

DISCOVERING THE BURMESE TABLE IN YANGON

Worldly Delights

Mardi Michels

Whether you call it Burma or Myanmar, for many the name still conjures up images of a mystical, far-away land, unknown to westerners as it was subject to a tourism boycott until relatively recently. The few guidebooks tout the virtues of a few “must see” sites in Yangon: the majestic Shwedagon Paya, the most sacred of all Buddhist sites for the Burmese (don’t miss it at sunset where the party-like atmosphere is in stark contrast to the serenity of the daytime), Sule Paya, the fanciest centrepiece for a traffic roundabout you’ll ever encounter and Chaukhtatgyi Paya, containing a 70m long reclining Buddha statue are just three of these. But as with any country, one must explore the local food to fully understand the culture. On arrival in Yangon after a long series of flights, we’re too tired to explore, but too hungry to stay put. Eager to sample the local culinary scene, we stumble out of our hotel, blinking in the bright midday sunshine and follow a rough map that will take us to what our guidebook calls reliable local food.



A few blocks from our hotel is 29th Street - a jumble of cars, bikes, pedestrians and street food stalls with locals enjoying lunch and we struggle to spot street numbers amongst the Burmese script on storefronts. Danuphyu Daw Saw Yi really is a “blink and you’d miss it” kind of place.

We climb a narrow staircase to an unassuming cafeteria-style room and are greeted by a manager. In broken English he indicates a counter with a wide variety of dishes and asks what we want. We’re spoiled for choice - lamb, shrimp, chicken, beef, pork and a huge selection of vegetables. We steal a glance around the busy restaurant to see what others are doing, to figure out how this meal works and realize we just have to select the few dishes we want. It’s like a picture menu come to life!

There’s so much choice and we’re not really sure about some dishes but select spicy chicken, lamb curry, butter beans and a cress/mushroom dish. No sooner do we sit down than a steaming bowl of what smells like fish broth appears. We must look confused because someone rushes over saying “Free! Free!” It’s a clear, sour broth with a few vegetables

that works like a palate cleanser that we will need because soon we’re surrounded by not only the dishes we ordered but many other condiments and salads. And, of course, rice.

We feel slightly embarrassed at the amount of dishes we have but soon a local couple occupies the other end of the table and proceed to order even more than us. We watch what they do with the condiments and side dishes. And follow suit. Right down to using our forks in our left hands to scoop the food into the spoon in our right and eating with the spoon.

That first meal in Burma was such a pleasant culinary surprise: salty, spicy, sour and bitter notes (sometimes all in the same mouthful!) woke up our airline-food dulled palates, our fellow diners taught us table manners, Burmese-style setting us up to confidently enjoy many similar meals. And all for about \$3CAD each including a large beer! The food is not overly spicy and shallots, garlic, ginger and chilies feature prominently, as does fish sauce and shrimp paste. It’s flavourful. Burmese food certainly does not have the same reputation as its neighbours Thailand, India or China but it deserves to.

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For a traditional “rice meal” in a Yangon restaurant more used to tourists which still maintains an authentic vibe (the day we were there we were the only tourists), you should head to *Feel Myanmar Food*, a short taxi ride from the centre of town.

Again, the meat and vegetable curries are displayed prominently behind glass at the back of the main room, and next to them, dishes containing the salad components, which are chopped and prepared to order. We select shrimp curry, chicken curry, potato salad and papaya salad, and once again, our table (big enough for four people) is covered in dishes, but this time we know what to do with most of the condiments and sides. Slightly more expensive at around \$6 per person, including drinks, the atmosphere is less chaotic, less canteen-like. Highly recommended.

The rice meal is something we experienced many times through our travels in Burma and each time we discovered a new favourite. A true revelation and one that has inspired many different flavour combinations in our home kitchen.

Dining Recommendations:
Danuphyu Daw Saw Yi
175-177, 29th St., Upper Blk.,
Pabedan Tsp, Yangon

Feel Myanmar Food
124, Pyihtaungsu Yeiktha Street,
Dagon Tsp, Yangon

BURMESE CHICKEN CURRY

Ingredients (Serves 6)

- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 6 chicken thighs (bone in, skin on)
- 1 large white onion, roughly chopped
- 1 796ml can diced tomatoes
- 4 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
- 1 (4 inch x 2 inch) piece of ginger, peeled and roughly chopped
- 1 bunch cilantro, stalks rinsed and patted dry, roughly chopped
- 1 hot banana pepper, diced
- 1 teaspoon anchovy paste
- 2 teaspoons chili powder
- 2 teaspoons paprika
- 1 tablespoon brown sugar
- 3 tablespoons fish sauce
- 2 Japanese eggplants, quartered lengthways then cut into cubes
- 16 white mushrooms, quartered
- A handful of cilantro leaves, roughly chopped for garnish



Directions

- 1 In a heavy pan, heat the vegetable oil at medium-high heat. Place the chicken thighs, skin side down (don’t crowd them, you might need to do 2 batches) in the hot oil until they are well browned, about 5 minutes.
- 2 Turn the chicken over and brown on the other side. Drain on paper towels and set aside.
- 3 Place remaining ingredients (except the eggplants, mushrooms and cilantro leaves) in a food processor and pulse until all ingredients are combined. It will resemble a chunky tomato sauce.
- 4 Heat the sauce in a large pot (big enough to hold the sauce, the chicken and vegetables) over high heat.
- 5 When the sauce just starts to bubble, place the chicken thighs in the sauce, making sure they are submerged in the sauce. If need be, add a little water.
- 6 Bring to high heat (the mix will be bubbling).
- 7 Reduce the heat to medium, partially cover the pot and simmer for 40 minutes.
- 8 Keep checking in during the 40 minutes – you might need to add more water to keep the chicken submerged.
- 9 Stir and add the vegetables and continue to cook, covered, for a further 15-20 minutes (depending on how tender you like your vegetables).
- 10 Serve with plain, steamed rice and a scattering of cilantro leaves.

Adapted with permission from a recipe by Burmese food writer and blogger MiMi Aye of meemalee.com