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Northern Thai Home Table

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Introduction

Northern Thai Home Table is an invitation to cook the flavors of Lanna—mountain markets, charcoal smoke, fresh herbs, and the quiet confidence of sticky rice in the hand. This book centers the everyday dishes that define the region's home kitchens: laap in its northern style, the lively family of nam prik dips, and the rhythms and techniques that make khao niao the anchor of every meal. Along the way, we'll ferment and dry, roast and pound, layering tastes that are bold yet balanced, direct yet nuanced.

Northern Thai cooking balances spicy, sour, salty, and bitter with a restraint that lets aromatics lead. Heat comes from fresh and dried chilies; sourness from lime, tamarind, and lactic pickles; salt from fish sauce and fermented fish; bitterness from herbs and greens that sharpen the appetite. Sweetness plays a supporting role. Many curries here are brothy and bright rather than rich, built on roasted spice pastes and herbs instead of coconut milk. The result is food that feels clear and purposeful, even when the flavors are deep.

Technique is a language. You'll learn why a mortar and pestle coaxes texture you can't get from blades, how dry-roasting unlocks perfume, and how a wisp of charcoal smoke turns a simple dip into dinner. We'll spend time with sticky rice—rinsing, soaking, steaming, and keeping it supple—because the way you cook and handle khao niao shapes the whole meal. The chapters on pounding, grilling, and brothy curries give you tools to improvise once you understand the patterns.

Preservation is at the heart of the northern table. This book guides you through safe, small-batch home fermentation: quick pickles to brighten a weeknight, sour bamboo shoots to tuck into soups, and foundational condiments that add depth with just a spoonful. You'll also learn practical ways to dry chilies—sun, oven, or pan—so you can build roasty, smoky flavor year-round. Each project emphasizes food safety, clear timelines, and sensory cues you can trust.

Accessibility matters. Not every kitchen has a charcoal brazier or a bamboo steamer, so you'll see side-by-side methods: how to steam sticky rice with a pot and colander, how to mimic charcoal char on a stovetop, how to substitute when specialty items are out of reach. When an ingredient is essential to the character of a dish, I'll say so; when it's flexible, you'll get smart swaps that keep the spirit intact. The goal is faithful flavor without gatekeeping.

This is a cookbook for the senses. You'll learn to taste for equilibrium—the point where heat rises but doesn't overwhelm, where sourness lifts, where salt carries aroma, and

a clean thread of bitterness keeps you hungry for the next bite. Notes throughout will teach you to diagnose and correct: when a laap needs more toastiness, when a nam prik wants a hint of funk, when a broth requires a fistful of herbs rather than another pinch of salt.

Most of all, Northern Thai Home Table is about how we eat together. Sticky rice makes a meal communal; dips turn vegetables and grilled meats into a spread; a pot of brothy curry invites another ladle. Cook these recipes for a quiet evening or a crowded table, mixing dishes for contrast—soft and crunchy, fresh and smoky, mild and fiery. Share with your hands, taste as you go, and let the flavors guide the conversation.

If this book succeeds, it will give you more than recipes: it will give you confidence. Confidence to pound a paste by feel, to ferment with care, to dry chilies on a sunny weekend, and to balance a plate until it sings. Welcome to the northern kitchen—humble tools, generous flavors, and the pleasure of food that's clear, lively, and deeply satisfying.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Lanna Pantry: Staples, Aromatics, and Tools

Northern Thai cooking begins at the market, in a basket, and on the counter where you set down your sticky rice for the evening. The Lanna pantry is not a list of rarities; it is a rhythm of fresh, dried, fermented, and toasted that you can learn to recognize by smell and feel. Build it step by step and you'll have the foundation for every dip, salad, and brothy curry in this book. You do not need everything at once, but knowing what matters helps you shop with purpose.

At the heart of the northern table is khao niao, glutinous rice. It's simply called sticky rice because of its texture and the way it clings in the hand, but its starch structure is what makes it unique. It is soaked, then steamed, never boiled. A basket lined with cloth and a tight lid are the traditional tools, though a stainless steel colander set over a pot with a lid works perfectly well. The rice changes the meal: it scoops, pats, and sops, anchoring flavors with a soft, resilient chew.

Chilies, fresh and dried, define heat. In the North, fresh green chilies often bring a bright snap to nam prik, while dried red chilies add a roasted, smoky depth. For home projects, think in categories: fresh for immediate pounding, dried for toasting and grinding, and smoked for those days you want campfire character without a fire. You will dry chilies in Chapter Five and toast them in Chapter Six; for now, know that a small jar of good dried chilies, stored airtight, is as valuable as a bag of fresh ones.

Citrus provides the sour lift. Limes appear everywhere, squeezed over grilled meat or worked into dips. Tamarind pulp brings a mellow, fruity sourness to broths and curries, especially the kind without coconut milk. Keep a block of tamarind paste or a bag of pulp in your pantry; a little warm water loosens it into a strainable concentrate. When citrus is bright and fragrant, the whole dish feels taller, as if the aromatics are standing up and paying attention.

Fermented products build the backbone of depth. Northern fish sauce, called nam pla, is often stronger and funkier than central versions, but any good fish sauce will do. Fermented fish like pla ra appear in certain regional preparations and can be substituted with care. For a home-friendly starting point, thua nao—fermented soybeans—offers savory depth without fish. We will make quick versions that are safe and manageable, and we will discuss smart substitutions that keep the flavor profile recognizable.

Herbs and greens bring bitterness, freshness, and crunch. In the North, sawtooth

coriander, mint, cilantro, and culantro are frequent players. Bitter greens such as yam leaves, water morning glory, or young jackfruit leaves turn up in soups and salads, sharpening appetite between bites of rich grilled meat. If you can't find a specific green, think in terms of texture and bitterness: mustard greens, bitter melon leaves, or even arugula can approximate the role while keeping the balance right.

Aromatics common across the region include garlic, shallots, and scallions. Galangal offers piney, sharp notes; ginger is warmer and sweeter. Turmeric root, with its earthy, mustardy bite, appears in many roasted pastes. Kaffir lime leaves and zest perfume broths; lemongrass adds a citrusy lift when bruised and simmered. While these items are not unique to Northern Thailand, the way they are combined—often toasted or charred rather than raw—gives the cuisine its focused voice.

Pounding tools are simple but influential. The granite mortar and pestle, called a *krok* and *sak*, is a cornerstone. Its weight and rough interior do more than mash; they abrade and coax oils and flavors from herbs and spices. A small mortar is handy for condiments and pastes; a larger one is ideal for *laap* and dips. If you do not have a heavy granite set, a sturdy ceramic or even a deep wooden bowl with a hardwood pestle can stand in. The key is friction and patience rather than brute force.

Heat sources shape aroma. Charcoal is traditional for grilling and for the finishing smoke that rides over *nam prik noom*. Gas works too, especially with a cast iron pan for roasting chilies and aromatics. A small tabletop grill can be used outdoors or in a well-ventilated kitchen. When we talk about char and smoke in this book, you will see both gas and charcoal methods. It is not about nostalgia; it is about accessing a specific flavor that pulls a dish from good to memorable.

Roasting and grinding tools complement the mortar. A cast iron skillet is perfect for dry-roasting spices; it holds heat and provides even browning. For larger batches of toasted chili powder or curry blends, a small spice grinder or a dedicated coffee grinder is helpful. Do not grind chilies in a grinder you plan to use for coffee unless you enjoy unexpected cayenne notes in your morning cup. A fine sieve helps remove tough skins from roasted chilies and seeds, making powders smooth.

Steamers and baskets complete the setup. A bamboo steamer is inexpensive and efficient for sticky rice, and it stacks neatly for vegetables and buns. If you use a bamboo basket, line it with a clean cotton cloth that can breathe but holds in the grains. Metal steamers work too, provided the lid fits tightly so steam does not escape and leave rice undercooked. You will learn the exact water level and timing in Chapter Two, but for now know that steam, not boiling water, is your friend.

Cookware for brothy curries includes a heavy pot that holds heat and allows gentle simmering. Northern curries often cook down to a concentrated broth rather than a thick sauce, so a wide pot with room to reduce is ideal. A good lid is important for

controlling evaporation, and a ladle with a fine mesh helps skim herbs or impurities without losing broth. You will also use this pot for simmering fermented bamboo or making quick pickles where a gentle, sustained heat is key.

Oils and fats are chosen for flavor rather than indulgence. Neutral oils are fine for sautéing, but a small amount of rendered pork fat or chicken fat adds silkiness to certain pastes and relishes. Use these sparingly; the northern table leans toward clarity. For finishing, a drizzle of toasted sesame oil or a touch of coconut oil can round out certain dishes, but most of the time, the fat you need is already in the meat or the roast of your aromatics.

Sweetness is present but plays a supporting role. Palm sugar, with its caramel depth, dissolves easily into sauces and dips. A tiny pinch balances the acidity in a nam prik or the saltiness in a brothy curry. White sugar can substitute if palm sugar is not available, but reduce the quantity slightly since it is sweeter and less complex. The goal is not sweetness per se but a soft landing for the sharper edges of sour and salty.

Rice is not only a staple but a measuring tool. Many northern cooks judge salt and chili by taste rather than grams, and that taste is calibrated with rice in mind. A bite of sticky rice alongside a dip or salad is the reference point: if it sings with the rice, the balance is right. This is a practical method that keeps meals grounded; it is not mystical, it is just the way the flavors are shared in the hand.

For marinating and curing, you will want a non-reactive bowl or tray. Glass, ceramic, or stainless steel is best. Wooden boards are fine for chopping but not for long contact with acidic ingredients like lime or tamarind. A small digital thermometer is a worthwhile addition for fermentation projects, giving you confidence when you are starting out. We will focus on sensory cues too—smell, look, and feel—but numbers help demystify the early steps.

Knives and chopping technique influence texture. A sharp chef's knife works for most tasks; a smaller paring knife is handy for deveining chilies or slicing aromatics thinly. For laap and salads, you will learn to chop by hand rather than grind everything, so a steady knife is important. Texture is part of flavor in northern cuisine; fine mince, coarse chop, and torn herbs each play a different role in the final mouthfeel.

Containers and storage gear turn projects into habits. Glass jars with tight lids are essential for ferments and quick pickles; choose wide-mouth jars for easier packing and cleaning. Small jars are excellent for nam prik, letting you portion out a week's worth with minimal exposure to air. For dried chilies, airtight tins or opaque jars keep out light and moisture. Labeling with dates is not glamorous, but it saves you from guessing later.

Seasonality guides your basket. In the cool season, you will find bitter greens and

fresh herbs in abundance; in the hot months, chilies are plentiful and ripe for drying. Markets often display the same ingredients in slightly different stages of maturity, so you learn to pick for purpose: young turmeric for fresh brightness, older roots for deeper color; small green chilies for raw heat, larger ones for roasting. Your pantry changes with the calendar, not a fixed list.

Substitutions are a practical skill. If you cannot find galangal, ginger can stand in with a lighter hand; if sawtooth coriander is missing, use a mix of cilantro and mint with a squeeze of lime to approximate the grassy note. For fermented depth, a tiny amount of miso can mimic thua nao in a pinch, though the flavor is different. The idea is to keep the function—savory, funky, aromatic—rather than chase exact identity. Authenticity is in taste, not just labels.

Safety comes first with ferments and chilies. Always use clean jars and utensils; wash hands before handling anything that will be salted and left to rest. When drying chilies, keep them out of rain and dust; if using an oven, monitor temperature to avoid scorching. When pounding pastes, pace yourself to prevent overheating the mortar; a warm mortar is fine, a hot one will bruise herbs. We will discuss these cues throughout, but begin with a clean, organized workspace.

Building a northern pantry is iterative. Start with sticky rice, fish sauce, limes, garlic, shallots, a couple of fresh chilies, and a small jar of dried red chilies. Add a bag of tamarind, a block of palm sugar, and a handful of herbs. From there, add galangal, turmeric, kaffir lime leaves, and lemongrass as you find them. Keep a small supply of fermented soybeans or fish sauce, and you will already be making dips and salads that taste like they belong to the north.

This chapter gives you the list and the logic, but the real learning happens as you touch, smell, and taste. You will feel the heft of a good mortar, hear the crackle of dry-roasting chilies, and watch sticky rice turn from opaque to glossy as steam works its quiet magic. The pantry is not a destination; it is a kit that grows with you. In the chapters that follow, you will use these staples to build specific dishes, starting with the simplest: a bowl of sticky rice and the first spoon of nam prik to taste the balance.

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