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HUNGRY for the HILLS

YOUNG RESIDENTS OF A CHIANG RAI VILLAGE SET OUT TO TURN THEIR HOME INTO A FOODIE'S PARADISE

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THE SUNDAY NATION

THE VILLAGE of Doi Mae Salong in Chiang Rai's Northern highlands has long been a popular destination with winter weekenders eager to enjoy some chilly weather, savour the local Chinese cuisine and sip the Oolong tea for which its plantations are known.

But once winter is over, the tourists tend to disappear and now the residents, with the help of a group of academics, are trying to woo them back throughout the year by promoting the area as a gastronomic village whose local cuisine tracks the legacy of the Chinese who found refuge here.

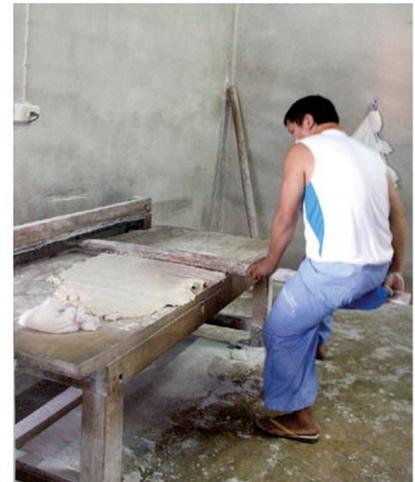
"Many of the residents of Doi Mae Salong are descendants of the anti-communist Kuomintang (KMT) forces who were granted citizenship in return for policing the area against communist infiltration. Their unique cuisine was born out of struggle, bravery, tolerance and love, and speaks loudly about the history and culture," says Pollavat Prapatpong from the School of Liberal Arts, Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai.

**Salted, air-dried pork sautéed with green pepper and onion****Stir-fried minced pork with pickled cabbages****Spicy and sour wonton**

Pollavat has joined young residents to research the roots of Doi Mae Salong foods in a bid to promote sustainable tourism and instil a sense of pride among the local people.

"We want to develop our home in a sustainable way based on our own roots and culture. After completing secondary school here, most young people head to the urban centres to find work. Only the old generation remains in the highlands. The pilot project to promote their traditional comfort foods aims to be easily accessible to the public," says Danita Tantivanit, 35, a granddaughter of Gen Tuan Shi-wen, leader of Kuomintang's 93rd Division, which sought asylum in Mae Salong.

With funding and academic support from Mae Fah Luang University, the five-month research project undertaken last year has produced a Thai-pocket paperback titled "Ros Mae Salong: Moo Baan Aharn" ("Taste of Mae Salong: The Gastronomic Village"). One thousand copies have been printed and distributed to restaurants and institutions in Doi Mae Salong and various tourist attractions in Chiang Rai



ABOVE: Fahlong Sae Suen keeps the age-old art of noodle-making alive by bouncing up and down on a wooden pole to knead the dough.

TOP LEFT: The Yunnan Noodle shop is famous for its egg noodle soup.

LEFT: Yupin Cheewinkulthong, a third-generation member of the Wang Put Tan tea family, is among the young residents hoping to promote Doi Mae Salong as a gastronomic village.

BOTTOM: The morning fresh market at Doi Mae Salong offers both fresh and preserved produce.



town.

The book compiles the traditional foods found in the valley. Some are family recipes, others dishes available at restaurants, and the book also explains the origins of the community, which is still home to the survivors of Chiang Kai-Shek's forces and their supporters who in

their prime fought the Red Army, but were forced to seek refuge on the Thai border after the communists came to power in 1949.

After Mao Zedong's communist party victory in China, the defeated KMT armies led by Chiang Kai-Shek relocated from Yunnan and struggled in the rugged mountain terrain

of Myanmar and Laos for many years before moving to Taiwan. However, thousands of soldiers of the 93rd Division led by generals Tuan Shiwen and Lee Wen-huan refused to surrender and were forced to relocate to the border of Northern Thailand in 1961.

The KMT members assisted the



Fried pork belly tossed with fried tea leaves



Egg noodle soup with wonton and dried noodle topped with shredded chicken

Thai government in policing the area against communist infiltration during the 1970s and early 1980s and were eventually granted Thai citizenship and given land in Doi Mae Salong where the government encouraged them to take up farming. The demography of the village has changed little over the years, with the majority of the inhabitants today ethnic Chinese and descendants of the original KMT soldiers.

“The core food culture of Doi Mae Salong is about preservation. Due to the hardships of living in a remote and deprived area, they had to find

ways to keep ingredients edible for as long as possible,” says Pollavat.

“Preserved Chinese cabbage was among the most common ingredients. The weather was generally cold and even in April, the barometer rarely rose above 20 degrees Celsius. Their traditional *moo nam khang* (salted air-dried pork) was so salty that soldiers could eat only a tiny slice with a bowl of rice. The people raised pigs because they were easy to feed and a single braised pork knuckle could feed a group of soldiers.”

Danita runs the resort-cum-



Sauteed wild termite mushroom



Yunnanese-style kanom tuay

NATION/EKKARAT SUKPECTH

restaurant Baan Hom Muen Lee where visitors can find several Yunnanese-style dishes including sauteed *hed khon paa* (wild termite mushrooms), which are sun-dried then tossed in hot oil, garlic and dried chilli.

"This mushroom is only available during the rainy season. Because of the limited ingredients available here in the past, the food must be cooked in such a way that a little of it eaten with rice goes a long way. You only need a small spoonful of this mushroom with a large bowl of rice for a satisfying meal," says Danita, who graduated in fashion design at Rangsit University then returned home to run the family business.

Another returnee is Yupin Cheewinkulthong, 29, whose family has run Wang Put Tan, one of the largest tea plantations at Doi Mae Salong, for three generations. She came back four years ago after graduating in business from East Central University in the US. In addition to running the family business and a restaurant-cum-teahouse, she has opened a boutique hotel.

"After seven years in the US, I started to look back at my origins. Watching the 1990 Taiwanese drama 'A Home Too Far' based on the true story of the 93rd Division taking refuge in Mae Salong, also influenced my decision to come back and help develop my hometown," she says.

In addition to developing blends of Oolong tea, Wang Put Tan also grows Chinese plums, using the fruits for both tea and cider. The brews have proved popular with visitors and the tea leaves are also used in several savoury dishes, among them fried pork belly tossed with fried tea leaves; spicy minced pork salad with fresh tea leaves; and omelette stuffed with minced pork and tea leaves.

A variety of Chinese dishes can be sampled at Suehai restaurant. The signature dishes are *moo nam khang* sauteed with green pepper and onion, stir-fried minced pork with pickled cabbage, and fried goat cheese.

"We only make *moo nam khang* during winter. I use the meat of black pigs that are fed with corn and banana and raised at Doi Mae

Salong. This is then marinated with Chinese herbs and curing salt. After several days, it is air-dried at night and sun-dried during the day for a week. The natural air-drying technique removes almost half of the liquid from the pork, making it tender and tasty. The meat can be kept for six months if stored in a freezer," says owner Suehai Sae Wang.

Yunnan Noodle Shop is the last restaurant to maintain the age-old art of noodle making and Fahlong Sae Suen, 42, makes his fresh egg noodles twice a day – in the morning and the afternoon.

For each session, Fahlong mixes 10 kilograms of flour with 40 eggs and 1.9kg of water. When the ingredients are well mixed and the dough is the right consistency, he straddles a wooden pole, bouncing up and down as if on a see-saw, to knead the dough.

The thin bed of perfectly pressed dough is then placed in machines to further thin it and cut into fine noodles. The whole process takes almost an hour and produces 14kg noodles or about 130 portions. A bowl of noodle soup topped with shredded chicken sells for just Bt40.

CJ Food is popular for its spicy and sour wonton. Choo Hong Tee inherited the recipe from his aunt who lives in Taiwan. The wonton dumplings stuffed with minced pork are seasoned with sour and soy sauce

and tossed with fried garlic, and a spicy seasoning made from fine minced pork, ground peanuts and ground chilli sauteed with oil.

Pantipa Kijvithee, whose family runs the tea plantation Ming Yong and a teahouse called Up to You, has turned favourite comfort food stir-fried minced pork with pickled cabbage into an appetiser.

Inspired by *kanom tuay* (steamed coconut milk pudding in a small-sized cup), the stir-fried minced pork with pickled cabbage is layered in a cup with coconut cream mixed with rice flour and arrowroot and steamed for 10 minutes. It's then topped with fried shallot, chopped spring onion and coriander leaves, dried chilli and crispy pork crackling. Her creation sells for Bt70 for six cups.

"For dipping sauce, I use homemade soy sauce without preservatives. It's then mixed with black soy sauce, pounded fresh chill and lemon juice," says Pantipa.

The more than 10 dishes covered in the book can be served as a tasting menu though bookings must be made in advance.

"We try to encourage local people, particularly the young generation, to be proud of the local wisdom and our origins through our foods. We hope it will also generate additional income for the villagers," Danita says.

TEMPTING TASTES

- For a free copy of book, contact the Mekong Basin Civilisation Museum, Mae Fah Luang University, call (053) 917 067 or e-mail mekong-museum@mfu.ac.th.
- Baan Hom Muen Lee can be reached at (053) 765 455 or www.BaanHomMuenLee.com.
- Wang Put Tan can be contacted at (053) 765 094 or www.WangPutTan.com.
- Call (053) 727 168 for Suehai restaurant
- Call (053) 765 185 for Yunnan Noodle Shop
- Call (080) 775 8827 for CJ Food restaurant
- Call (089) 162 1528 for Up to You teahouse

