

As a youngster in England, my earliest experience of Thai food came from those little packets of dried ingredients that you reconstituted with water. Vesta, I seem to remember!

How very far removed they were from the extraordinary cuisine of Thailand!

I have been trying to remember when I first tasted authentic Thai food, but I am drawing a blank. It doesn't really matter.

Years later, my travels took me to Bangkok.

Immediately, there was something wonderfully exotic about the atmosphere, and exploring the city certainly didn't disappoint.

Having developed a strong appreciation for spicy food over the years, I was captivated from the first bite.

The combinations of ingredients and flavours in Thai cuisine are unmistakable. Fragrant lemongrass, galangal, lime, chilli, fish sauce and fresh herbs create a culinary identity recognised around the world.

Although its range of dishes may appear less expansive than some other great cuisines, the intensity and balance of flavour deliver a remarkable experience.

Sharp, refreshing dishes such as our featured Som Tam Thai provide a wonderful contrast to rich, warming curries.

And to complete the meal, there are few desserts more satisfying than mango with coconut sticky rice.

This week, we explore Thailand – The Balance of Opposites, where sweet, sour, salty, spicy and fresh elements work together to create extraordinary flavour.



Kitchen Haiku

Green papaya sings
Lime and chilli dance as one
Sweet and sour embrace

This Week's Focus - The Beauty of Contrast

Thai cuisine demonstrates how seemingly opposing elements can create a unified flavour experience.

- SWEET - Softens and rounds stronger flavours.
- SOUR - Introduces brightness and energy.
- SALTY - Provides savoury depth and structure.
- SPICY - Adds heat, intensity and excitement.
- FRESH - Creates lift, aroma and contrast.

These elements are supported by richness, temperature and texture.
A dish may be strongly sour, gently sweet or intensely spicy, depending on its regional character and purpose.
Balance is not equality. It is the deliberate relationship between contrasting elements.



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Flavour Lens

Profile

Sweet • Sour • Salty • Spicy • Fresh • Aromatic • Vibrant

Behaviour

Pounds • Bruises • Infuses • Stir-fries • Simmer • Tosses • Refreshes

Balance Role

Sweetness rounds acidity and heat. Sourness lifts savoury richness. Salt provides depth. Chilli introduces energy, while fresh ingredients and texture complete the contrast.

Key Pairings

Palm Sugar • Lime • Tamarind • Fish Sauce • Bird's-Eye Chilli • Lemongrass • Galangal • Makrut Lime Leaf • Thai Basil • Coriander • Green Papaya



Chef's Insight – Balance Is Not a Fixed Formula

One of the most valuable lessons from Thai cooking is that flavour balance cannot always be measured by equal quantities.

A salad may need pronounced acidity.

A curry may require sweetness to soften its heat.

A rich preparation may benefit from fresh herbs or a sharp accompaniment.

The important consideration is the relationship between the elements.

Taste, adjust and taste again.

The objective is not to eliminate contrast. It is to make contrast enjoyable.

Ingredient Spotlight – Green Papaya – The Crisp Foundation

Unripe green papaya is the foundation of Som Tam Thai.
Unlike ripe papaya, it has a firm texture, mild flavour and refreshing character.
When finely shredded, it provides a crisp structure readily carrying a dressing.
Its relatively neutral flavour allows lime, fish sauce, palm sugar and chilli to become the dominant taste elements.
The preparation is equally important.
Traditional Som Tam is made using a mortar and pestle, with ingredients gently pounded or bruised to release their flavours.
The objective is to combine the ingredients without crushing the papaya.

Chef's Rule
Preserve the crunch. The texture is as important as the dressing.



Five Elements of Thai Flavour

Element	Typical Ingredients	Culinary Function
Sweet	Palm sugar, coconut sugar	Rounds acidity and heat
Sour	Lime, tamarind	Brightens and sharpens
Salty	Fish sauce, fermented seasonings	Provides savoury depth
Spicy	Bird's-eye chillies, chilli pastes	Adds heat and energy
Fresh	Herbs, vegetables, citrus aromatics	Adds lift and contrast

Beyond the Five Elements

·RICHNESS – Coconut milk, peanuts and cooking fats provide body & softness.
·TEXTURE – Crisp vegetables, tender proteins & crunchy garnish create interest.
·TEMPERATURE – Warm dishes & cool accompaniments introduce contrast.

The Principle: Identify the leading flavour, then use complementary elements to create a balanced and satisfying result.

Professional Application

OPPOSITES CREATE HARMONY

- *Sweetness softens acidity.*
- *Salt adds savoury depth.*
- *Chilli brings energy.*
- *Fresh ingredients provide relief.*
- *Texture completes the experience.*

Thai cuisine demonstrates how contrasting flavours can work together to create something extraordinary.

Balance does not mean equal quantities.



BALANCE THE CONTRASTS.
PRESERVE THE FRESHNESS.
RESPECT THE TEXTURE.
SWEET • SOUR • SALTY • SPICY • FRESH

Thai cuisine demonstrates that extraordinary flavour comes from understanding how opposing elements work together.
The chef's skill is knowing when each flavour has contributed enough.

Thailand Balanced Flavour System Podcast

Thai Regional Cuisine – Flavours, Customs & Culinary Traditions

Thai cuisine reflects the country's geography, climate and cultural influences. While sweet, sour, salty and spicy flavours provide a common foundation, each region has distinctive ingredients, dishes and culinary traditions.

Northern Thailand (Lanna) features aromatic herbs, milder seasoning and sticky rice. Influenced by Myanmar and Laos, specialities include khao soi (curry noodles), sai ua (herb sausage) and roasted chilli dips. Grilling and steaming are common techniques.

Northeastern Thailand (Isan) is known for bold acidity, chilli heat and fermented flavours. Sticky rice accompanies grilled meats, fresh vegetables and dishes such as som tam (papaya salad), larb (minced meat salad) and gai yang (grilled chicken).

Central Thailand emphasises balanced sweetness, acidity and aromatic spices. Jasmine rice, coconut milk, palm sugar and fragrant curry pastes feature prominently. Green curry, tom yum and pad Thai are familiar examples, while Bangkok celebrates a vibrant street-food culture.

Southern Thailand favours intense chilli heat, turmeric, coconut and seafood, with Malay and Muslim influences. Specialities include gaeng som (sour curry), khua kling (dry spicy curry) and khao yam (herb rice salad).

Culinary Customs & Practices

Thai meals traditionally feature several shared dishes, balancing flavours and textures. Rice is central, with sticky rice particularly important in the north and northeast. Mortar-and-pestle preparation, grilling, steaming and wok cooking are fundamental techniques. Spoons and forks are commonly used, with chopsticks mainly reserved for noodles.

Chef's Insight: Thailand's regional cuisines demonstrate how shared flavour principles produce remarkably different dishes through local ingredients, traditions and techniques.



This Week's Infographic

FLAVOUR NOTES
SERIES II

ISSUE 33
PHASE 3: GLOBAL FLAVOUR SYSTEMS

THAILAND

The Balance of Opposites

SWEET • SOUR • SALTY • SPICY • FRESH

A vibrant cuisine where contrasting flavours work in harmony to create fresh, balanced and intensely satisfying dishes.

THE FLAVOUR SYSTEM

Thai cuisine is built on the balance of opposing yet complementary flavours — sweet, sour, salty, spicy and fresh.

The result is food that is vibrant, aromatic, complex and remarkably balanced.

KITCHEN HAIKU

Crisp papaya, bright lime
Chilli, salt, sweet and sour
Balance in each bite

FEATURED DISH

SOM TAM THAI
Green Papaya Salad

A classic Thai salad that demonstrates the balance of opposites: sweet, sour, salty, spicy and fresh.

THE FIVE FLAVOURS

SWEET (Wan)
Rounds, softens and brings harmony.

SOUR (Priao)
Lifts, brightens and adds freshness.

SALTY (Khem)
Provides depth, seasoning and structure.

SPICY (Phet)
Brings heat and energy.

FRESH (Hom)
Adds aroma, crispness and a clean finish.

KEY INGREDIENTS

Green Papaya • Lime • Fish Sauce
Palm Sugar • Chillies • Garlic
Long Beans • Tomato • Peanuts

WHY IT WORKS

BALANCE
Contrasting flavours work together, not against each other.

CONTRAST
The interplay of sweet, sour, salty, spicy and fresh creates excitement.

LAYERING
Flavour is built in stages, with each ingredient playing a specific role.

TECHNIQUE
Pounding, mixing and gentle bruising release flavour and create texture.

KEY THAI FLAVOUR BUILDERS

FISH SAUCE (Salinity)	PALM SUGAR (Sweetness)	LIME (Acidity)	CHILLIES (Heat)	GARLIC (Aroma)	LEMONGRASS (Fragrance)	GALANGAL (Warmth)	KAFFIR LIME (Perfume)	CORIANDER (Freshness)
Savoury depth and seasoning.	Natural sweetness and roundness.	Brightness and lift.	Vibrant, controllable heat.	Pungent depth and energy.	Citrus aroma and freshness	Peppery, aromatic complexity.	Distinctive citrus aroma.	A clean, herbaceous finish.

THE BALANCE OF OPPOSITES



COOKING APPLICATIONS

SALADS	STIR-FRIES	CURRIES	SOUPS
Fresh, crisp and vibrant.	Fast, aromatic and balanced.	Rich, spicy, and layered.	Fragrant, spicy and refreshing.

TEXTURE & CONTRAST

CRUNCHY (Nuts)	CRISP (Vegetables)	TENDER (Meats)	CHEWY (Noodles)
Texture and richness.	Freshness and structure.	Succulence and balance.	Satisfaction and variety.

CHEF'S INSIGHT

Thai cooking is about contrast and harmony. The strength of the cuisine lies in the way sweet, sour, salty, spicy and fresh elements are combined, with texture adding the final dimension.

"In Thai cuisine, flavour comes from contrast — opposites that work together to create balance." — Mark J French

CHEFSNOTEBOOKS.COM

The Chef's Five-Point Check

BEFORE IT LEAVES THE WOK

01 Is the savoury foundation clear without excessive saltiness?

02 Does sweetness round the flavours rather than dominate?

03 Is acidity sufficient to lift the richness?

04 Are the aromatics fragrant rather than burnt?

05 Have contrasting textures been preserved?

The best dishes are balanced before they reach the table.



Chef's Insight

"Good technique releases flavour while preserving the character of the ingredient."

Kitchen Practice – Five Ways to Build Thai Flavour Balance

1. Establish the Leading Flavour

Decide whether the dish should be predominantly sour, spicy, savoury or sweet.

2. Build the Supporting Contrasts

Use palm sugar, lime, fish sauce and chilli to create a deliberate relationship between the flavours.

3. Release Aromatics Carefully

Bruise, pound or briefly cook ingredients according to the preparation, allowing their natural oils and fragrances to develop.

4. Preserve Texture

Avoid overworking crisp vegetables or overcooking ingredients that should retain their structure.

5. Taste and Adjust

Assess the finished dish as a whole. Adjust gradually until the contrasting flavours work together.

Balance the contrasts. Preserve the freshness. Respect the texture.





A practical application of this week's flavour system

Som Tam Thai

Som Tam Thai is one of the clearest demonstrations of Thailand's Balance of Opposites.

Finely shredded unripe green papaya is combined with long beans, tomato, dried shrimp and roasted peanuts.

A dressing of fresh lime juice, fish sauce, palm sugar and bird's-eye chillies creates the characteristic sweet, sour, salty and spicy contrast.

Garlic and chillies are pounded in a mortar, then incorporated with the papaya.





What This Dish Teaches

·SWEET - Palm sugar rounds the sharper elements.

·SOUR - Fresh lime provides brightness and lift.

·SALTY - Fish sauce and dried shrimp contribute savoury depth.

·SPICY - Bird's-eye chillies introduce vibrant heat.

·FRESH - Green papaya, long beans & tomato provide a clean, refreshing character.

·TEXTURE - Crisp papaya and beans contrast with roasted peanuts and tender dried shrimp.

The dish should taste lively and harmonious, without becoming excessively sweet, salty or hot.

The balance comes from the interaction of every ingredient.

🔗 **Recipe: Som Tam Thai**

The Liquid Counterpoint -Thai Lemongrass & Lime Cooler

A refreshing infusion of lemongrass, lightly sweetened and finished with fresh lime.

Its refreshing acidity provides an appealing counterpoint to spicy Thai preparations.

From the Kitchen - The Mortar and Pestle

The traditional Thai mortar and pestle is far more than a tool for crushing ingredients.

It releases aromatic oils, bruises vegetables and helps integrate seasonings.

For Som Tam, the technique is particularly important.

Garlic and chillies are pounded to develop their character.

Long beans and tomatoes are gently bruised.

The shredded papaya is then tossed and lightly worked with the dressing.

Too much force destroys the texture.

Too little leaves the ingredients insufficiently integrated.



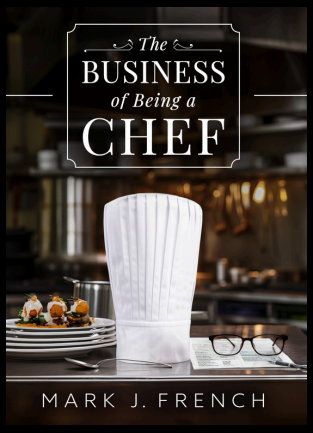
Further Reading & Resources

From the Library

See flavour balance charts and acidity mapping in the ChefsNotebooks archives.

The Business of Being a Chef

For a deeper understanding of flavour structure and kitchen systems, The Business of Being a Chef provides useful operational context alongside culinary insight.
🔗https://chefsnotebooks.com/books



The Business of Being a Chef is the result of more than 30 years of experience in hotels and restaurants throughout the world. It is a guide to managing the multiple business demands of today's executive chef, encompassing diverse areas including cooking, taste, food safety, human resources, finance, and sales & marketing, amongst others. It is also a great resource for operations managers.

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About the Author

Mark J French is a hotelier, chef, consultant, and author of several books on culinary arts and business. Based in the UK and Philippines, he blends classical training with global flavours.



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