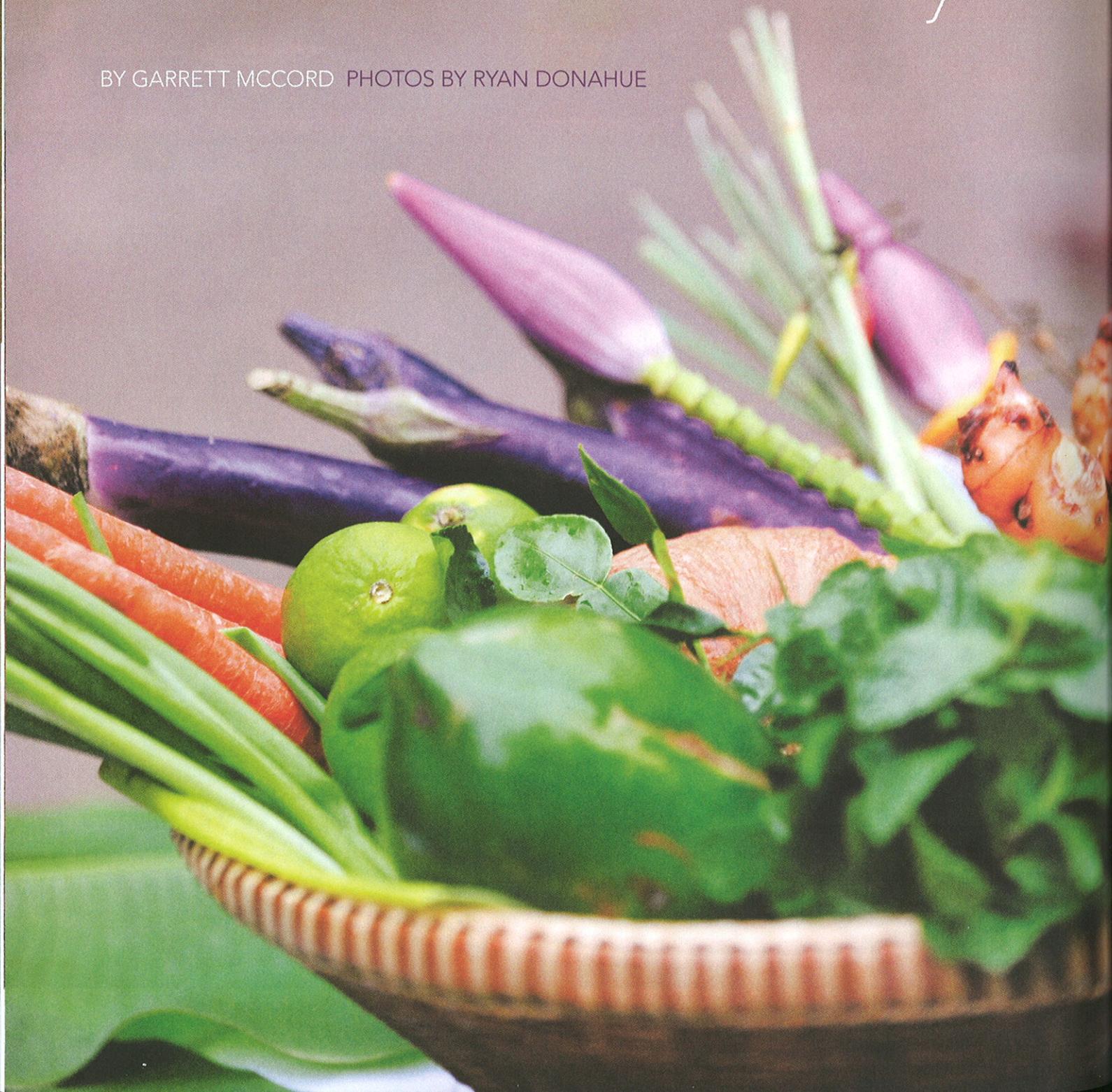


A Question of Authenticity

BY GARRETT MCCORD PHOTOS BY RYAN DONAHUE



Recently, a friend and I were sitting down to Chinese food for dinner. As I scooped some of the saccharine-sweet and sour pork onto my plate my dining companion questioned how Chinese food had evolved into such a sugary, deep fried mess. I responded that this wasn't Chinese food we were eating, but Chinese-American food. This was an entirely different cuisine.

"And how authentic it is!" I added. "Go to any Chinese-American restaurant in the U.S. and you're sure to find all the same dishes, yet each place is owned and operated by different individuals. That kind of synchronicity proves that Chinese-American food is a distinct food of its own. If you wanted food like the kind you'll find in Xi'an or Chengdu then we should have gone somewhere else."

As we discussed it more the topic left me to wonder exactly how authentic the Asian food we eat actually is. Then again, exactly how do we define authentic? I've had some people tell me that the Laotian food in Sacramento is better than most of the food in Laos. Yet, at the same time not all the ingredients of Laotian cuisine can be procured in California.

So, then, what is authentic food?

"I think authenticity is a moving target," explained Andrea Nguyen, author of the book, *In the Vietnamese Kitchen*. "It comes from within. Being a good cook, using ingredients in an adept manner, and having a firm understanding of the culture and techniques."

Nguyen's family came to the United States in 1975 when she was six due to the collapse of South Vietnam under the communist regime of North Vietnam. Due to the brutality of the communists and the corruption of the South Vietnamese government the United States offered more opportunity to those who could escape. Once settled in the states many families had to struggle to recreate the dishes they left behind in Vietnam.

"When the Vietnamese first arrived in California most of the ingredients they used in Vietnam used weren't available. My family had to go to Chinatown in Los Angeles from Orange County to find even the most basic ingredients," Nguyen explains. For example, soy sauce was used in place of fish sauce, but even that was a drastic substitution for most Vietnamese immigrants.

"Soon we started a telephone tree all about food. People were looking to recreate flavors to make us feel whole, to generate solidarity and create identity. We could find lettuce and cilantro in California and with those we were able to make some basic foods," notes Nguyen.

Suleka Sun-Lindley, manager of Thai Basil in Midtown Sacramento, remembers this culinary cobbling for authenticity. As we

sat on the patio of her restaurant over a winter seasonal dish of fried Barramundi and eggplant with red curry sautéed pumpkin she recounted some of the culinary drama, "When my sister first arrived in the United States thirty years ago she couldn't find green papaya for salad so she, and most Thai people, used carrots." It's a substitution that has carried on over the years as many Thai restaurants still prepare green papaya salad with carrots. The dish is a remnant recipe from early immigration and a reminder of the Thai people's desire to recreate their traditional foods in a new country. Now, green papaya salad with carrots is genuinely Thai.

This kind of reworking was, and still is, a part of nearly all Asian-American foodways. In the 1970s basil still hadn't become a widely available ingredient, and today the herb shiso, an ingredient common in many Asian culinary traditions, can still be difficult to obtain. Thai, Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong and other communities began to utilize mint instead, and though multiple varieties of basil can now be found in markets these days, mint has stayed a staple herb in many dishes.

So, it can be argued then that in 1970 a Thai-style curry made with soy sauce and mint was bona fide Thai food. Thai people who understood the fundamentals of Thai cuisine made the food, and it was Thai people who decided what would make acceptable substitutions.

Sheng Yang, author of *Cooking From the Heart: The Hmong Kitchen in America* and Sacramento-based cooking instructor, agrees with this idea of flexible authenticity. "The Hmong people

were originally from Mongolia, then moved to China, to Laos, to Thailand, and then to the United States. Each time they adapted and learned to use new vegetables and ingredients. The Hmong are very adaptable and pick up ideas from wherever they are."

For the Hmong, authenticity is utilizing whatever becomes available. Though Hmong cooking may be vastly different for the communities in Mongolia than those in Sacramento, each is cooking authentically accurate Hmong cuisine. "I cook okra when it's in season here, but I doubt they have it in China," notes Yang.

Of course, many in the Hmong community, a supposed 50-55%, are farmers or keep gardens in their back yard in order to grow various vegetables native to Asia. That makes these crops Californian produce, further blurring the line of what foods are legitimately Asian or not.

Authenticity isn't just fluid between immigration patterns and countries but between differing kitchens. Nguyen points out that in both the U.S. and Vietnam she's seen Vietnamese cooks use fresh and pre-made noodles for *pho*, a popular Vietnamese soup.

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Sun-Lindley echoed this sentiment in regards to pad thai, noting, "Each cook has a different recipe for pad thai, and how one restaurant makes it isn't going to be the same as another. Yet, each one is genuinely Thai."

This makes the boundary of authenticity even more vague as it becomes difficult to pinpoint what exactly defines a dish. For example, mashed potatoes require that the potatoes be boiled, and then mashed. Yet the variations on this simple preparation can vary greatly from the addition of butter and garlic, to cream cheese or chives. Even the type of potato used can differ from cook to cook, but each recipe still makes for authentic mashed potatoes.

This constant variation requires flexibility of both the eater and the cook when it comes to any regional cuisine as each may hold a different idea of what makes a dish true to its roots.

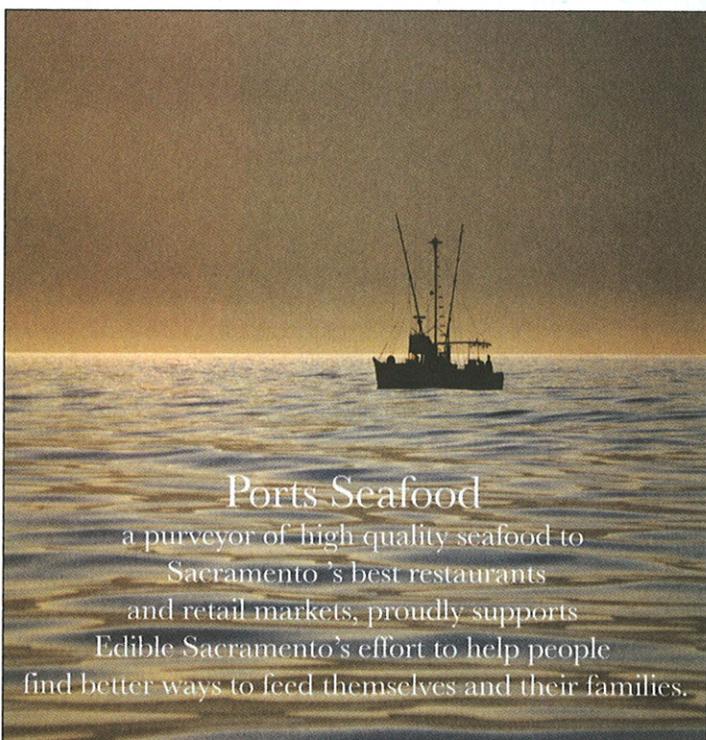
Sun-Lindley explained to me that in Thailand, pad thai is traditionally served with dried shrimp, and that for pad thai to be pad thai it only needs to have rice noodles, egg, bean sprouts, tofu, and some tamarind. Any further customization from that point is at the discretion of the person cooking it. Furthermore,



the sauce for pad thai varies greatly; with some cooks creating a base for it from tamarind while others may even use ketchup. Peanuts are an ancillary ingredient to the dish and are added only by the chef's discretion. However, in the U.S., peanuts have become a mandatory ingredient to pad thai. We expect it, or the dish isn't authentic.

(At this, Suleka bemoaned that, because of this, people have begun to associate peanuts with Thai food. This would be like saying American food is defined by pepperoni because people love it on pizza.)

Of course, even authenticity in the countries varies. Just as the creamy seafood bisques and lobster boils from New England are a whole different world apart from the Mexican-influenced



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and fiery flavors of Texas, each country in Asia has its own regional differences in food. Vietnam, China, Cambodia and many other countries all have diverse histories and borders, so food varies from region to region. For example, coastal parts of Vietnam will have more seafood dishes than those that share inland borders with Thailand and Cambodia.

Most Thai food that people are familiar with in the United States is the food that hails from Northeast Thailand, which focuses on lots of salads and the use of fresh vegetables and herbs. Southern Thai food, characterized by the use of lots of different anchovies and the crafting of hellishly strong curries, hasn't taken as much hold in the United States. This is partly because most diners now have an established idea of what makes up authentic Thai cuisine, and to most American diners anchovies aren't a part of that.

In addition, food changes within the countries of origin, so



just as dishes evolve in the United States so do they everywhere else. On a recent trip to Vietnam, Nguyen noted the change in the rice paper used for cooking. "Right now everyone uses this new, very lacy rice paper. That's what's authentic now." This new kind of rice paper has yet to become widely available in the U.S.,

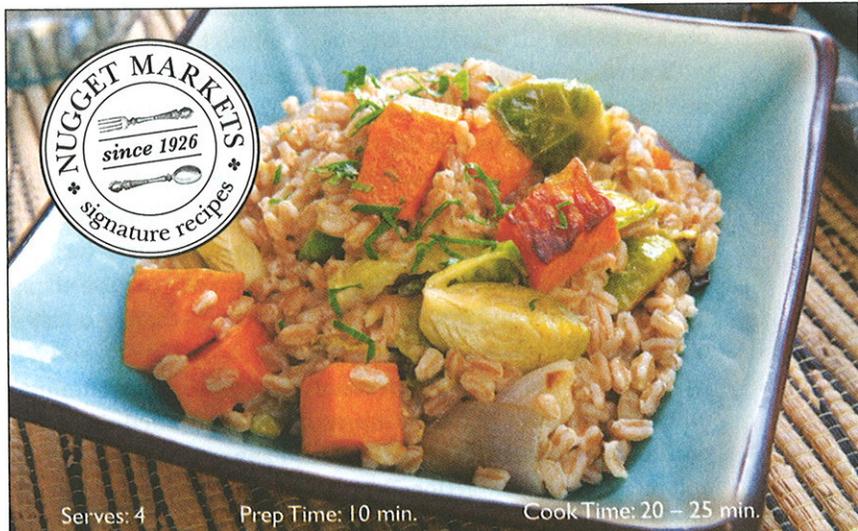
putting a question on how valid the spring rolls being served in hundreds of restaurants really are.

Or not.

"Honestly, I don't know what authenticity is," concludes Nguyen. "I find that the cilantro grown in the United States is more pungent in than that in Vietnam. Some Vietnamese dishes just taste better in California

than Vietnam."

In the end, the quest for real food from another country is an endless one. The only way to gauge authenticity is to eat as much of the cuisine in question as possible and become educated in what ingredients are used and how they are prepared. ☐



Serves: 4 Prep Time: 10 min. Cook Time: 20 - 25 min.

Farro with Roasted Winter Veggies

Preparation

Preheat the oven to 425° F. Toss all the vegetables except for the garlic in the tablespoon of olive oil, poultry seasoning and salt and pepper. Place on a cookie sheet and roast while you prepare the farro. They should take about 15 to 20 minutes.

Preheat a medium-sized pot on medium-low heat and add the teaspoon of olive oil. Toast the garlic until the edges are just brown. Add the farro, and toast lightly for about 1 minute. Then deglaze the pan with the wine, and allow to reduce until almost dry. Add water to the pan until it covers the farro by at least one inch. Bring to a boil, and then reduce the heat to a simmer. Cook until just al dente, adding water if necessary to keep the farro just covered. This should take 15 to 20 minutes.

Check on your vegetables after 15 minutes. They should be lightly caramelized, and the yams should yield to a fork easily. This could take up to another 5 minutes. When the farro is al dente add the vegetables to the pot and lightly fold them in. Serve with parsley as a garnish.



This recipe features Fresh to Market Extra Virgin Olive Oil — Locally grown and produced, cold pressed, unfiltered, arbequina olive oil.

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Ingredients

- ½ pound farro
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- ¼ cup red wine
- 6 Brussels sprouts, quartered
- 1 yam, peeled and 1 inch dice
- ½ red onion, 1 inch dice
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon
Fresh to Market Extra Virgin Olive Oil
- 1 teaspoon poultry seasoning
- 1 tablespoon Italian parsley, chopped