Introduction

Kin Khaoo - eat rice is the daily celebration of life, and the way of cooking what you 'eat with rice' - kin kap khaoo - reflects the Lao attitude to life: Simplicity.

Three rocks, some firewood and a pot will do the trick, and a mortar and pestle would come in handy. Aa, and a steam pot and bamboo basket!

You buy fresh in the market what has been newly gathered and caught along the rivers, in the fields and in the jungle - vegetables leaves, herbs and fish. Whatever livestock runs around the house yard makes for a feast.

Bamboo skewers grill things on the fire while banana leaf wrappings roast food in the hot ashes or steam it in the bamboo basket; the pot cooks soups and stews, and fries the odd meat. Mortar and pestle pound roots and spices, chilli pastes and the life sustaining papaya salad, and the steamer and basket makes a home for it all with sticky rice.

With few tools and some herbs the Lao know to magically produce culinary delight, finely balanced in flavour, varied in preparation, all of it ultra healthy - light and fresh.

Cooking and life - simple, immediate, receiving the abundance of nature with humility. Every meal is Thanksgiving, an auspicious and merry occasion blessed by the presence of family, friends, neighbours and colleagues ... or you as the guest, anytime.

Where does this leave you?

Venture on foot or by kayak into the deep countryside for a 'homestay', eat in the local street stalls or bypass exercise and culture shock and go adventuring at a restaurant dedicated to serving Lao food in style.

Where daily meals are 'ingenuity in simplicity' - sticky rice, a chilli dip, something grilled and something boiled, all of which is accompanied by mountains of fresh herbs - festive occasions justify the extra effort to produce some of the Lao signature dishes to be featured in this magazine's next issues together with everyday fare for healthy sustenance:

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6. Rice, in its various splendid incarnations

Rice - Life

Life is about rice - rice is life. The pursuit of life is to plant and harvest rice. The meaning of life is to plant and harvest rice. The spirit of life is rice. Rice is everything. Without rice there is nothing.

Gkin Khaoo, 'to eat' correctly translated into Lao actually means gkin khaoo - to eat rice! Common rice is the main staple food in Asia, in Laos it is 'sticky' rice (khaoo nio) eaten with your fingers. Anything else that goes with it is called gkin kap khaoo - to eat with rice.

Life revolves around rice, breakfast, lunch and dinner - time arrives with clockwork precision and people will not greet you with sabaidee but ask the immediate question on their minds: gkin khaoo le yang? This inquiry 'have you eaten rice yet' is made out of concern for your wellbeing. When having a meal they will say gkin khaoo, 'eat rice', to politely advise you that they are not to be disturbed while at the same time making an inviting gesture with their hands to join them, ghin khaoo! There is nothing more important at this very moment in eternity, and nobody else should go hungry, either. The big basket full of sticky rice will always feed another mouth or two.
Stupendous rice, in Laos 3169 distinct rice variety names have been identified. Sometimes the same variety is called by different names by different ethnic groups; furthermore clearly different varieties have the same name. Lao farmers assign names to traditional varieties that relate to the environment, seed type and growth time. The name also often indicates a variety’s particular features. Varieties are also named for plants, flowers, fruits and animals. Resistance to or tolerance of drought, floods, birds, weeds and adaptation to soils are also reflected in some rice variety names. Welcome to Laos and Lao cooking.

Sticky rice and the Lao, what is the hamburger bun to the Americans, chapati to the Indians, Spaghetti to the Italians, potatoes to the Incas, french fries to the Belges, fragrant Jasmine rice to the Thais is sticky rice to the Lao. Knead a sizeable ball of this glutinous rice in the palm of your left hand from which you tear small morsels to dip into and pickup bits of the food on offer. The sticky rice grains will miraculously stick to themselves, no to your fingers. A Chinese scoup spoon helps with soups and stews.

'Neung' khao nio, sticky rice is 'steamed' and THAT is a whole ritual:

Khao gkham, the 'curio' rice, naturally black in colour. Unpeeled, it is very healthy and deliciously crunchy to the bite. I mix sticky rice and black rice 2 : 1 which gives a mixture that can be eaten either with the fingers or a spoon. Khao gkham is usually used to make sweet khao lam, see here-under.

Khao khoua, dry-fry uncooked sticky rice in a hot pan and pound it into coarse flour with mortar & pestle. It’s one of the signature ingredients for laob.

Khao beua, soak uncooked sticky rice in water and then pound it into a thick smooth paste. This paste is used to thicken a stew like or and soua. Traditionally steamed sticky rice was pressed by hand around a bamboo stick, grilled (chee) until black, then pounded and mixed with little water.

Khao chee ping, the aforementioned khao chee is nowadays not grilled until black but rather mixed with egg and gently roasted / ping until golden brown. To make you life easier western style bread is also called khao chee!
Khao tom, steamed sticky rice mixed with meat (salty) or fruit (sweet), tightly wrapped in banana leaves and boiled / tom.

Khao nom wah, sweets are made with lots of sugar, lots of coconut cream, sticky rice, rice jelly, sesame, coconut flakes and colouring; made fresh every day and sold in the afternoons from five o'clock onwards.

Khao lam, black khao gkham or white sticky rice and sweet beans with coconut cream stuffed into a bamboo pipe which is then roasted or smoked (lam) over the fire.

Khao kiap, snack food made of large wafers of sun-dried and crispy fried rice paste.

Khao krohp, pop-rice for the movies! Steamed rice, formed into small round patties, sun-dried, crispy fried & popped and flavoured with a thin line of sugarcane syrup.

Fermentation I, which turns food sour as in som, is induced by adding steamed sticky rice to raw ingredients which are then left to ferment for 2 - 3 days at room temperature like fish (som pa), fish eggs (som krai pa), porkskin sausage (som mou), cabbage (som kalam) and green vegetables (som pak).

Fermentation II, Lao hai, alcohol (lao), in this case a rather mild mannered wine, is produced by way of fermentation of sticky rice in traditional clay pots (hai) from which it is drunk by means of long bamboo straws. The volume consumed today is refilled with water to get drunk, again, tomorrow; fermentation and partying going hand-in-hand.

Laolao / laokao, alcohol (lao) distilled from sticky rice. Laolao means the ‘Lao alcohol’ while laokao means the white alcohol in the tradition of a schnapps or vodka, same thing. It keeps the countryside very happy at very little expense; I drink mine with tonic water and a good squeeze of lime!

Laobongyaa, the stuff you see around sold as yaa or ‘medicine’ with different herbs and roots inside. The more exotic varieties of Vietnamese origin feature such delicacies as cobras, scorpions and lizards. The bong stands for ‘preserving’ whatever is in there. It better!
No trip to Asia is complete without having eaten Fried Rice by whatever name:

**Khao Khoua - Fried Rice**

...Garlic, egg & meat or seafood of your choice - coriander & spring onion - salt & pepper

Smash garlic gloves. Fry these in very little oil over low heat until turning brown and dry ... or the egg won’t turn out as dry as desired; see here-after.

Add egg and keep stirring over low heat until very dry. When you think it’s dry enough, fry some more! Don’t worry, the egg is supposed to have turned deep yellow at this moment in time but beware, there’s more frying to come.

Add sliced meat or seafood and perhaps a little more oil in the case of beef or chicken. Pork has enough fat of its own and seafood will release plenty of water when cooked. Fry until done. By now the colour of the egg could be light brown.

Add boiled rice; keep frying. If your boiled rice happens to be really dry, add a little bit of water to moisten the lot.

Shortly before taking off fire, add herbs and season with pepper and salt, not fish sauce - to keep the rice dry! The classic ‘fish sauce with chillies’ plus half a lime round off the dish.

**Khao piak,** 'wet rice', i.e. rice soup made with rice noodles *sen khao piak* or boiled rice *khao piak khao*:

**Khao Piaқ khao - Rice Soup**, at all hours, food to get well

Add water to your boiled rice and cook it together with slices of chicken, pork, beef or seafood. Cut ginger to matchstick size for eating. Add garlic and crushed peppercorns.

Use plenty of herbs and spring onions. It is a matter of opinion whether you want to cook them along with the rest of the soup or add fresh as a final touch.

Boil on high heat for grains to smash into each other like ztoms until rice is really soft, which takes half an hour plus. I like my rice soup to be fairly thick, without excess water.

Decorate with crispy fried garlic and shallots.

For that boost of energy, add a raw egg once the soup is taken off the fire and stir together.

**Khao jok**, is the gruel version of *khao piak khao* whereby the dry, boiled rice has been pounded first.

You find the previous write-ups at tropicaldesignzf.net/articles

See you for the next issue