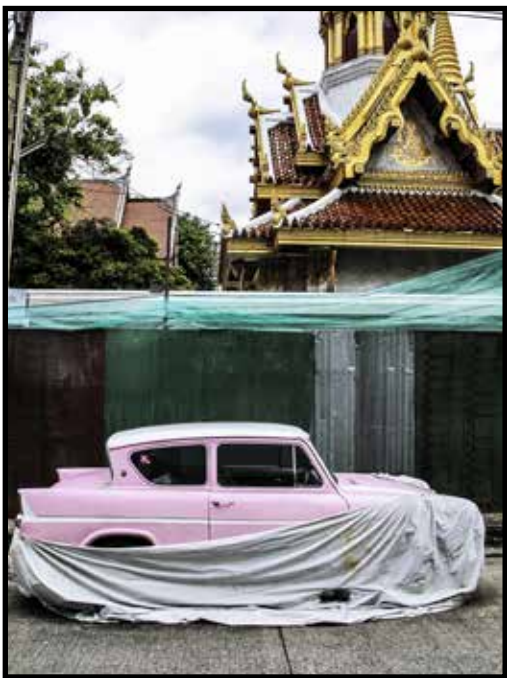




**Thailand's capital
is reinventing itself,
with locals embracing
the new ideas that
innovative expats
are bringing to their
adopted home.**

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run beer bar (with 30 craft beers on tap) occupying an old house in Phra Khanong Nuea. It's early in the day and the main bar hasn't opened yet, so we explore its bottle

B

angkok isn't really a city — for me it's like a series of interconnected towns," says architect Luke Yeung as we enjoy a flat white in the cafe downstairs from his studio,

Architectkidd. Hong Kong-born Yeung grew up in Canada but has been based in Bangkok for more than a decade.

The baristas at the Ink & Lion Café are in the throes of setting up an exhibition called *High On You* by Thai artist Orn Thongthai. One of the pieces features a stick-figure Pinocchio with the words 'I Hate You', while another says 'Come To Me My Love'. I'm getting mixed messages from the art. Perhaps it's just the mixed nature of the venue, which is part cafe, part gallery; the 'ink' in the name refers to the art they showcase, the 'lion' is the shiny La Marzocco espresso machine that dominates the counter.

Ordering another flat white, I tune back into the conversation. "The different parts of the city, such as Thonglor and Ekkamai, where we are now, are their own distinct ecosystems. These [areas] overlap with others but don't form part of any master plan or urban design," says Yeung. "Unlike other Asian cities like Beijing, Singapore or even Hong Kong, where you have a downtown heart that then radiates outwards into the suburbs, the centre of Bangkok really depends on your point of view."

He couldn't be more correct. If you're a fan of craft beer, the centre of Bangkok for you could be Mikkeller, a Danish-

ABOVE, FROM LEFT Thai food with a twist at Namsaah Bottling Trust gastro bar; Bangkok Tree House is adorned with greenery; and drinks at the hotel. **OPPOSITE** Bangkok Tree House hotel offers guests complimentary bikes to explore. **PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT** One of the team at Namsaah; old and new converge in Bangkok; Soul Food Mahanakorn; some happy locals; tuktuks are a popular mode of transport; neon signs line the streets; smoked fish curry from Nahm restaurant; outside Namsaah's bright building; Gaggan Anand, chef and owner of Gaggan eatery; dine at the Bangkok Tree House on-site restaurant.

shop and opt for a Californian India Pale Ale (IPA) called City of the Sun. Or, rather, I let my drinking companion do the choosing for me. Chad Mitchell is a craft-beer enthusiast from California and, after an intense discussion about the aroma (fresh, fruity and hoppy), he talks about how Thailand's craft-beer scene has exploded over the past few years. "[It] is amazing right now," boasts Mitchell. "People are bringing in excellent brews from all over the world, and there's huge local interest in trying something different."

It's true. As the evening approaches, Mikkeller's beanbag-filled garden slowly fills up with a mix of western businessmen, Japanese families and Thai hipsters. This embracing of new ideas by Bangkok's cosmopolitan crowd is equally exemplified by the raft of restaurateurs who have, this decade, taken Thai food from street stalls to the tabletop. Places like Bo.Lan, run by husband-and-wife team Dylan 'Lan' Jones and Duangporn 'Bo' Songvisava. There's also Australian export David Thompson's irrepressible Nahm, as well as the ➤





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Bangkok's neighbourhoods are always abuzz; Gaggan's colourful table decorations; yellow curry with prawns at Nahm; Nahm head chef, Australian David Thompson.

understated, yet perhaps most intriguing, Soul Food Mahanakorn. The tiny wood-panelled space is the brainchild of former food writer Jarrett Wrisley, and is an ode to the best Thai street food.

Having spent years critiquing restaurants, befriending chefs, learning the tricks of the trade and immersing himself in all things culinary in China's Shanghai, Wrisley invested his accrued knowledge and savings into opening a restaurant devoted to the love of his life. "I remember the heat and the confusion and trying to pick my way through the crowded sidewalks," he says of his first visit to Bangkok. "How the character of the people — friendly and rather serene — contrasted with the noisy, chaotic, messy city that they lived in. And, of course, the bouquet of strange smells — delicious and putrid — that one experiences when walking around here for the first time."

Was there a particular dining experience that helped him make the move from China to Bangkok to open a restaurant of his own? "I don't think there was one moment but rather a succession of delicious experiences that led me to Thailand. I love Thai-style fried chicken, and the way Thais take an everyday dish and make it distinct and better than almost anywhere else certainly left an impression on me. The market culture was also a huge drawcard; the markets are incredible places to wander and plan meals."

Soul Food Mahanakorn is an extension of this, and brings together authentic regional Thai dishes made using organic and free-range ingredients, with cocktails featuring a local twist — think crisp southern-style lamb samosas, tiger-prawn satay and fried chicken larb accompanied by Soul Punch, a double pour of SangSom rum, amaretto, guava and passionfruit.

Wrisley's assessment of the city's emerging culinary scene is much like Yeung's take on the city. "There isn't a single Bangkok food scene, but rather many sectors driven by different interests doing vastly different things. Bangkok has a great community of chefs and restaurateurs that are not only raising the bar for food, but helping each other along the way." ➤

CULTURE

The film, music, art and literature that immortalises Bangkok.

Lawrence Osborne's semi-autobiographical 2009 novel *Bangkok Days* sums up the lives of many expats who arrive with the intention of exploiting Bangkok but end up losing themselves to the sultry city.

Movie buffs should seek out the hard-hitting action flick

Bangkok Dangerous, directed by the Pang brothers. It tells the story of Kong, a deaf and mute hitman who discovers there may still be a way to redemption.

Occupying a 100-year-old shophouse in Chinatown, the multi-purpose space Cho Why is at the forefront of Bangkok's emerging arts scene. It hosts edgy art and photo exhibitions.

See a different side of the city on a luxury boat with

Anantara Cruises, which runs three-day upriver itineraries to Ang Thong and the historic Ayutthaya.

"One night in Bangkok and the world's your oyster, the bars are temples but the pearls ain't free. You'll find a God in every golden cloister, and if you're lucky then the God's a she." It may be more than three decades since Murray Head released it, but these *One Night in Bangkok* lyrics still ring true.



FROM LEFT
Popular bar and art gallery WTF; a live show is part of Bangkok night-life.

general, is that despite newcomers like us moving in, it's still a working, living community."

Exploring the neighbourhood, McGrath points out thriving local businesses, such as an ice factory and a hardware store, interspersed with newer arrivals such as tapas bar El Chiringuito, the rather cute and cosy Nahim Cafe x Handcraft, Patani photography studio and the rustically stylish Tep Bar.

"I guess we've all been drawn here by the fact it's not glamorous and upmarket — it's the exact opposite," says McGrath. "For me, it's about the raw urban environment and the sense of authenticity of the place and its people."

Yeung might be right — Bangkok is more than a collection of towns. For the 14 million or so people who call this bustling city home, it's an ecosystem of distinct villages, each with its own idiosyncrasies, charms and dreams. 🍷

The next morning, I head to the other side of the city, to another 'town', as Yeung would put it. Chinatown is one of the oldest parts of Bangkok, and to get there I walk past Hua Lamphong train station. The ornate Italian-designed structure has been the terminus for trains to the north, east and south of the country since 1916, as well as the famed Eastern & Oriental Express (which runs three-day luxury train trips from Bangkok to Singapore via Kuala Lumpur). It's a busy international hub of travellers, hawkers and workers, but the vibrant, cavernous space will be turned into a museum in the next few years. The station is being moved to the outskirts of the capital.

"There's definitely development coming, but we're lucky that here we're still off the beaten track," says photojournalist Nick McGrath, one of the co-founders of multi-purpose space Cho Why, located just a few hundred metres from the train station.

For the past two years, Victorian-born McGrath has lived in a century-old former shophouse he converted himself, not far from Cho Why, a venue that has given the area cool, cultural cachet. We're standing on the roof of the three-storey 'blank canvas' art space used as a photo studio, an art gallery and for events (such as flea markets), discussing what drew McGrath to the area. "The best thing about Soi Nana, and Chinatown in

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EAT & DRINK

Thonglor has a range of bars and restaurants, so it makes sense to start here. A short walk from the train station is **Soul Food Mahanakorn**, which serves up refined Thai street food. Close by is the more upmarket **Bo.Lan** as well as **WTF Café and Gallery**, where you can meet Bangkok's creative community over a drink. If it's drinks you're after, **Namsaah Bottling Trust** is another good option. Housed in a grand 20th-century villa, it has a selection of more than 30 cocktails. For some of the city's best craft beers, head to **Mikkeller** or **Craft Bangkok**, where there's an astonishing 40 beers on tap. For a non-alcoholic alternative, try **Ink & Lion Café**. A bit further out you'll find two of the city's most popular restaurants: **Nahm** — headed by Australian chef David Thompson — and

Gaggan, where Kolkata-born chef Gaggan Anand serves up molecular Indian cuisine that has earned his eatery the title of Asia's best restaurant.

STAY

Bangkok Tree House You'll find this rather amazing little hotel in an oasis on a bend of the Chao Phraya river. www.bangkoktreehouse.com. **Metropolitan by Como, Bangkok** The crisp decor is impressive enough at this luxury hotel, but the added bonus is that award-winning Nahm restaurant is found on the ground floor. www.comohotels.com. **Shanghai Mansion** Located in Chinatown, this 1930s hotel has an oriental theme and fits right into the busy neighbourhood. www.shanghaimansion.com. **The Siam** This elegant, yet fun hotel is run by a multi-talented family, which includes singers, an author and photographer. www.thesiamhotel.com.

DETAILS

Anantara Cruises www.bangkok-cruises.anantara.com. **Bo.Lan** www.bolan.co.th. **Cho Why** 17 Soi Nana, Pom Prap Sattru Phai. **Craft Bangkok** www.craftbangkok.com. **El Chiringuito** 221 Soi Nana, Pom Prap Sattru Phai. **Ink & Lion Café** Soi Ekkamai 2, Sukhumvit 63. **Gaggan** www.eatatgaggan.com. **Mikkeller** www.tastingroombkk.com. **Nahim Cafe x Handcraft** 78 Soi Nana. **Nahm** 27 South Sathorn Rd, Tungmahamek Sathorn; www.comohotels.com. **Namsaah Bottling Trust** www.namsaah.com. **Soul Food Mahanakorn** www.soulfoodmahanakorn.com. **Tep Bar** 69-71 Yi Sip Song Karakadakhom 4. **WTF Café and Gallery** www.wtfbangkok.com.