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If there was one thing I could bring back from Chiang Mai, Thailand, it wouldn't be a fake Rolex or a jade elephant carving. It wouldn't be any one of the endless tchotchkes that tourists barter over in the humidity of the ubiquitous night markets, then triumphantly lug home in a "Louis Vuitton" suitcase. Six months after my return from the city referred to as Thailand's Rose of the North, the only souvenir I still hanker for isn't really a souvenir. It's a plateful of green papaya salad.

My mouth still waters when I remember its fantastic medley of textures, of simultaneously spicy, sour and sweet notes that explode on the tongue without the aftertaste of something that has been artificially manufactured. And while I couldn't bring back the ready-made version, the good news is, I did bring home the knowledge of how to prepare it – and many other recipes for my favorite Thai dishes.

I'm no cook, which is why I enrolled in the Chiang Mai Thai Cookery school with an initial mix of trepidation and excitement. It turned out to be the highlight of my trip. Run by Thailand's international TV chef, Sompon Nabnian, and his English wife, Elizabeth, it is, according to many guidebooks the top institution in Chiang Mai at which to learn Thai cooking. It's the oldest school in the city, having opened its doors in 1993, and offers no shortage of options when it comes to full-day courses. Each course runs from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and features six different dishes including salads, entrees, and dessert, that you learn how to make, then sit down to enjoy alongside your fellow "chefs". The morning starts off with an activity that can range from making curry pastes with a pestle and mortar, to carving flowers out of vegetables. There is also a choice between two different locations in which to take the course – either in the remote garden setting of Nabnian's home, located on the outskirts of town, or within the restaurant he owns in the heart of the city, called The Wok.

I chose the option that offered a mix of classics such as cashew chicken, with fancier-sounding dishes - like steamed fish in banana leaves - which also featured the morning activity of shopping for ingredients at the local food market.

A shuttle picked us up from our hotel in the morning and also picked up several others also on their way to the school's main office. We registered and paid our fee of 990 Thai baht for the day (approximately \$33 Canadian, and a steal of a deal considering you get a cookbook and at least two meals worth of food, plus the lesson). From there we set out for the market – an alternate universe where the fish for sale were still flapping wildly in their crates and each cluster of herbs I picked up instantly released their potent fragrance. Lemongrass, tiny greenish-purple eggplants, coriander, and kaffir lime leaves were some of the ingredients I may have observed elsewhere but, until this trip, I never had the opportunity

to handle them up close.

Later at the site of Nabnian's home, in a blissfully air-conditioned classroom, my fellow classmates and I watched step-by-step demonstrations of how to prepare each dish, then ventured outside to individual cooking stations to try it ourselves. While Nabnian himself showed us how to make one of the courses – a creamy yellow curry with chicken - the other five were demonstrated by three enthusiastic young teachers who never failed to crack a joke or come to someone's aid (mostly mine).

My fellow classmates hailed from as far away as New Zealand and South Africa and as near to my home base as Toronto and San Diego. They ranged from a retired English couple to a trio of American hippies. Amateur and professional chefs worked diligently side by side, though none were quite as amateur as I.

With some relief, I observed that much of the prep work had already been done for us when we came back to our stations after each classroom session. The vegetables were washed, the herbs appropriately portioned and the sauces carefully laid out along with all the proper tools and utensils. The instructor to student ratio was sufficiently high enough for me to grab one in desperation whenever I forgot how many parts palm sugar to soy sauce the recipe required. The most challenging parts? Figuring out how to work the stainless steel gas ring, keeping my food from burning in the wok, and trying not to be the last person to finish.

The first dish of the day was perhaps the easiest – fried noodles with soy sauce. Even so, as I struggled to keep up, I began to despise my blue-haired, dreadlocked neighbour as she effortlessly flipped her noodles on one side of the pan, fried an egg on the other and concocted the perfect proportion of sauce to pour over it - all this while nursing a hangover too, she claimed. But as the day wore on, the cooking became easier and I too felt like a pro as I deep fried cashews for my chicken, mixed chili jam into my spicy northeastern-style prawn salad, and stirred banana slices to a boil in thick coconut milk.

Most dishes were whisked away as we completed them and kept warm so we could enjoy them together as a feast at the end of the day. As I covered the table with my exotic offerings I couldn't believe they tasted as good as they looked, or more importantly, that I was in any way responsible for their creation.

I won't be heading back to Chiang Mai anytime soon, but with the help of my cookbook, whenever the mood strikes, I can bring some of the best of Thailand to me instead.