

## Introduction

*This book is different. It's not a cookbook. . . . It's a food book.*

There's an Asian idiomatic expression: "Same, same . . . but different." It essentially means that what appears to be similar on the surface, turns out to have subtle but profound differences once you look a little deeper. That applies to the book you are holding right now! It works like a cookbook, but it's much more. It also takes you inside the life and mind of the people of Asia. Yes, there are recipes (more than 100 actually) and lots of photos (more than 700, all of which I snapped myself). Hundreds were captured as I traveled around Southeast Asia, a few are from around the United States, and hundreds of others were taken in my kitchen studio in Los Angeles.

My goal is to give you not just a taste, but a look, smell, and feel for these four countries: Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore. A true snapshot. Just as with any picture, although it may be an accurate representation, it is not an all-encompassing image. This subject is too big to cram into a library, let alone one book. There are other books that delve deeper into each region (pg. 364), and you should keep an eye out for my next volumes on each country. I share stories of real people, present recipes for authentic flavors, and provide you with the keys to unlock the mysteries of the ingredients of Asia. If you meander through these colorful pages, read some of the stories, and cook some recipes in each country's chapter, you will gain an understanding of what the true Southeast Asian flavors are. The geography, history, ethnic diversity, and culinary etiquette all converge into authentic recipes that represent culture on a plate.

I have been working on this book for decades and thought of publishing it many years ago. But the reality is that no publishing company was willing to create such an intricate book. Frankly, the cost of including all the photos I felt were needed was reason enough to send their financial teams into a tizzy. I wanted to create a book on my terms, similar to the way a chef opens his own restaurant to express his culinary vision—I wanted to serve you recipes and cultures I live, breathe, and love to cook. Similarly to how my colleagues open their first restaurants, I wanted to have the final say of what was included and how it was conveyed. Since my lifelong mission to share the cuisine and culture of my second home had not diminished, I simply had to start my own publishing company, and

hence Mortar & Press was born. My objective is to take you on a cooking adventure through the vibrant foods of a culinary paradise.

I have chosen to focus on only four countries for this book. Yes, there are others countries in Southeast Asia with amazing food, interesting people, and fascinating histories, but these four are where I live when not in the USA. These are the people whom I know abroad. And these four countries' similarities and differences can be illustrated within the context of cuisine and culture.

### ***Southeast Asia Captured My Heart: It Was Love at First Sight***

It all started nearly twenty years ago when I met a petite, beautiful Malaysian woman, Estrellita Leong. I had just finished high school and was taking some local culinary courses at El Camino Community College when we met. The next year she took me on my first adventure to Southeast Asia, a gift for which I will be forever grateful. This was the beginning of two love affairs. The first was with my adored wife, Estrellita Leong-Danhi, whom I call Esther. The second love is for the land from which she came, Southeast Asia.

That first trip was intense: a marathon of flight, countless new faces and family, and a menu full of smells, sounds, textures, and tastes that I'll never forget. When we arrived in Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur, we were greeted by Esther's brother, Glenn. They conspired to spoil me on local food even before we made it home. These folks were serious about food. Three weeks later, hooked on the food culture there and deeply attached to my new family, I didn't want to leave. I was in food heaven. We'd even driven down to Singapore, the food obsessed city-state at the most southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. I had a career to return to in America, but I knew this would be the first of many trips to this tropical food paradise.

### ***The Lifelong Adventure***

The two decades that followed transformed me into a "hard-boiled egg": a white shell on the outside, but Asian in my soul. I've journeyed for weeks and months at a time through the byways and alleys, farms and fields, markets and private homes of Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia,

and Singapore. The loves and losses, superstitions and idiosyncrasies of that region have been burned into my DNA. Esther's mom, Annie, has been my invaluable culinary guide, not only teaching me about Malaysian food, but also rounding up hard-to-find ingredients and smuggling them to me (thank goodness these ingredients are now available in the U.S.!).

## Abroad at Home

Ten years in professional kitchens led me into a side activity that came naturally for me: I began to teach the craft and art of cooking. At first it was in local cooking schools, cooking side by side with home cooks. I was sous chef at a Los Angeles neighborhood (Manhattan Beach) restaurant, working mornings and afternoons. I was approached by educators who wanted to tap my experience as a chef to train some cooks. I soon discovered that when you teach, you learn even more than the students. I began to formally document what I was experiencing on my culinary adventures to Asia. Over the next ten years, I spent time studying and traveling to other parts of Asia. Teaching in Korea, being a guest chef in Japan, wandering the rice paddies of Indonesia, and traversing the spice trails of India—these experiences all helped put these cuisines into context.

The comfort I found in teaching gave me the confidence I needed to talk my way into small kitchens in the back alleys of Malaysia and to convince food vendors in Thailand to share their secrets. I decided to take the leap into education full time. I devoted the next few years to developing the curriculum at the California School of Culinary Arts in Pasadena. The accrediting process I went through there taught me how to analyze a subject to discover its intricacies.

Then the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) brought me on to teach fundamental cooking skills. I wanted to teach the Asian cuisines I'd come to love. I immersed myself even further in the world of Asian cookery. I studied everything I could get my hands on, reading, cooking, and traveling there any chance I got. I was fortunate to lead the team of faculty redeveloping the Cuisines of Asia course at the CIA, an intensive part of the curriculum covering Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai, Malaysian,

Indonesian, and Indian cuisines. To hone my skills in Vietnamese cookery, the CIA sent me to Vietnam.

Vietnam was like stepping back in time. Women walked the bustling streets of Saigon with yokes across their backs, dangling burning embers of coal to keep cauldrons of soup simmering. Nothing could prepare me for the time warp of that country. Although I was on a tour with twenty-five other people, I was part of the crew running the trip, so I had a chance to interact closely with the Vietnamese people. We traveled from the southern capital of Saigon to the northernmost areas of Sapa and Bac Ha.

I stayed behind after the rest of the group went home, taking the opportunity to navigate quickly and cover a lot of ground with a private guide. This is when I realized the value of a dedicated guide in a country where you don't speak the language (Malaysia and Singapore are much easier, as a majority of the population speaks English). To be most efficient, I often used guides to find my way into the kitchens and homes of the small towns and villages in Vietnam, where I mastered the techniques I've committed to the pages of this book.

I've left full-time teaching at the CIA, but still stay involved there, leading projects and courses that require my specialized skills in research and development, culinary education training, and of course the cuisines of Southeast Asia. I now run a consulting business, Chef Danhi & Co., based in Los Angeles. I've developed a niche teaching about the cuisines and culture of Asia, working with restaurant chains, schools, food manufacturers, and professional associations. If you are interested, look at [www.chefdanhi.com](http://www.chefdanhi.com) for more details.

## How the Book Is Organized

Get the big picture first. The "Southeast Asian Culinary Identity" chapter takes you through the stages of development for each country: where they are, what their climate is like, and who lives there. How do they eat? with chopsticks? Sometimes a concurrent use of the fork and spoon prevails. These nuances do impact the cooking and dining experience.

"The Southeast Asian Pantry" chapter was a battle—it kept growing as the book evolved. I have included some

*Each adventure, I immerse myself into my work, literally.  
Here I was deep within a palm tree harvesting sap for palm sugar.*



historical information about the ingredients when pertinent. I've included the binomial (Latin) names of vegetables and fruits to make sure you and your grocer are talking about the same thing. Language translations (some phonetic) enable you to find some of these ingredients while you're shopping and traveling. There are photos, lots of photos . . . but only when it seems especially useful. Photos of unidentifiable piles of starches and flours seemed meaningless, so I have left them out.

The "Techniques for Building Southeast Asian Flavors" chapter covers fundamental techniques used in Asia. This may be as simple as how lime wedges are cut in Southeast Asia (yes, they do it differently there). There's in-depth exploration, for the more serious cook, of things few will take the time to do, like making coconut milk from scratch. Even if you do not make it, this will help you get a better understanding of what's in the can and how different fresh and canned coconut milk are (recipes in the book use only canned). Buy a Thai curry paste (see recommended brands on page 128) or make your own. Use the traditional method, pounding the ingredients in a mortar, or use a

blender to whirl all the aromatics to an equally authentic paste. I show both methods and leave the choice up to you (see step-by-step curry paste instructions on page 104).

Each Culinary Identity™ section begins with an adventure through the land, meeting the people and seeing how they cook, eat, and drink. Malaysia and Singapore are different nations, actually entirely different cultures (and they are addressed as such), but their foods are not that different. Perhaps they're as different as the foods from southern and northern Thailand. I have chosen to group their recipes into one chapter.

There are more than thirty recipes in each chapter. Some can be made for a simple weekday meal. Others are weekend activities, taking hours to prepare. The recipes here are authentic, the way you can find these dishes made in these lands right now. Not everyone makes Singapore Chili Crabs the same (pg. 314), but no one from Singapore would call the one from this book anything but real.

The Asian Resource Guide points you to places where you can get authentic ingredients, absorb the culture, and learn more about Southeast Asian flavors. Fortunately, there



are many other excellent books available for learning other, peripheral things about these cuisines. Refer to the Bibliography (pgs. 364–369) for a list of recommended books.

## Don't Stop Now— I Am Your Culinary Guide

There are some hard decisions when writing a book. For me, the most difficult was when to stop. There is so much to share about these cuisines and cultures, and some things must be left out. I have mastered volumes of recipes, taken tens of thousands of photographs, and filmed hundreds of hours of video in my travels. I just have to share them with you. Plus, there are dozens of recipes that just couldn't fit on these pages.

That multimedia experience awaits you at **www.southeastasianflavors.com**. Throughout the book look for the web icon. This icon indicates that there is more to be seen and heard on the Web site. Those emblematic Pad Thai noodles I describe being wrapped up in a thin sheet of egg on page 174? Don't imagine it—see it and hear it in the videos on the Web site. In addition to cultural content for vicarious exploration, I've uploaded countless step-by-step videos where I demonstrate techniques and share tips on how to prepare the recipes in the book. If you have more questions, just e-mail me to get more information.



## Get in That Kitchen and Cook . . . or Don't

There are coffee-table books, filled with memoirs, strikingly beautiful pictures, and a few recipes that aren't really meant to be cooked, just imagined. Another category (there are lots) is technique books, which take an analytical approach. As an educator, I love all of these books. *Southeast Asian Flavors* was created with the intention of creating a hybrid of them.

One day you may want to take a virtual journey to the backstreets of Vietnam. Flip through the pages and see (pg. 186-196). Perhaps you're curious to learn about how palm sugar is made (pg. 58). There's nothing wrong with a vicarious journey from the comfort of an armchair.

Consider that cooking shows are among the most popular forms of passive entertainment these days. Most devotees of the cooking shows don't cook what they watch. It is a form of entertainment, and that's great.

But on those days when you want to get in the kitchen, fire up those flames, and get cooking, you hold a guide to the Southeast Asian food world. Fundamental ingredients, techniques, and recipes will keep you busy in the kitchen for as long as you want. Buy that Thai curry paste—or make your own. Use the traditional method of pounding in a mortar—or use a blender to whirl all the aromatics to a smooth paste. It's left up to you.

## Hopefully, We Will Cook Together Soon!

There is nothing like cooking with a guide. Hands-on instruction enables all forms of communication to happen right there, right then. It is likely that I will be in your area soon—teaching a cooking class, doing a book signing, or in the kitchen of a restaurant that you frequent. Keep in touch. Visit **www.southeastasianflavors.com** to see a schedule of where and when I'm working. Also consider coming with me to Southeast Asia on one of my Culinary Immersion Tours. There's no substitute for actually being there. I look forward to hearing about *your* culinary adventures one day soon!

Culinary regards,

Robert Danhi