

Inspired by 'Like Water for Chocolate'



Ms. Potiwat's steamed egg with ixora flowers.

SAIMOK KAB DOKMAI

By Russell Nichols

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Chiang Mai is so known for its flowers that it is sometimes called "the rose of the North." Anya Potiwat is working to extend that influence into the area's cuisine.

Ms. Potiwat owns Saimok Kab Dokmai ("mist and flowers" in Thai), a 50-seat restaurant specializing in floral cuisine. There she serves spicy rose petal salads, spring rolls stuffed with begonias and pansies, and crepe-fried platters of roses, hibiscus, banana flowers and frangipanis.

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Before opening Saimok Kab Dokmai, she had no culinary training or even restaurant experience. Her inspiration was Laura Esquivel's "Like Water for Chocolate," the story of a Mexican girl who expresses her love through cooking, including one meal made with rose petals.

An ethnobotanist friend, Chaiyong Rujjanawate, helped her identify buds that were safe to eat, and Ms. Potiwat, 58 years old, now works exclusively with the flowers she grows in her organic garden. Unbeknownst to her, she was at the forefront of a local flower-eating movement. In the mid-2000s, the Thai Health Promotion Foundation launched a campaign called "Food Safety: Edible Flowers" to push restaurants to start cooking with flowers and persuade farmers to stop using pesticides.

The campaign has increased local competition, but she said she appreciates that more people are interested in the dishes' environmental and nutritional benefits. Still, the concept of eating flowers takes time to grow on people.

"Some still think it's too crazy," she said. "They think flowers should be for decoration only, that flowers are only good for the eyes, not for the mouth."

At her restaurant, patrons go for the fried crepe flowers or the spicy floral salads. She explained the ideas behind her personal favorite: steamed egg with ixora flowers, which grow in small clusters and have a slightly sour, rose-like taste.

Red, not white: Ixora is common in Southeast Asia. Ms. Potiwat uses the red and yellow flowers for their astringent flavor, adding that the red ones have a relaxing effect when eaten. Avoid white ones, which are bitter and can be slightly poisonous.

Savory custard: She mixes the flowers with eggs, chicken stock, soy sauce and diced shitake mushrooms. Most cooks add ground pork to savory custards, but she prefers to go meatless. She also opts for soy sauce over fish sauce, a common flavoring in many Thai dishes, citing its "softer" aroma.

Let off steam: Ms. Potiwat transfers the egg mixture to her serving bowl and steams it for 10 to 15 minutes in a covered wok. During the last minute of steaming, she sprinkles a few extra petals on top. The result: A custard with a silky texture, studded with petals.

Presentation: Before serving, she drizzles soy sauce over the dish. It is intended to be eaten alongside other small plates, such as spring rolls with begonias and pansies, and a sweet, purple drink made from butterfly pea flowers.

Price: 80 Thai baht (about \$2.60)

59 Wongwaen Rd., 2nd Ring Rd., Chang Phuak, Amphur Muang.
Phone +66 53 122 779. thaifloraldishartist.com

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