



When Andy Ricker, the chef and owner of the Pok Pok empire, won the James Beard Award for Best Chef, Northwest in 2011, he said the foundation had “indirectly given the award to the chefs of Northern Thailand.” Ricker replicates Northern Thai food with as much precision as humanly possible at his restaurants in Portland, Brooklyn, and Los Angeles—but he’s still a white guy from middle America. Yet when he flags a dish on one of his menus as “spicy,” he means it.

Back in the early 1990s, in between stints as a cook in Portland, Ricker took odd jobs painting houses and playing in a punk band. Nothing resonated with him, until, on a whim, he visited a friend in Thailand and fell in love with the food and culture there. Since then, he has lived for months at a time in San Sai in the Chiang Mai province, immersing himself in the food and drinking culture.

After years of eating his way through the country, Ricker returned to the United States to open Pok Pok. It was 2005, Ricker was in his 40s, and the menu relied on roasted chicken and green papaya salad. Now he helms nine restaurants, and his not-yet-named second cookbook, about drinking culture in Thailand, is due out in fall of 2017.

We spoke to Ricker at his restaurant in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, a quiet waterfront area with a strong artistic community and industrial charm, a neighborhood with tree-lined streets, brownstones, churches and parks that Ricker finds to be all-around “lovely.” How did Ricker, an American from North Carolina, introduce a new generation of American diners to an expanded understanding of Thai cuisine, and frankly, nail the flavors?

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You opened the first Pok Pok in Portland in 2005. When you were opening your next location in New York, why did you decide on Brooklyn?

One: the rent is cheap here. Five years

ago, in Manhattan, the rent prices were already outrageous. We literally could not afford to open a large restaurant in Manhattan. We opened a tiny to-go spot on the Lower East Side that we kept for about three years, and then bounced out of it. Number two: We’re able to do charcoal grilling out here. In New York City, you are allowed to grill outside if you’re cooking at a restaurant. As long as you meet certain standards, it’s totally on par with health code. The biggest problem is dealing with your neighbors, which, in Manhattan, makes this kind of operation basically impossible. There are too many people around, and you’d get complaints constantly. In Brooklyn, the population feels way less dense. Not to mention, getting a liquor license in Manhattan is a brawl. You either have to beg or you have to fight. Here, you can get a liquor license easily. And if you talk to restaurateurs, you’ll know it’s basically impossible to make a living in this business without a liquor license.

The third reason was personal: I like it out here. Brooklyn is more like Portland than Manhattan is, and I don’t mean in the beard, suspenders, mustache, and \$500 vest way. It has more of a community feeling. It’s more spread out and laid-back than Manhattan. It felt homier to me. Also, there’s a potential that this neighborhood holds—people actually need Thai food here, because this neighborhood is underserved.

How would you describe the food at Pok Pok?

We don’t use the word “authenticity” here. We also don’t use the word “traditional.” Those words mean different things to different people. Instead, we use the term “specific regional” food.

What do you mean by that?

First of all, there’s the context. This is a kind of restaurant that would exist in

Thailand, basically. Number two: we use a lot of tools that you would use in a Thai kitchen. Mortar and pestle gets used all day, every day for a number of different recipes. The portion sizes are similar to what you would get in Thailand. The way the rice is served is how you would get it in Thailand. We make our minced meat with knives. We don’t use grinders. It’s hand-chopped every day. It’s something we don’t make a big deal about, but I bring knives that are specifically used for making laap [minced meat] back from Thailand, and we use those knives to chop the laap every day. The papaya salad gets made fresh with a mortar and pestle every time it’s ordered. We do a lot of cooking on charcoal. We bring ingredients in from Thailand that you basically can’t get here at all. We do dishes that rely on these ingredients. That’s what I’ve built this restaurant on.

Pok Pok is trying to recreate something that exists somewhere else in a way that’s understandable to Westerners. When I say that, I don’t mean we dumb shit down, or we change things, or make things bigger. We just present it in a way that Westerners can generally understand. The descriptors on the menu are in English, and they’re potentially over-descriptive, because most people don’t have a frame of reference. If we did a shopping list menu, people would order the same shit they always do. The whole point of Pok Pok is to introduce people to things they may not have had before, and for it not to be scary for them.

Pok Pok is self-described as a “Northern Thai” restaurant. What are the regional differences in Thai food?

Northern Thailand is a specific region. Southern Thailand is a specific region. Central Thailand is the largest region. Each region has its own staple and its own relatively distinctive food culture. The various regions and their cuisines are defined by their geography, and the

climate, and the ethnicity of the people who live there.

The staple in Southern Thailand is jasmine rice. The food there tends to be heavy on coconut cream and seafood because it's close to the ocean. It tends to be really, really spicy. There is a lot of influence from Malaysia, so a fair share of dry spice enters the kitchen.

Central Thailand is where Bangkok is, so you get royal cuisine. That's where a lot of the food you probably think of as Thai food comes from.

If you're talking about Isan food, or Lao food [in Northeastern Thailand], that's a different cuisine. The staple there is sticky rice. It tends to be very simple food. It is to Thailand what the food of the American South is to the United States.

Northern Thailand is mountainous: There are rivers, valleys, and jungles. It's landlocked. There's no access to the ocean, unless you travel great distances through Burma or Laos. There's not a whole lot of seafood there. There's freshwater fish, frog, wild game, and domestically raised animals like pig and chicken. Unlike most of the country, northerners eat quite a lot of beef. Most of the rest of the country doesn't eat much beef for many reasons, religion being one of them. The food tends to be herbaceous. There's a lot of boiled, steamed, and grilled food made from wild herbs and wild vegetables. Bitter flavors feature heavily.

What was it about Northern Thai food that sparked your obsession?

I happened to be in the right place at the right time. I was in Chiang Rai. I showed up at a particular time of year, and was taken to eat a particular local regional dish [Kaeng het thawp, a wild, puffed mushroom dish]. It was unlike anything I had ever had before. It was bitter, sour, herbaceous, soupy, and salty. It was really delicious and really surprising. It made me start to think, well, this is a local, regional dish that is seasonal. This means that this is probably true all over Thailand. What I've been eating at home obviously is a tiny sliver of dishes that have translated

well to American menus. So, I wanted to know more.

You've said before that Thai people, like all people, experiment and deviate from traditional recipes. Are there any dishes you've modified for Pok Pok?

I don't give myself as much liberty to do that. When I opened this restaurant, I decided to try to accurately recreate what I saw there because I didn't think it needed altering. At the time, I didn't feel like I was qualified to alter anything because I didn't fully understand the food. I still don't fully understand the food. I won't ever be a master of this shit. The older I get, and the more I go there and study this stuff, the more I learn. At this point, if I wanted to start fucking with it, I could. But I don't want to, because my favorite restaurants in Thailand are the places where you go, and ten years later, you go again and it's exactly the same. I think there's a huge amount of respect and honor in doing the thing you do really, really well and just doing it forever. Never letting it get worse, and always trying to make it better somehow.

How do you sustain something like that?

It doesn't necessarily mean changing recipes drastically. It's finding better sources for the meat, getting fresher herbs, or finding new techniques that make a dish taste better, even marginally. The freedom that I have is that I'm not locked to any one genre, or any particular style of cooking, so I can put dishes on the menu that are a little bit around the map (of Thailand). I don't get bored doing this.

People are creatures of habit. They go to the same place to get the same dish, more often than they'll go out and eat adventurously. I know people who've been coming to this restaurant for five years and they order the same thing every time they walk in the door. I'm the same way. When I go to a diner that's been there for 30 years, I'm having the damn French toast. There are people that like to go out and try something new, but you're not going to do that every night. That's the nature of a neighborhood restaurant, especially a New York restaurant. It's built on people who are regulars.

We're not trying to get chef-y on things. I only get chef-y on things when we're doing a special event. I'll let my freak flag fly a little bit. Why fuck with something that is great as it is, especially when it's not even your own thing? When I was younger, I had a really chef-y ego. Everything had to be cool and new and I had to make it up. I basically gave up that side of the chef ego. It removes a lot of pressure. Running restaurants is an insanely difficult job, and not having to come up with a new fucking menu every three weeks is a massive amount of time and effort saved.

In ten years, what do you think the status Thai food in America will be? In Brooklyn?

I had no idea when I opened what it would be like in one year or five years. I still have no idea now. I have hopes. I hope that more Thai open specialty shops (a shop that specializes in typically one dish) as they do in Thailand. If you want to eat pad Thai, you go to the pad Thai shop. It doesn't have 50 other things on the menu.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of new Thai restaurants try to find a way to do fusion food or incorporate as much diversity as possible to draw in as many people as they can. But, thankfully, restaurants like Somtum Der in the East Village, which still doesn't have pad Thai on the menu, are specializing. The thrust of its menu is to serve Isan food. I hope a Southern Thai place opens up, because, in New York, that is the least represented, least understood, and least appreciated of all Thai regional cooking.

I also hope that people start doing their own thing. So far what's happened is, for instance, somebody in Portland—Nong [Poonsukwattana], who used to work for me—opened a khao man gai shop, and she became famous. Now there are three khao man gai places in New York. Instead of people saying, "Oh, cool, someone opened a khao man gai restaurant, so why don't I do boat noodles?" they're going, "I'm going to sell khao man gai, too."













