



## STORY ON A PLATE GAENG HANG LAY

# A melting pot of spices

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“Chiang Mai people love *gaeng hang lay* too much!” laughs Yousubfee Aimwathana. Seated at the back of Pawn Poon spice shop, on a narrow lane in busy Muang Mai market, he and his brother Subbin – Pawn Poon’s owner – are talking about *hang lay* curry (“*gaeng*” is Thai for “curry”), a beloved dish in the northern Thai city. Rich and meaty, lush with fragrant dried spices, soured with tamarind and spiced with plenty of fresh ginger, *gaeng hang lay* is to Chiang Mai natives what *gaeng keow wan* (green curry) is to Bangkok people. “It’s northern food, Chiang Mai food, real local food,” says Subbin.

Much like the Thai-Indian Aimwathana brothers themselves, *gaeng hang lay* is a fusionist expression of Chiang Mai’s trading past. The city sprawls from both banks of the Ping River. In the 19th and early 20th centuries its port in the Gat Luang neighbourhood, Chiang Mai’s original commercial core, bustled with boats from Bangkok loaded with goods and teak logs. Chiang Mai was a stop on a land route through Myanmar, Thailand and Laos plied by Chinese Muslim traders from Yunnan, and a launching point for overland caravans to the southern Myanmar port of Moulmein.

As a result Chiang Mai became home to migrants from as far away as India. Some 90 years ago Subbin and Yousubfee’s father arrived from his village near Mumbai with a throng of relatives. By that time Gat Luang’s textile trade was dominated by Indian immigrants; the young Farkaruddin Sethjiwala broke ranks and opened Chiang Mai’s first shop selling dried spices imported from India and Indonesia.

Those spices found their way into what is probably *gaeng hang lay*’s predecessor: a mild Myanmar meat curry that might have made its way to Chiang Mai with the Shan ethnic minority (also called Tai Yai), many of whom came to the city to work for British logging companies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Author and photographer Naomi Duguid, who spent six months in Myanmar gathering recipes for her forthcoming cookbook *Rivers of Flavor*, notes that Shan stews and curries and *gaeng*



A spice shop (top) in Chiang Mai that sells dried spices for *gaeng hang lay* (above). Photos: David Hagerman

*hang lay* share ingredients such as shallots and powdered turmeric. They are prepared similarly: meat, spice paste and other ingredients are placed in a pot and cooked together until oil rises to the dish’s surface. In central and southern Thailand, by contrast, spice pastes are fried separately in oil or with coconut milk, while most northern Thai-style curry recipes require paste to be boiled separately in water or broth before meat is added.

As further suggestion that *gaeng hang lay* is Myanmar in origin, Duguid points to a recipe for pork curry in the 2004 book *Introduction to Myanmar Cuisine* by Ma Thanegi. Called *wet tha hin lay* (“*wet tha hin*” is Myanmar for “pork curry”), the

dish includes shrimp paste – a component of the spice paste for most versions – and roselle leaves, a common souring agent in Myanmar cuisine. As a substitute for the latter the author suggests green mango, wild plum or tamarind, the ingredient used to sour Chiang Mai’s *gaeng hang lay*.

It’s not far-fetched to imagine Yousubfee and Subbin’s northern Thai mother or another adventurous Chiang Mai cook raiding Gat Luang’s Indian spice shops to add a little zing to Myanmar *wet tha hin*. *Khao soi*, Chiang Mai’s iconic curry noodle soup, also incorporates a range of spices more often associated with southern Asia than with northern Thailand, as does *laab khua*, a northern dish of chopped fish, pork or beef sautéed with chillies, prickly ash, an array of dried spices and chopped fresh herbs. Duguid notes the subcontinent’s influence on Thai cuisine is seen elsewhere as well: southern Thailand’s meat-and-potato *gaeng massaman* mimics Indian yellow curries, and in northern Thai dialect the word for potato is not *man farang* (Thai) but *aloo*, as in Myanmar and parts of India.

Back at Pawn Poon, Subbin stands over wooden boxes filled with dried spices and, without revealing ratios, point out those that he includes in his own *gaeng hang lay* blend (each spice shop has its own): turmeric, white pepper, fennel, cardamom, coriander, cumin, mace, long pepper, star anise, cloves and dried galangal. To make the curry, he says, pound 100 grams of the spice powder in a mortar with shallots, garlic, shrimp paste, fresh galangal and ginger, and cilantro roots, then mix it with 2.3kg of meat.

“Put it in a big pot with a little water, finely chopped garlic, plenty of ginger cut into thin, thin slices, and fish sauce or salt,” he says, and

let the stew cook long and slow until the meat is so tender that it falls apart with a nudge. Tamarind water and brown cane sugar are added to taste near the end of cooking. “It should be a little bit sour, not too sweet. There’s no need for chillies, because we get the pepper from the ginger,” Subbin adds. “The best one is made today and eaten tomorrow,” to allow the flavours to develop.

Because it’s time consuming and most tasty when made in large quantities, *gaeng hang lay* is *ahaan phiset* – special occasion food – served at funerals and family gatherings, and included with other foods offered at the *wat* (temple) on holidays. (Leftovers often go into *gaeng hok*, another northern Thai curry associated with Songkran, the Thai New Year, made with *woon sen*, or bean thread noodles.)

“When we make *gaeng hang lay* [in our restaurant] it’s in a very large pot, usually with several people cooking at once. It’s a kind of community activity; the food brings people together,” says Manaswat “Kim” Chutima, assistant managing partner of the Old Chiang Mai Cultural Centre, an organisation devoted to preserving Chiang Mai and northern Thai traditions.

Years ago, when eating meat on a daily basis was economically out of reach for most northern Thais, *gaeng hang lay* would have been enjoyed only once or twice a year. Nowadays, it’s easily available almost everywhere in Chiang Mai, served at restaurants and casual open-air eateries, and sold as takeaway from stalls offering other northern Thai specialties such as *laab khua*, and *jaw pakkat* (sour and spicy stewed flowering mustard).

“When I was a little boy we rarely ate *gaeng hang lay*. But now, when I want to eat it, I eat it,” Yousubfee says. “No need to worry – I make it myself!”

## LEGENDS SON-IN-LAW EGGS

### Chop tactics work wonders for marriage

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These deep-fried hard-boiled eggs topped with a sticky tamarind caramel sauce are a popular Thai dish, and a must for celebrations. The curious name, *khai luk koei*, or son-in-law eggs, is said to come from a rather unnerving story. Prudes, be warned.

Legend has it that a recently married young couple moved into a house in the same village as the wife’s parents. The newlyweds were settling well into their new home and, each day, the wife would go out shopping at a nearby market.

During this time, however, the husband would also leave the house to flirt with other young girls in the village. Some even say he had affairs with them. Rumours were soon spreading all around the village.

One evening, the couple went to the wife’s parents’ house for dinner. The wife’s mother, having heard these rumours, felt she had to warn him to stay in line, but she couldn’t simply say it outright for fear of hurting her daughter’s feelings.

She decided to communicate this through her cooking. She boiled two eggs, then deep-fried them in hot oil. The message was that she would not hesitate to treat her son-in-law’s similarly shaped manly parts the same way if she found him being unfaithful to her daughter.

As they were finished with a drizzle of dark tamarind sauce, one could easily imagine the bloody splatters, too.

The legend assumes that the suspicious son-in-law got the point; whether he ate the eggs then is anyone’s guess. The average diner, however, should disregard this gory story and dig in to this delicious invention.

Nowadays, it is hugely popular and served all around Thailand, from humble street stalls to avant-garde restaurants, usually as a side or an accompaniment to other dishes.

