



Bamboo steamer



Carbon steel wok

Composing a Well-Balanced Thai Meal

What Exactly Are We Balancing?

After years of teaching Thai cooking, I'm beginning to feel like a broken record whenever I say that Thai food is all about *balance*.

But people sometimes misunderstand and think that this means each dish has to have a balance of sweet, salty, sour, and spicy. This is not true; if it did, everything would taste the same! In each dish, you've got a flavor "target" to hit. For some dishes it'll be sweet and salty, for others it might be salty and sour, and for some it'll be a little bit of everything. Each dish has its own flavor identity. But the balance has to happen at the level of the whole meal.

Thai food is usually served family style, with multiple dishes on the table shared by everyone. (I say "usually" because some dishes are meant to be served on their own.) So, on the family-style table, the choice of which dishes to serve together makes a big difference to the overall experience of the meal. I'm happy to know that many people are aware of this, because I have received many messages asking what dishes they should serve together.

In my first book, I discuss the issue of balance from the perspective of what kinds of dishes you should have on the table. But after speaking to many fans and followers of my YouTube channel, I realize that many people plan their Thai meal based on the one or two dishes that they want to make. So the question is usually worded something like "I want to make X. What else should I serve that would go well with X?" And in the same way, as you browse through this book, you'll probably find yourself drawn toward a particular dish you want to try. So here are some guiding questions to help you build a well-balanced meal around that dish.

The Dish You Want to Make, Is It...

RICH? If so, have something light and refreshing, such as a salad or broth soup, on the table.

SOUPY? This includes anything with lots of liquid, whether it's a soup, a stew, or a curry. If so, serve a "dry" dish with it, like something grilled or

deep-fried, or a stir-fry that's not too saucy.

MEAT-CENTRIC? If so, make sure you've got lots of vegetables to lighten it up and provide different textures.

SPICY? If so, make sure you have something not spicy on the table. I know some people will say "But I love spicy food!" Yes, I do too, but having something not spicy to provide contrast will make the spicy dish even more satisfying.

SOFT? This is something like a tender steamed fish, an eggplant stir-fry, or a curry with potato. If so, also have something crisp or crunchy on the table.

OPPOSITE OF THE ABOVE? Then simply reverse it.

What Is the Prominent Taste of This Dish? Is It...

SWEET? Some Thai dishes have a sweeter flavor profile, like the Instant Pot (or Not) Massaman Curry Chicken ([this page](#)), and if you've got that on the table, it's important to also have something that's tart and bright, to keep the sweetness from becoming cloying. Salty foods don't cut sweetness nearly as well as acidic foods do. Most Thai salads are sour and fresh-tasting, so that's always an easy solution to turn to.

SOUR? We love our limes and our tamarind in Thailand, so many dishes are prominently sour, whether they're salads, soups, or (even) curries. You can balance sour with sweet or salty dishes, but another great way to do it is with heavy, starchy foods. It's not a coincidence that many Thais love *laab*, including Beef Laab ([this page](#)), a lime-heavy dish, with dense and chewy sticky rice. Heavy noodles also work; we sometimes serve papaya salad with a rice noodle stir-fry, such as the Minimalist Pad Thai ([this page](#)). Rich and creamy dishes such as my coconut milk-based Quick Yellow Curry with Beef ([this page](#)) can help give more substance to acidic foods which tend to be light.

SALTY? Saltiness seems to be the most neutral of the tastes, in the sense that all savory dishes have to have some saltiness as the base seasoning, just to bring out the flavors of all the ingredients in the dish. And when saltiness is the prominent taste (think salty fried chicken), the need to balance it with something else isn't as strong. Having said that, I think a salty dish can only be elevated when paired with something sweet and/or sour. This is why our go-to dipping sauce for salty fried foods like fried chicken is the sweet and vinegary chili sauce that lines just about every supermarket shelf these days!



Whoa, That's a Lot to Think About!

I know it sounds like a lot, but trust me, it's actually intuitive, especially once you become familiar with several Thai dishes. It's second nature for most Thais, and every time I'm with friends and family in Thailand ordering food at a restaurant, it's an interesting dynamic to observe. It starts with a couple of people ordering something based on their wants, and from that point on, you can see the wheels turning for everyone else, using those first dishes as a base for ordering the rest of the meal. I don't think most people even realize that's what they're doing, but it becomes clear that balance is on everyone's minds when you hear people veto suggestions with "Too many soupy things already" or "We already have two deep-fried dishes." One point that's often brought up when my friends and I order food is "We don't have any vegetables yet." Seems like we often forget about vegetables when faced with tantalizing meat and seafood options!

Tips for Fast and Efficient Cooking

If you want to cook *sabai-sabai* on a weeknight, you'll need to be efficient in the kitchen so that cooking the dishes don't end up being more time-consuming than necessary. Here are some tips:

Make Your Own Meal Kits

If you're not yet proficient with cooking Thai food, it may take you a bit longer, as you will still need to read recipes and don't yet have the muscle memory for the dishes. On the weekend or whenever you have time, you can do a lot of advance prep to cut down on the amount of time it takes on the day-of. Here are a few things you can do:

MAKE THE SAUCES. There are very few sauces I can think of that will not last in your fridge for at least 1 week and usually much longer. Curry sauces, stir-fry sauces, and dips can all be made in advance, then you can add meat and vegetables on the day-of. You can make curry sauces in bulk