

22 October 2010 Last updated at 20:01 ET

Can foreign chefs conquer Thai cuisine?

By Rachel Harvey

BBC News, Bangkok

Thai food must be among the most popular cuisines in the World. There is now a Thai-style restaurant in almost every major city on the planet.

So you wouldn't have thought that opening another Thai restaurant would be controversial. Unless of course the chef is Australian and the restaurant is in Bangkok.

David Thompson won a Michelin star for his Thai restaurant in London, called Nahm. Now he's opened a branch in Bangkok under the same name. So far so good.

But Mr Thompson attracted a volley of nationalist outrage after he was quoted as saying he was on a mission to revive Thai cuisine.

His words were interpreted by some writers as an arrogant affront. How dare a foreigner presume to understand the true nature of Thai cooking?

The fact that Mr Thompson speaks and reads Thai and has studied Thai cuisine for years was, apparently, no defence.

Thai fusion

Mr Thompson may be the most high-profile foreign chef to open a Thai restaurant in Bangkok recently, but he's not the only one.

In a Bangkok food market, Jarrett Wrisley watched as coconut was first shredded then pressed by machine to release a rich, creamy milk.

If you're in search of the taste of Thailand, this is a pretty good place to start.

Mr Wrisley, originally from Pennsylvania in the United States, scours local markets every day looking for fresh produce.

The food vendors, mostly women, are very tolerant of him, he said, smiling broadly. "They ask the typical questions. Do you have a wife? Does she cook? What are you doing here?"

This is business as well as pleasure. Like David Thompson, Mr Wrisley has also just opened a bar/restaurant in Bangkok serving Thai food.

He wanted he said to "take the idea of a Western restaurant, whether it's a bistro or a tapas bar, or even a Japanese



Jarrett Wrisley has just opened his own restaurant in Bangkok

“

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Suthon Sukphisit
Food critic

isakaya and apply that to Thai cooking".

So the food stays the same, but the context changes.

'Instinctive'

That would probably be acceptable to Kopkaew Najpinit, with a few conditions.

A renowned authority on Thai cuisine, Ms Kopkaew runs the Khao cooking school, just off the Khao San road in Bangkok's backpacker heartland.

"If foreign chefs want to open Thai restaurants and they cook properly then that's fine," Ms Kopkaew said, as a group of European tourists were put through their paces in the brightly kitchen. "It helps to promote Thai food."

Food is considered an essential part of Thai culture and it is marketed heavily as part of the international Thai brand. Cooking classes are hugely popular with tourists.

But learning to make a basic Pad Thai is one thing, Ms Kopkaew stressed; mastering the art of Thai cuisine is quite another.

"Thai dishes are very complicated. You have to follow every step rigorously."

Spicy, sweet, salty, sour, bitter - Thai food is all about balancing big flavours.

Over a plate piled high with a special home-made snack - coconut, kaffir lime, chillies and peanuts folded into slices of raw green mango - food critic Suthon Sukphisit said the real question is whether a foreigner can develop a suitably discerning palate.



Kopkaew Najpinit says real Thai cooking is very complicated

"If a foreigner makes Thai food, it has a certain style," he explained. "If a Thai person makes Thai food, it has a different style."

"It's about understanding the culture of the cuisine. In Thailand a mother shows her children how to cook, it becomes instinctive for us. That can't be taught."

'In love'

Back in his restaurant, Soul Food Mahanakorn, Jarrett Wisley is undaunted. On a midweek night, the small venue was almost full.

The music was western, the cocktails were probably best described as a kind of fusion, but the food was all Thai.

"I'm just trying to create an environment in which to enjoy it. I love the ingredients... I love the food culture here."

"And I think all the foreigners who are cooking Thai food, whether it be in Thailand or outside are just really in love with the cuisine."

So whether you choose to eat Tom Yum Goong from a street stall, sitting on a plastic chair, or vegetarian red curry in an air-conditioned restaurant, whether the chef is foreign or Thai, it's good food that matters.

And there's clearly an appetite for that.