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THAI WITH A HONG KONG TWIST

For 20 years, the Mango Tree brand has become a magnet for Thai food lovers. But with the growth of its empire in the East and West, success still depends on local tastes, as shown by its Hong Kong sister restaurants.
STORY APPLE MANDY

In a city where Thai restaurants abound, Mango Tree deserves attention. Its prime locations at Cubus in Causeway Bay and at Elements in West Kowloon, which opened in November 2011 and December 2012, respectively, have become a destination for those seeking authentic Thai cooking.

This chain of high-end restaurants is the brainchild of chief executive officer Pitaya Phanphensophon, a Bangkok-based chef with Chinese roots. When the original Mango Tree opened in Surawong, Bangkok, in 1994, the food appealed to critics. This led to the opening of its second location at O.P. Garden on Charoenkrung Road in 2009. Today, the brand has extended its branches to London, Tokyo, Dubai, Manila, and will soon open in Washington DC and Mumbai.

In Hong Kong, the franchise is owned by the 1957 Company, whose chief executive officer, Paul Kwok, designed the menu with Trevor MacKenzie, managing director of Exquisite System, a subsidiary of COCA Holding International, which owns Mango Tree restaurants worldwide. Most recipes, such as for the salads and curries, have been retained to keep the flavours consistent across other cities.

Thai cuisine, often described as complex, combines sweet, sour and spicy flavours. Harmony is the guiding principle, and authenticity must be guaranteed through the use of fresh ingredients, well-balanced taste and exquisite presentation. These principles also guide Mango Tree's Hong Kong chefs, who were rigorously trained by the Bangkok team.



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In Hong Kong, Mango Tree is famous for its *tom kha goong* (Thai coconut soup with shrimp), curry crab, char-grilled pork neck fillet, and chicken wrapped in pandan leaves – all from the Bangkok restaurant. However, some dishes from the original Pitaya menu were adapted to suit local palates. For instance, MacKenzie and his team's research showed that Hong Kongers love river prawns, so they baked them with Thai herbs, peppercorns and glass noodles, and served the dish in a clay pot. The lobster *phad samunprai* – dry-fried lobster with fresh Thai herbs and spices – is another example, with MacKenzie's team replacing regular seafood ingredients with something more premium.

Other dishes relying on Hong Kong favourites are the Thai sausage salad tossed with onions, Thai celery, chilli and garlic lime sauce, as well as barbecued Australian lamb racks served with fragrant Esan-style lime sauce and fresh mint. To bait seafood lovers, there's the stir-fried lobster in light yellow curry with egg, Thai celery, peppers and onions.

"Years ago, we did not have lamb, salmon, lobster and mussels in our menu, and many people were content to just slap Thai food on a plate and send it out," says MacKenzie. "We saw this as an opportunity through our travels, especially with the advent of Instagram and other social media. We began to refine our presentation and started using ingredients that weren't typically in Thai menus but appealed to people overseas." 🍷



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01 Curry crab

02 Mango Tree at Elements in West Kowloon

03 Pitaya Phanphensophon