

Cooking up soul food in Bangkok

Expat food writer Jarrett Wrisley is just weeks away from opening his first restaurant in Bangkok, Thailand. How has he found the transition from pen to ladle?



Jarrett Wrisley is hopeful that his menu will bring fresher, more organic food to Bangkok's restaurant scene.

By Leah Hyslop

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Jarrett Wrisley is stressed. The 30-year-old expat and food writer is opening his first restaurant, Soul Food Mahanakhon, at the end of August, but not much is going to plan. "Everything that could go wrong is going wrong," he tells me from his home in Bangkok. "From problems with contractors, to problems with the restaurant's design, progress is very, very slow. But nothing moves quickly in Thailand. I guess I've just got to accept this is the pace it's going to happen at."

Jarrett, originally from the US, has spent the last decade traveling around Asia, making his living from writing about the continent's food. About a year ago, however, he began to notice a steady drop in the rates he was offered for his work and started to think about what else he could do.

"The magazine industry is in a crisis," he says grimly, "especially now we have the blogging scene, and so many people are writing about food for free. I'm hopeful it will recover, but now is definitely the time to move on. I've always focused on food, so I decided to take a swing at opening my own restaurant."

So why did he choose Thailand as a base? "It's an odd choice in some ways, because it's Mandarin I'm fluent in, and I've spent most of my time in China," admits Jarrett. "But I've always loved Thailand – it's mellower and less stressful than China, and I love how you're in easy reach of both the mountains and the beach in Bangkok. Plus, the food here is amazing. It has a freshness you don't get in Chinese dishes."

The inspiration behind the restaurant is Thailand's street food. "What I want to do is take Thailand's typical street food into a more formal setting," explains Jarrett. "I've called the restaurant Soul Food Mahanakhon, because the street food you get here reminds me a lot of American soul food - all fried chicken, smoky ribs, and papaya salads that are a bit like American 'slaw. So Soul Food, combined with Bangkok's Thai name, Krung Thep Mahanakhon, makes a name which I think represents my vision of what the place will be."

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(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatlife/7936568/Theres-only-one-place-for-a-tango-dancer-to-go-and-thats-Buenos-Aires.html>)

Jazzing it up in China (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatlife/7904647/Jazzing-it-up-in-China.html>)

Teaching the art of film in Brussels (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/expateducation/7900555/Teaching-the-art-of-film-in-Brussels.html>)

Kep, Cambodia: Asia meets France by the seaside

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/asia/cambodia/8259144/Kep-Cambodia-Asia-meets-France-by-the-seaside.html>)

Beyond Bangkok: the serene sides of Asia (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/7748622/Beyond-Bangkok-the-serene-sides-of-Asia.html>)

Ageist to Zedonk: 251 words The Daily Telegraph coined (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/8168474/Ageist-to-Zedonk-251-words-The-Daily-Telegraph-coined.html>)

Good-quality ingredients are the most important aspect of his plans for the restaurant. "Thailand has suffered, like so many countries, from the industrialisation of agriculture. Good dishes are damaged by cheap meat and over-fertilised vegetables. What I'm doing is trying to set up a supply chain with traditional, organic farming communities who can supply me with high-quality produce."

It is, he admits, going to be a difficult system to manage. "I'm going to use a market-based menu, as a lot of these producers won't be able to give me the same foods every week. So if there's fresh fish available one week, then I'll cook that, and then I'll cook whatever else looks good the next week. Most restaurants here have very rigid menus, so I hope this will make mine stand out."

The building he has chosen to house his restaurant was, he says, "an empty shell" when he bought it, and he is spending much of his time overseeing its renovation. "It had no drains, no toilets, or anything a few months ago," he says. "What I want it to look like when it's finished is a casual bar: using a lot of old wood, in the spirit of Thai houses, and unfinished concrete."

When he is not overseeing work at the site, he is testing recipes with his head chef, and has spent a lot of time "travelling around the country, cooking traditional recipes with old ladies."

"I taught myself to cook," he says, "so I've had no formal training, but as a writer I've had access to some great professional kitchens where I've watched excellent chefs work."

"The difficulty with setting down recipes for use in my restaurant is that Thai cooking is not an exact science, unlike baking or French cooking. Mint varies in strength, some chillies are spicier than others. When you see Thai cooks at work, they are constantly tasting and seasoning their dishes, so you have to see a recipe as

more of a framework.”

His particular favourites among Thai cuisine are “the rustic, almost barbecue-like dishes, cooked in low coals so they come out smoky and juicy, and the spicy curries from the South, which use such interesting ingredients. I also love the fried noodles you can get here, which evolved from the Chinese version.”

He admits that Bangkok’s civil unrest troubles him, but says that the situation is improving. “It’s been stressful, trying to open a business when you are watching a city erupt around you. For some time, there were curfews, and everything was shut down. But the restaurants have re-opened now, so I’m keeping my fingers crossed.”

The hardest thing about swapping food writing for life as a restaurateur has been the amount of teamwork. “As a freelancer, I was used to working for myself, on one thing at a time. Now I’ve got to balance 50 things at once, and with a team of people. It is challenging but also rewarding.”

Does he miss “home” at all? “I do miss family and friends, but I don’t miss ‘being’ American. I find Bangkok such a fascinating place. It’s hot and dirty and full of traffic, but also an amazing melting pot of different cultures. It’s boiled from many influences, yet is unique and singular at the same time.

“When I go back to the US, that to me feels like a vacation. And I like that, I think it’s nice. Though I’m not sure my mother would agree...”

Soul Food Mahanakhon opens at the end of August.

You can follow Jarrett’s journey at his blog [here](http://jarrettwrisley.typepad.com/snacks/) (<http://jarrettwrisley.typepad.com/snacks/>).