

and depth of flavor. To coax the right character out of these two aromatics, we found that cooking them to the point of browning was critical; they tasted mellow, sweet, and mildly toasty.

Tamarind was the most enigmatic ingredient on our list. Tamarind is a fruit that grows as a round brown pod about five inches long and is often sold as a paste (a hard, flat brick) or as a sticky concentrate. (For more information, see page 479.) It is central—if not essential—to the unique flavor of pad thai. Tests showed that tamarind paste has a fresher, brighter, fruitier flavor than concentrate, which tasted dull by comparison. For those who cannot obtain either tamarind paste or concentrate, we worked out a formula of equal parts lime juice and water as a stand-in. This mixture produces a less interesting and less authentic dish, but we polished off several such platefuls with no qualms.

We tried a little ketchup, but its vinegary tomato flavor was out of place. As for soy sauce, even just a mere tablespoon was a big bully—its assertive flavor didn't play nicely with the others.

The other ingredients in pad thai are sautéed shrimp, scrambled eggs, chopped peanuts, bean sprouts, and scallions. For more textural intrigue and to achieve authentic pad thai flavor, dried shrimp and Thai salted preserved radish are optional but worthy embellishments (both sold in Asian grocery stores). Dried shrimp are sweet, salty, and intensely shrimp-y and they add tiny bursts of incredible flavor. We used 2 tablespoons of the smallest dried shrimp we could find and chopped them up finer still, because tasters asked that their firm, chewy texture be mitigated. Thai salted preserved radish is brownish yellow in color, dry, and a bit wrinkled and it is sold in long sections (think daikon radish) folded into a flimsy plastic package. Two tablespoons of chopped salted radish added piquant, savory bits with a good crunch.

Oddly, after consuming dozens of servings of pad thai, we did not feel glutted. We were addicted. These days, if we order it in a restaurant, we prepare ourselves for disappointment. We've come to think that pad thai is best when made at home.

Pad Thai

SERVES 4

For an accurate measurement of boiling water, bring a full kettle of water to boil, then measure out the desired amount. Although this dish cooks very quickly, the ingredient list is long, and everything must be prepared and within easy reach at the stovetop when you begin cooking.

SAUCE (Double)

4x 2 tablespoons tamarind paste plus ¼ cup boiling water or tamarind substitute (see page 479)

6x 3 tablespoons fish sauce

1x 3 tablespoons sugar

4x 2 tablespoons vegetable oil

2x 1 tablespoon rice vinegar

1x ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper

+ 1 tsp soy sauce + ½ tsp garlic powder

NOODLES, SHRIMP, AND GARNISH

8 ounces (¼-inch-wide) dried flat rice noodles (see page 470)

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

12 ounces medium shrimp (40 to 50 per pound), peeled and deveined (see page 363)

Salt

3x 1 medium shallot, minced

6x 3 garlic cloves, minced or pressed through a garlic press (about 1 tablespoon)

4x 2 large eggs, lightly beaten

1x 1 tablespoon dried shrimp, chopped fine (optional)

2x 2 tablespoons chopped Thai salted preserved radish (optional)

1/2x ¼ cup chopped unsalted roasted peanuts, plus extra for garnish

4x 3 cups bean sprouts (about 6 ounces)

6x 3 scallions, green parts only, sliced thin on the bias (see page 505)

¼x 1 cup loosely packed fresh cilantro leaves (optional)

1 lime, cut into wedges (for serving)

Soak noodles

warm H₂O until barely soft. Finish cooking in sauce

480 Have shrimp and peanuts + onion ready
pre-cut limes,

1. FOR THE SAUCE: Following the instructions on page 479, soak and rehydrate the tamarind paste in the boiling water until softened, about 10 minutes. Push the tamarind mixture through a fine-mesh strainer into a medium bowl to remove the seeds and fibers and extract as much pulp as possible. Stir in the remaining sauce ingredients and set aside.

2. FOR THE NOODLES, SHRIMP, AND GARNISH: Bring 4 quarts of water to a boil in a large pot. Remove the boiling water from the heat, add the rice noodles, and let stand, stirring occasionally, until the noodles are tender, about 10 minutes. Drain the noodles and set aside.

3. Heat 1 tablespoon of the oil in a 12-inch non-stick skillet over high heat until just smoking. Add the shrimp, sprinkle with ½ teaspoon salt, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the shrimp are opaque and browned around the edges, about 3 minutes. Transfer the shrimp to a plate and set aside.

4. Add the remaining tablespoon oil, shallot, garlic, and ½ teaspoon salt to the skillet, return to medium heat, and cook, stirring constantly, until light golden brown, about 1½ minutes. Stir in the eggs and cook, stirring constantly, until scrambled and barely moist, about 20 seconds.

5. Add the drained rice noodles, dried shrimp (if using), and salted radish (if using), and toss to combine. Add the sauce, increase the heat to high, and cook, tossing constantly, until the noodles are evenly coated, about 1 minute.

6. Add the cooked shrimp, peanuts, bean sprouts, and all but ¼ cup of the scallions and continue to cook, tossing constantly, until the noodles are tender, about 2½ minutes. (If not yet tender, add 2 tablespoons water to the skillet and continue to cook until tender.) Transfer the noodles to a serving platter, sprinkle with the reserved ¼ cup scallions, cilantro (if using) and additional peanuts. Serve immediately with the lime wedges.

VARIATION

Pad Thai with Tofu

Tofu is a good and common addition to pad thai.

Add 4 ounces of extra-firm or pressed tofu, cut into ½-inch cubes (about 1 cup), to the skillet along with the cooked shrimp in step 6.