

# At Nari, a Thai Chef Revitalizes Fine Dining

Nari | NYT Critic's Pick | Thai | \$\$\$ | 1625 Post Street | 415-868-6274

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SAN FRANCISCO — A wreck of juicy, half-busted Gulf prawns and kapi, the concentration of salted, fermented krill, beats with unripe Meyer lemon — so freshly smashed, so intensely seasoned, it tastes alive.

Like much of the unflinching cooking at Nari, which opened last August in San Francisco's Japantown, the dish is absolutely delicious.

Good nam prik is made in a mortar, a little at a time, and though it's often called a “dip” or “relish” in English, translation diminishes it. Luckily, the servers at Nari, who want you to enjoy yourself, do more than translate.

Sensitive to the fact that many diners in San Francisco are more familiar with dishes like pad thai and tom kha gai, which dominate American Thai menus, they'll explain nam prik kapi plah as they set it down. It is very powerful, they say. Its fishiness can be divisive, they warn. But this is at the heart of what it is.

So put a little onto your plate, and use it to dress a few bites of white rice. Chomp on fresh hearts of palm and radish as you go, and see what you think of that unripe Meyer lemon, standing in for the more hard-to-find citrus, som sa.

Pim Techamuanvivit's kitchen reaches for local seasonal fruit, from green Meyers and pluots to fingertip-staining blood oranges, and dissolves Early Girl tomatoes into curry paste. But that easygoing confluence of Californian and Thai ingredients isn't what makes Nari so extraordinary.

Thai chefs have been swapping in local ingredients for decades here, whether for fun or out of necessity. In Los Angeles, the crux for Thai cuisine in the United States, cooks often struggled to find traditional Thai ingredients before Bangkok Market opened in the early 1970s.



Meals at Nari are served family-style, and start with bright little bites such as pla haeng — fruit topped with crisp trout and shallots. Celeste Noche for The New York Times

The availability of makrut lime, shrimp pastes, a variety of fish sauces and herbs grew, alongside the arrival of more Thai immigrants. There are now more than 200,000 people with Thai roots living in California, more than any place in the world outside Thailand.

But Thai restaurants still push up against unreasonable expectations that they be casual and cheap, spicy and scrappy. Many, for the sake of business, serve only a small group of familiar dishes, in familiar presentations, in familiarly decorated spaces. Choose your curry, choose your protein, choose your heat level.

Ms. Techamuanvivit, 49, opened her first restaurant, Kin Khao, on the edge of the Tenderloin in 2014, and subverted many of these expectations. Nari rejects them entirely for a more modern, luxurious, exuberant vision of Thai cuisine.

Servers lap the dining room at a fast pace, in part because it's so big — two stories and about 100 seats, none of them squashed together. The space, inside the Hotel Kabuki, is stunning, with an extravagance of plant life and light, all smooth, bare surfaces of concrete and wood. At night, when the surrounding businesses go dark, Nari glows.

Meghan Clark, who traveled with Ms. Techamuanvivit to Thailand when she took over the Bangkok restaurant Nahm, and has been cooking with her for years, runs the kitchen as chef de cuisine. Ms. Clark is meticulous, both expressive and obsessive in her deep, continuing study of Thai cuisine.

I spent a few days traveling with the two chefs in 2018, to report a profile of Ms. Techamuanvivit, a former food blogger and jam maker who worked for several years in the tech industry. But I did manage recently to sneak into Nari's dining room a couple of times unnoticed. (Those meals were just as good, if not better, than the final one, when I was spotted.)

In Bangkok, two years ago, Ms. Techamuanvivit told me that she planned to call her next restaurant Nari, for the women who carried Thai cuisine forward, and shared their culinary knowledge with her. That sounded nice, but a restaurant's name can be as empty as a tote bag printed with a feminist slogan. What did it mean?

At Nari, it means that a team of women lead the restaurant at every level, buying wine from several women-run wineries along with spirits made by women. Megan Daniel Hoang's cocktail menu is thoughtful in ways more drinks menus should be — I find it so useful, when choosing a drink, to see each one marked with the shape of the glass that it comes in.

Meals at this level of excellence, using ingredients of this quality, in a space so beautifully designed, are often structured in a traditionally French way, course by course, with each person getting her own plate. Or as a tasting menu. But Nari presents everything family-style, taking cues from Thai dining.

Choose your dishes as a group, and the food rolls along in a few waves, cluttering the center of the table each time. A swell of bright little bites at the beginning of dinner might include glossy, delicate betel leaves filled with trout roe and stone fruit, seasoned with fish-sauce caramel, or tiny spheres of fried headcheese curry, the threads of meat buoyant in a thick, gelatinous sauce.

Ma hor — fruit with a soft, sticky, candylike paste of peanuts, pork and shrimp — is one of many dishes at Nari with roots in Thai royal kitchens, or the kitchens of wealthy Thai families. The kitchen plays with that fruit base, skipping effortlessly from kiwi to pluots to oranges.

A surge of small dishes follows. I recommend the laab hed, a hot jumble of mushrooms, grainy with roasted rice powder and rich with the flavor of the grill, incandescent with lime and chile. And the coconut-rich seafood curry, roasted like custard inside a carefully folded banana leaf, which carries the

fragrance of makrut lime.

But before you can look at the dessert menu (where the cool pandan parfait is waiting), your table is cleared for nam prik, rice and curries.

The game hen, stuffed with lemongrass, comes with a ruffle of roti, pliable and laminated, flaky at the edges, ideal for cleaning out the sauce at the bottom of the dish. And the eggplant curry, hidden under fried shallots, also has an abundance of texture — a vegetable cooked to its zenith — in various places crisp, chewy, sticky or slippery.

Nothing mandates that a family-style dinner can't be this elegant and ambitious. But as a format, family-style is often undervalued in the United States, signaling quick home cooking rather than labor-intensive fine dining. Nari quietly challenges this.

Though you can't help but notice the finesse and creativity of Ms. Techamuanvivit's kitchen, that work won't be emphasized by servers. Instead, diners pass food around the table, focusing on one another, relaxing into the space and its pleasures. Isn't this what going out to dinner is about?

Nari is extraordinary, not only because it refuses to flatten Thai cuisine into a Eurocentric model, but because of what it offers us instead.

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