



Don't Overlook LAOS CUISINE

In an article adapted from his book *Enchanting Laos*, writer/photographer **Mick Shippen** gets stuck into the local cuisine that has many outside influences and regional delights.

It only takes a short time in Laos to realize that the country marches, or in the case of this slumbering backwater, strolls rather casually, on a diet of rice and *pho* noodle soup. Yet despite the increase in visitor numbers, Lao cuisine has yet to make its mark on the culinary map of Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, its many fresh and healthy delights should not be overlooked by foodie travellers.

Mother River

Central to the Lao diet are a wide variety of freshwater fish, much of it caught in the Mekong River. It's impossible to overestimate the importance of this mighty river as a source of food. Known in Lao as the *Mae Nam Kong* (literally 'mother river'), the Mekong not only feeds the nation with a huge and incredibly diverse catch of fish, its fertile banks and islands are also planted with a



wide variety of vegetables, and the massive floodplain that runs from Xayabouri to Champasak supports the annual rice crop.

Fish are served with almost every meal and typically steamed, grilled and fried, or made into a salad called *goy pla*. A fermented fish paste known as *pla daek* is used to flavour many dishes. Lao people also like to eat copious amounts of steamed and fresh vegetables and herbs accompany all meals.

In common with northern and northeast Thailand, the Lao eat mainly glutinous rice, a malleable steamed grain served at the table in woven baskets, although boiled fragrant rice is also eaten. In Laos, beef and buffalo are much more popular than in neighbouring Thailand where they are seldom eaten.

Regional Cuisine & Colourful Markets

Although restaurant menus in Laos can be

limited in scope and increasingly draw upon versions of Thai dishes such as the spicy *tom yam* fish soup or *gaeng som*, a similar, but slightly sour soup, regional favourites can be found in the local markets. In Luang Prabang, dishes include the delicious *aw laam*, a kind of vegetable stew thickened with broken sticky rice and gently spiced with the addition of pieces of peppery *sakarn* wood, and *sin savan*, thin slices of sun dried beef served with *jeow bong*, a roasted chilled paste. *Kaipen*, tasty sheets of dried river weed, similar to Japanese *nori*, is also a popular snack.

Further north in Luang Nam Tha, markets are particularly colourful due to the presence of many different ethnic groups such as the Tai Dam and Akha peoples. Sellers have a particularly endearing way of arranging their produce in small heaps or freshly cooked food in portion sized bowls, ready to tip into a bag when a customer

makes a purchase. The ladies take great care with their beautiful displays, bunching salad vegetables together and threading them on strips of bamboo, and arranging small river fish nicely. It's a visual feast.

Wild food

In rural areas travellers are likely to see a wide range of wild food for sale in the fresh markets. To many, this can often be disturbing sight especially when you consider the fragile nature of Laos' environment. However, many in rural Lao villages are very poor and most eke out a living as subsistence farmers. Wild food has always been an important part of the diet. Creatures ready for the pot in markets include civet cat, squirrel, porcupine, jungle rats, a variety of wild birds, bats, frogs, tadpoles, and snakes. Ant eggs are also a popular and nutritious addition to salads and curries.

Laos is made up of a colourful mix of



68 different ethnic people but these are commonly divided into four main groups that refer to the altitude at which they live. These are the Lao Loum or lowland Lao who make up roughly 50 percent of the population; the Lao Tai or tribal Tai which includes the Tai Dam or black Tai; the Lao Theung or lower mountain people who are of Mon-Khmer descent; and the Lao Soong or the hill tribes who live at the highest altitude. The highest concentration of hill tribes is in the far north in villages located above 1,000m. Most settled in Laos after migrating from southern China, Burma and Tibet early last century. Visitors to the northern towns of Muang Sing and Luang Nam Tha are likely to see different tribal peoples in the local markets including the Hmong, Akha, Yao, Lisu and Lahu, among many others.

Outside Influences

Other Asians that have an established presence in Laos are the Chinese and Vietnamese. The Chinese have a long history of migration to Laos, but in recent years there has been an influx of so-called temporary workers who come mainly from Yunnan province in southern China to work on construction projects. As a result more and more Chinese restaurants serving regional Chinese cuisine are opening in Laos. The Vietnamese have a noticeable presence in

Vientiane and in the eastern provinces.

The culinary landscape of Laos is no less effected by its past than the French-colonial architecture or its politics. In the late 60s and 70s, when Vietnam was subjected to America's campaign of sustained blanket bombing, many Vietnamese sought refuge in Laos. Today, the culinary tradition that they brought with them is extremely popular. Vietnamese dishes include the ubiquitous *pho*, a comforting noodle soup of beef, buffalo, pork or chicken with liberal additions of fresh herbs and vegetables, and of course, fiery chillies. Other Vietnamese favourites include '*naem neang*', tasty little 'do-it-yourself' rice paper wraps with grilled pork balls, lettuce, and herbs, *ban cuan*, steamed rice flour sheets stuffed with pork and mushrooms, and '*yor kao*' and '*yor jeun*', fresh and fried spring rolls.

Laotians also enthusiastically accepted the baguette when it was introduced during the French colonial period. In Vientiane, baguettes are sold on street corners and in the local markets, but with a distinctly local twist. Warmed over a charcoal brazier, split down the middle, smeared with *pâté* and stuffed with pork, raw papaya, pickled vegetables and a lick of hot chilli sauce, the baguettes make a satisfying breakfast when served with thick Lao coffee sweetened with condensed milk.

Coffee Culture

Lying just east of Pakse in southern Laos is the Bolaven Plateau. At just 1,300m above sea level, the altitude and cool micro climate made it the chosen location for coffee plantations during French rule. When Laos gained independence the industry went into decline, but in recent years has enjoyed a revival. Today, there is renewed interest in the Lao brew and hundreds of villagers tend coffee bushes. There are also several large commercial plantations, mainly around the town of Pak Xong, and organic Arabica coffee can be found for sale in the markets across the country. Coffee is not the only attraction on the Bolaven Plateau, however, and visitors to the area enjoy beautiful scenery, national parks, cascading waterfalls, and hill tribe villages.

Dining for cause

When in the capital city, Vientiane, diners with a conscience should check-out Mak Phet, a restaurant run by Friends International that helps train former street kids in all aspects of the business. The menu features modern Lao food, great shakes and cocktails, but gets very busy so try and book ahead.

It's located in the centre of town behind Wat Ong Teu and open from Monday to Saturday from 11:00am – 2:00pm and 6:00pm – 9:00pm. ^[A]

www.friends-international.org

More images can be seen at www.mickshipping.com

