#)
- [Mark Padoongpatt | \*Flavors of Empire: Food and the Making of Thai America\* \(book\)](#)