

A Tasty Thai-American Dream

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Opening a Thai restaurant is a gateway into the United States for many Thais, but it's not every day that a single restaurant grows into a local chain. So when I heard that Aloy Thai was expanding its Denver presence, I wanted to know what the secret ingredients were.

I first discovered Aloy Thai seven months ago during my campus visit to the University of Colorado Boulder. Fearing homesickness, I had to make sure there was a nearby restaurant that could give me a taste of Bangkok before I committed to a school for my graduate studies. I googled “Best Thai Food in Boulder” and came across Aloy Thai.

On my first visit I ordered their Thai BBQ Chicken and was surprised to find it accompanied by a specific sauce. “Jaew” is made from tamarind, fish sauce, sugar, and garnished with toasted rice powder, chili, and cilantro. The result is a sharp sauce that is spicy, sour, and salty all at once. This sauce is commonly found in northeastern Thai food, but not often served in American Thai restaurants.

That tiny sauce dish became the most important thing to me in the restaurant. It was a testament to the restaurant's commitment to authentic Thai tastes, to still serve something many Americans won't know and perhaps won't even try.

Now, with Aloy Thai trying out a new business concept in Denver, I put on my reporter hat and took a trip to the Capitol Hill neighborhood.

My visit to the still-under-construction Aloy Thai Eatery was on a late October afternoon. Flanked by a bar and grill on the left and a taco restaurant on the right, the space was occupied by a pair of mechanics who let me meander inside. Accent walls were painted in the bold orange of the heart of a ripe papaya. On the brand-new glass door were the words “Aloy Thai Eatery,” with the O in “Aloy” being replaced with a juicy tomato.

Boulderites and Denverites alike might recognize the name. The small-scale Thai food chain began as a single restaurant in Boulder (the one I visited first) in 2006. A second restaurant, Aloy Modern Thai, opened in 2016 in Denver near Union Station. Heralded by Khun Sorawee “Kim” Nakapadungsuk and her two daughters, Aloy Thai has become a local favorite for Thai food.

This third Aloy Thai restaurant was originally supposed to open in June, but construction and inspection delays kept pushing back the grand opening. Now, the restaurant is slated to open mid-December.

To celebrate a new milestone in the Aloy Thai story, we wind the clock back seventeen years, back to when Khun Kim made that life-changing decision on the other side of the Pacific Ocean.

From Bangkok to Boulder

Khun Kim (“Khun” is a Thai honorific) was part of the large Naka family. Over the years, the root Chinese name of Naka had to be lengthened to fit with Thai naming laws. The family lived in the Yowarat area of Bangkok, known for its dense maze of shops and Bangkok’s Chinatown. One day in 2005, she received a call from an acquaintance proposing that they leave Bangkok behind for the United States to start a Thai restaurant.

“I thought ‘Alright, it was worth a shot, it sounds good, let’s try it.’ I also wanted to create new paths for my daughters,” said Khun Kim.

Besides, a large family already accustomed her to preparing meals for large groups. She decided to join the joint venture. After touring a couple of American cities in 2005, Boulder was chosen to be the base of operations.

The largest Thai diaspora populations are in California and New York, with Los Angeles having the only “Thai Town” in the world and the largest Thai population outside Thailand. So one might not expect Boulder, Colorado to be a surprisingly good place for a Thai restaurant. A large college campus meant a continuous stream of potential customers, and potential Thai international students. With Boulder being the gateway to the Rocky Mountains, the natural landscape pulls in tourists from all across the United States. And Boulder has one more characteristic that not only makes opening a restaurant, but a Thai restaurant, a great business idea.

A walk along the Pearl Street Mall is revealing: stores where Buddha figures line display shelves, meditation and psychic businesses with open doors, and a clothing shop that sells elephant pants. While a lot of mindfulness concepts and elephant symbols are also deeply connected to Hinduism and India, it’s clear that Boulder also has a fascination with Buddhism, and by extension, the countries associated with it—Thailand included.

Dr Lauren Collins, a professor at CU Boulder’s Center for Asian Studies, has a theory to potentially explain one of the factors for this cultural interest. During the Cold War, the United States was partly focused on freeing Tibet (a dominantly Buddhist region) from the grip of Communist China. As part of this goal, the CIA ran Tibet Freedom Fighter training camps in the Rocky Mountains in hopes that the terrain would mimic the Himalayas. The mission would be promoted in regional towns. Coupled with growing immigration from South and Southeast Asia along the west coast, Boulder became drawn to the cultures of the Tibetan area and Buddhism.

“But I think Americans and people in Boulder don’t necessarily understand the nuances of differences between Buddhist practices,” Collins said. And she would be right. In Boulder, it’s hard to tell that Tibetan Buddhism and Thai Theravada Buddhism are two very different forms of the religion. Still, the connection was there. And for an entrepreneur, that association was a draw for customers.

“A lot of people in Boulder have been to Thailand,” said Khun Kim. “Some of them even eat spicier than Thais.” Today, Aloy Thai goes through 30 pounds of the extremely spicy bird’s eye chili every week.

How to Prepare a Restaurant

Khun Kim’s long stay in the states to the U.S. began in February 2006. She had arrived on a tourist visa with two of her daughters; the elder daughter, Arisa, was around 23 for the move, and was hoping to help her mother with their entrepreneurial opportunities. Khun Kim's third daughter decided to stay in Bangkok. The acquaintance who proposed the restaurant, who Khun Kim asked not to be identified by name, would help cover opening costs and getting the business off the ground.

The family’s joint venture quickly turned into a solo venture. Khun Kim and her daughters were left with little to no assistance from their supposed partner. The Naka family found a lawyer to help guide them through the immigration process, but the lawyer became difficult to afford when their "partner" began to use up consultation hours for a personal business. At the very least, the family managed to switch from a tourist visa to the [E-2 visa](#), which allows nonimmigrants to enter the United States if they are investing a substantial amount of capital in a U.S. business.

Khun Kim struggled to understand English when she arrived. Thankfully, Khun Arisa, the elder daughter, was much more fluent and would help her mother translate. But when it came to finding a place to stay, without a Social Security number, apartments were unwilling to let the family rent. So Khun Kim and her daughters went to Housing Helpers. Because they currently had no assets in the United States, they managed to procure a low-income apartment with two bedrooms and two bathrooms. Khun Kim bought a pillow and a blanket, and the family slept on the floor.

The family pulled in some savings from Thailand to purchase a laptop and a printer. "This entire business," said Khun Kim with reserved pride, "was built on one computer and one printer."

But there was another problem. "We knew absolutely nothing about this country."

With that one little Dell laptop, the family would walk a creek beside Boulder Library to catch the Internet for restaurant research. Once again, the lack of a Social Security number prevented the family from obtaining Wi-Fi or a car. Most of the research was done by Khun Arisa.

Khun Kim meanwhile, was learning how to handle food. Unprepared for all the details required to pass a U.S. health inspection without fines, she had to go to special training at the health department. She remembered being exasperated with all the standards.

"In Thailand, we leave eggs out on market stalls all the time! Here, the health inspector comes, they poke the egg, and if it's higher than 41°F, then, you're fined."

Accumulating small fines would be too high a price to for the restaurant to pay. So Khun Kim learned to keep eggs and all produce under 41°F. She learned to prep meat and vegetables

completely separately. She learned to split her large curry pot into smaller pots, and to put those pots in vats of ice mixed with water, and how to stir the curry so it would cool evenly.

Today, Aloy Thai has a perfect health inspection score. In contrast, Thai street food vendors, while delicious, do not adhere to any sort of sanitary code. Meat left out for hours, ice that's touched who-knows-what, and handwashing or cleaning of cooking equipment as frequent as the chef desires. As a result, many western tourists who decide to eat from may find themselves spending more time than they expected in the bathroom. The bacteria come as a gastrointestinal shock to my tourists.

Unfortunately, Khun Kim is finding herself in the same boat. Whenever she returns to Thailand (which isn't often because the E-2 visa discontinues when she leaves), she has to be careful with street food.

"I now can get food poisoning every day. What happened! I used to live in Sampeng, I've eaten at roadside stalls! I've never had this problem! But because I've been here, it's too clean. When you're gone for so long, your body forgets."

The Ingredients

Aloy Thai first opened its doors on Sept. 27, 2006. The restaurant actually didn't open with that name, but rather "Chy Thai." But after finally fully cutting ties with their dubious partner around 2010, the family decided to rebrand the restaurant. "Aloy" was derived from the Thai word "aroi," meaning "delicious." The Thai word itself ("อร่อย") is displayed in beautiful, golden curling letters in the dining room's main wall.

As Aloy Thai celebrates its 16th anniversary, reflection reveals the different factors that helped the restaurant get through the 2008 recession, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent labor shortages and inflation.

"We've had incredible support from local customers," said Khun Tess Portfolio, Aloy Thai's general manager for the past five years. Her words ring true throughout Aloy Thai's history.

During the first week of opening, an early review of the restaurant caused an outpour of first customers. There was such a crowd that one of the chefs broke down crying. Today, the wall next to the receptionist's desk are framed certificate for the "Best of Boulder" awards, which the restaurant has won for three years straight.

There is also an autographed photo of Guy Fieri, who praised the restaurant and featured it on the Food Network. On its front door, the Aloy Thai Eater now features a large sticker next to its door saying, "Featured on Food Network." It's a badge of honor worthy of showing off. Fieri's reputation continues to give the restaurant a certain prestige.

But there were lots of steps the Aloy Thai family took to give them greater chances at success. Khun Kim had a commitment to serving high quality food. Coupled with Boulder's love for

healthy food and vegetarianism, she did her best to accommodate the customers. The chicken and beef are free-range, the pork hormone-free, and almost every dish has a tofu substitute. Other ingredients were organic when financially feasible.

Traditional Thai recipes also had to be modified to fit the new market. The Thai basil stir fry (“pad kaprao” in Thai) was originally served the way it was in Bangkok: holy basil, garlic, soy sauce, minced meat. It was beauty in simplicity. But she found that the dish wasn’t selling in the States. So she made some adjustments, added bamboo shoots, onion, and bell pepper, and now the dish is an Aloy Thai staple.

Preserving Thai flavors was also a challenge. The famous tom yum soup is traditionally served with the spices, herbs, and seasonings intact. Which meant lemongrass poking out of the bowl and kaffir lime leaves floating around. Everyone in Thailand knows that these parts of the dish are there for flavor and are not for eating. But after an Aloy Thai customer was pierced by pieces of lemongrass, Khun Kim had to change tactics. To keep the flavor intact, she used a Thai mortar and pestle (a “krok”) to mash the ingredients into a customer-friendly paste.

Any Thais that stop by also need to be able to taste dishes that remind them of home. Khun Mui Fisher, Khun Arisa’s best friend and co-owner of the Denver Aloy Modern Thai, noticed that the majority of Thai customers at Aloy Thai order the Ayothaya Noodle Soup. This dish consists of thin rice noodles with beef or pork, bean sprouts, and fried garlic in a rich, herbal broth. The dish is not at the forefront of Thai food’s reputation, compared to Pad Thai or favorite curries.

Aloy Thai’s menu managed the miracle of balancing traditional Thai dishes with flavors that allowed them to be successful overseas. That adherence to Thai authenticity earned them an award in 2008. The [Thai Select](#) award, given by the Thai Ministry of Commerce, is the seal of approval for authentic Thai food outside the country. The award came about as part of a larger plan to standardize Thai food and make it a marketable brand to boost tourism.

Originally, Aloy Thai’s only income was through in-person dining, but later added online ordering to expand the restaurant’s versatility. The shift helped pull the restaurant through the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We were busy during COVID,” said Khun Tess. She noted that pre-pandemic summers were annual lulls in sales, with students leaving and many Boulderites heading out to hike and camp.

“We used to have a winter rush,” she said. “But with COVID takeout we were busy all year.

She also said that because many restaurants closed, the traffic shifted to restaurants that were able to stay open. Many restaurants that made it through COVID had runaway success compared to what they had before.

When it came to dealing with inflation, Khun Tess didn't want to put all the financial burden on individual customers. Instead of focusing on increasing prices, she was looking to find more customers to help keep dishes affordable.

As for wages, the restaurant does its best to pay their staff well. Colorado's 2022 minimum wage is \$12.56 per hour, and Denver has its own minimum wage of \$15.87. Tipped wages have lower thresholds: \$9.54 for the state, and \$12.85 for Denver. Aloy Thai's staff, servers included, make at least \$18 per hour, hopefully to help them afford living in the area and working with the restaurant. Next year, the Denver's minimum wage will raise to \$17.29, putting some heat on restaurant gains.

Aloy Thai's cooking staff is recruited from Thailand. The goal was to give these chefs an opportunity to build their culinary skills abroad. Recruitment would be occasionally difficult.

In 2016, ten years after Aloy Thai opened its doors in Boulder, the heart of Denver was getting a taste of the action. Khun Arisa and Khun Mui Fisher had opened a second restaurant near the Union Station area, titled "Aloy Modern Thai." Khun Mui had worked so closely with the Naka family over the years that Khun Kim came to love her as her own daughter. Originally, the plan was to serve completely organic ingredients, but that goal was scaled back once the financial burdens became too much.

Now, after months of construction delays and repeated inspections, the Aloy Thai family is taking their business a step further.

The New Recipe

As I craned my neck trying to take a peek into the kitchen of the still-under-construction Aloy Thai Eatery for details, one of the mechanics walked by. He told me that the owner was on site, and I was ecstatic to meet the woman who could be considered as Khun Kim's fourth daughter.

Khun Mui Fisher greeted me with a wide grin and an Aloy Thai t-shirt with the red, yellow, and blue of the Colorado flag.

The concept for the Aloy Thai Eatery had been in progress for a couple years. Following the [change in consumer and dining behavior](#) triggered by the pandemic, the family decided that a takeout restaurant was the way forward. Aloy Thai Eatery would have limited seating and feature the 15 most popular dishes from the two dine-in restaurants for to-go orders. Portions would also be bigger. To start off, they would rely on the customer base they have already built in Denver. The idea was to create a quick eating experience similar to fast food.

"We wanted to focus and expand for Aloy Thai," said Khun Mui. "It's a pilot project. Chinese food has Panda Express. Japanese food has Sarku. We wanted to be the one for Thai food."

The Thai government had that idea once. The Global Thai Restaurant Company was founded in 2001, followed by the launch of the Global Thai campaign in 2002. Both operations were founded and funded by the Thai government. They wanted to create a McDonalds for Thai food, which meant widespread restaurants with a standard for quick, yet authentic and delicious Thai food. While Thai restaurants increased across the United States, that large chain never became a reality. Only time will tell if Aloy Thai is up to the task.