



Photo: Paul Wesley

Supa's Longing

Supa DeRose longed for the foods she grew up with in Thailand, and this longing sent her to the kitchen, Asian markets, her own garden and back to Bangkok to become a chef and teacher

They say necessity is the mother of invention. For Supa DeRose it was missing the food of her homeland in Thailand that sent her into the kitchen.

There she reinvented the recipes remembered from cooking with her mother, cooking for her younger siblings and cooking with an aunt who was a chef in Bangkok. It also sent her to Asian markets to buy some of the ingredients she needed like Thai sesame oil and coconut milk. And it sent her outdoors to start a garden where she could grow fresh Thai vegetables and herbs. Freezing and drying some like Thai basil, holy basil, Thai chili peppers, Kaffir lime leaves and lemongrass to use in the winter and saving the seeds at the end of the season to plant come the following spring.

That was in 2003 and living in New Hope with her husband,

Donald DeRose. Soon she was cooking for his friends and hosting dinner parties. By 2014 her food became so popular and in demand, her husband sent her to culinary school in Bangkok to learn the art of teaching Thai cooking. It's one thing to know how to cook, she says, it's another to be able to teach others how.

When she returned, Supa was not only a master chef but well-equipped to teach, beginning at The Farm Cooking School and Shelley's Table as well as at her own cooking classes. In addition she was a guest chef multiple times at Zoubi's in Lambertville.

Having heard praises of Supa and her Thai food for longer than I want to admit, I knew a visit was long overdue. On a warm summer day, we sit inside her inviting takeout restaurant, Supa Thai, in Rice's Market. It is a Thursday and the restaurant

is closed, although, prep work done, she will finish cooking a specially ordered dinner for eight (a tray of Chicken Satay, Summer Shrimp Rolls, Pad Thai with Rib-Eye Steak and for dessert, Sticky Rice Mango) to be picked up later. (More on special orders.)

After her husband's death in 2017, she says, friends encouraged her to open a restaurant. In November 2019 she opened Supa Thai. The small take-out venue suits her perfectly. Instead of a large restaurant, she says, with Supa Thai she's able to prepare all the dishes herself, ensuring that each dish is cooked to perfection. The menu is health-based with all dishes prepared with fresh and high-quality ingredients, such as grass-fed beef and pork, free-range chicken and eggs, wild-caught shrimp and local products, including from her own garden. The small venue also affords Supa time for cooking classes and catering.

Thai food is one of the world's great cuisines, with four main regional styles of cooking. Supa grew up on her family's farm in the Muang District in the Nkhon Ratchasima province, near Bangkok, and is considered the most flavorful and versatile. Curries—both red and green—along with vegetables, seafood and shellfish take starring roles. You'll find these along with other specialties of her homeland on her menu.

One is the soup Tom Yum Goong, a hot and sour shrimp soup, and one of Thailand's national dishes. Under her hand, it is an ambrosial mix of flavors, both bright and bold. Its rich tomato broth is liberally laced with large, wild-caught shrimp, plump, sweet and tender. Along with kaffir lime leaves, galangal, oyster mushrooms, fish sauce and lime juice, flavors pour in from her garden: lemongrass, Thai chilies, tomatoes, scallions and cilantro. Though the soup is hot and it's 90-plus degrees outside, I don't think I've enjoyed a soup more or one so flavorful.

Smiling sweetly, she asks, conspiratorially, if I would like it more spicy. Too busy savoring the soup, I just nod. With

this Supa disappears into the kitchen, bringing a small dish of her hand-crushed, Thai red chilies from her garden and sprinkles a few on top of the soup. Under her instruction, I swirl them in. Instead of a burning fire-engine heat, they add a savory one. Perfection!

Two appetizers follow: Chicken Satay and Taro Puffs. First are tender and succulent pieces of chicken tenderloin on four skewers, having been marinated in lemongrass, shallots, kaffir lime leaves, Massaman curry paste, coconut milk and palm sugar. They're served with a peanut sauce (a perfect marriage of salty and sweet) and a cucumber relish, refreshingly spiked with shallots and slivers of Thai red pepper. Taro Puffs follow.

Taro root vegetable has a mild, slightly nutty flavor and creamy texture when cooked. A vegetarian alternative to her Chicken Puffs, Supa mixes the cooked taro with coconut cream, stuffing it inside a feather-light and flaky pastry. It is a work of culinary art both inside and out.

On another day I join Supa for lunch at her lovely home in New Hope. It's also where she conducts cooking classes.

We begin with Larb Gai, another Thai national specialty. For it Supa stir-fries hand minced chicken breasts with sticky rice powder (her own blend of toasted sticky rice, galangal and kaffir lime leaves), fish sauce, fried shallots, lime juice, chili flakes, fresh cilantro and mint. Served in lettuce leaves, making no need for forks or chop sticks. Just pick up, tuck in and enjoy.

Next is Pad Thai, probably the most recognizable Thai dish in America. But like any signature dish, the authenticity and quality of the ingredients and resulting flavor depends on the skill of the chef. As she sets the freshly made dish before me, the aroma and eye-appeal alone foretell its umami flavor. I am rewarded with my first taste. Studded among the sweet and sour sauced noodles are succulent, wild-caught, large shrimp and plump cubes of tofu. The noodles have a nice-bite while retaining their silkiness. Nestling in a lettuce leaf on

the side are thin ribbons of sweet carrot and shredded red cabbage, adding both crunch and color. Small dishes of crushed, roasted peanuts and Thai chili flakes to be sprinkled on top of the Pad Thai accompany the dish. As is often present in Thai food, a wedge of lime rims the dish. A squeeze or two brings out the dish's richness while adding a bright citrus splash. It is a perfect 10.

You'll find five different curries on Supa's menu: Yellow, Massaman, Panang, Red and Green. On this day, we end with her Green Curry with Grass-fed Beef. Supa makes a southern Thai-style green curry. To her spicy green chili and turmeric paste, she blends in coconut milk and fermented fish sauce. Then adds generous slices of beef, tender, young Thai eggplant and baby tomatoes. All served over fried Jasmine rice. The dish's description on her website (www.supathai.com) says "It'll knock your socks off." Though I'm wearing sandals, I couldn't say it better.

Thai food is very adaptable to your own taste, Supa says. Its main profile is salty, sweet and sour. Each can be adjusted to suit your palate, including heat level. Note: When ordering you can request special instruction, such as allergies or more spicy as well as a protein choice. To see a menu item's description, click on the "Order Here" box over the item's photo.

Though Supa Thai is only opened on Tuesdays and Saturdays, 9am-6pm, orders can still be made for pick-up Wed., Thurs. and Fri. with advance notice. Catering is also available.

Supa offers cooking classes at her home as well as at private ones in yours. In the past, she has offered cooking trips to Thailand. She's in the process of building her own cooking school near her home in Thailand. The trip will also include excursions into Bangkok. This coming winter, the cooking school and accommodations will be completed. Dates and trip descriptions will be posted on her website.

It was at one of Supa's dinner parties in the early 2000s where she met Christy Baldyga. Wasn't long before a 20-plus year

friendship developed and Christy started helping Supa. As her general overall assistant, Christy helps with some of the prep work and takes care of the front of the house and customers. Christy doesn't remember the first time she had Thai food, she says. But she wasn't impressed. Not until she tasted Supa's. "Oh, I thought. So this is Thai food."

For me, who always enjoyed Thai food, all I can say is, "I waited too long to taste Supa's Thai food. Don't you make the same mistake."

Supa Thai is located in Rice's Market, 6326 Greenhill Road in New Hope; 267-275-4555; www.supathai.com. ♦

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