

Sawasdee

The best of Thailand

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The city of dreams

Ultra-modern, uber-hip and totally chic, there are pockets of Bangkok that are like nowhere else in the world

Three scoops a day

Forget chocolate, vanilla or strawberry. In Thailand, ice cream comes in flavours ranging from cornflakes to key-lime pie to, ugh, cigarette

By Montira Horayangura Unakal

IMAGINE A UTOPIA WHERE ICE CREAM could be enjoyed in a guilt-free fashion, for breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea, and even a nocturnal nightcap. Where 31 flavours would be the entry point to an ice cream wonderland bounded only by your gastronomic sense of adventure.

If this appeals to the inner dessert-

a-holic in you, Thai designer Prima Chakrabandhu na Ayutthaya could be your personal messiah of all things rich, creamy and cool. Khun Prima has channelled her creative juices into a unique, and rather calorific, artistic medium.

"Ice cream has always been a bit of a family obsession, but it wasn't until I

finished my degree in industrial design that I hit upon the idea of bringing my skills to the realm of ice cream," she explains. Her quirky brainstorm tickled the tastebuds of the design world when she launched her first runway "collection" at the competitive 2004 Bangkok International Gift Fair, as one of 21 select young Thai designers.

Exclusive collections have been created for boutique coffee shops and patisseries in Bangkok, allowing adventurous ice cream fans to forsake the monotony of chocolate, strawberry and vanilla for the slightly surreal experience of eating everything from cheese- to cough-drop-flavoured concoctions.

True to the designer's background, the ice cream is as much about creative expression as it is about gourmet refinement. In one experiment that reveals her unconventional design philosophy, dubbed the "colour blind collection", Khun Prima presented a palette of ice cream where the fuchsia-coloured ice cream turned out to be green tea flavoured, the orange tasted of mocha, and the green was actually strawberry ice cream.

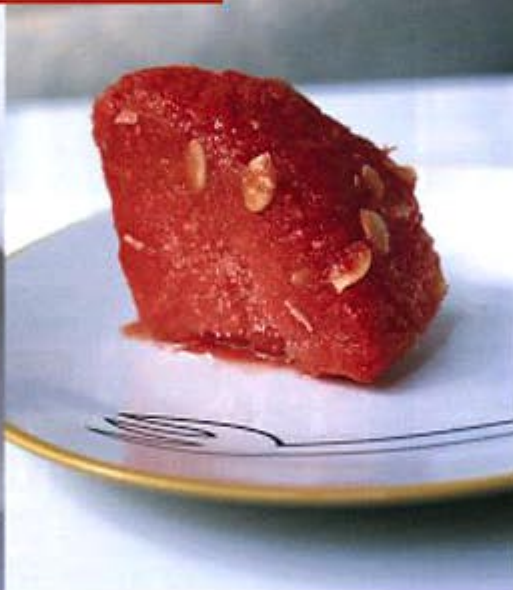
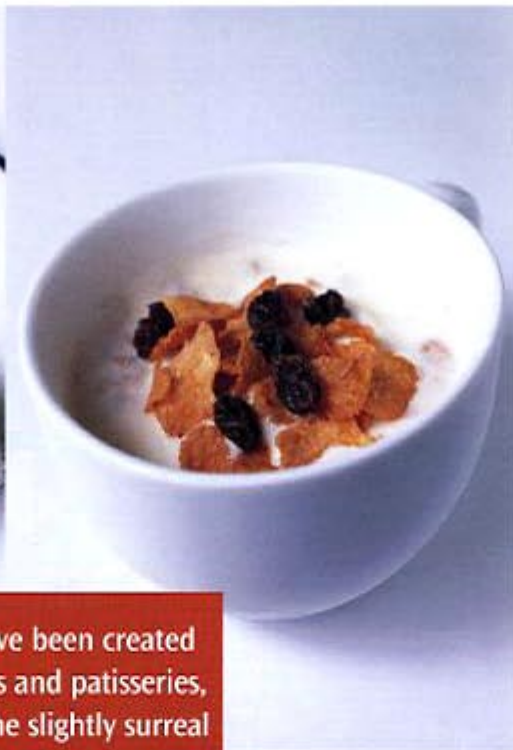
IT WOULD BE TEMPTING TO START OFF A DAY of ice cream indulgence with something familiar, which helps explain the takes on two breakfast favourites. Dig into a bowl of cornflakes in milk, where cornflakes and raisins are mixed with creamy milk ice cream. From a distance, the only give-away

Enjoying a cold taste of heaven in the heat. Opposite from top left: Ice cream or sorbet cleverly disguised as a chocolate bar, cornflakes, watermelon and lemon tea.





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quintessentially Thai meal can be relished in ice cream form. Jasmine rice with *tom ka gai* is on the menu. As unlikely as it sounds, you might awaken to the appeal of a savoury ice cream when you dip into the creamy coconut milk ice cream laced with aromatic lemongrass and hints of gingery galangal. As for those little white chunks floating around, they're chicken, of course.

While *tom ka gai* is one of the milder dishes in the Thai culinary galaxy, it's still best enjoyed with a steaming helping of jasmine rice — or in this case, a scoop of fragrant jasmine rice ice cream. As the signature staple of Thai cuisine, rice anchors every meal, and also forms the base of many delectable desserts, starting with the seasonal favourite, sticky rice and mango. A less-known snack abroad is *khao tom mut* — steamed sticky rice sweetened with coconut milk folded around banana and black beans, wrapped into neat banana-leaf bundles. Instead of being served fresh from the steamer, though, this version comes straight from the icebox but retains its authentic presentation, right down to the banana-bark twine securing the packages.

Next to ice cream, nothing quenches a tropical thirst

that this is no ordinary bowl of cereal is the frost build-up on the outside. Amazingly, unlike in the real thing, not a single flake of cereal goes soggy even until the last bite.

As an Asian alternative, there's soybean curd in ginger broth, a Chinese dish available throughout Southeast Asia, one that can be enjoyed all day long. The silken smooth soybean curd is scooped up in flat spoonfuls from a large stainless-steel container, and layered into a bowl, before

being doused in a hot, sweet ginger broth. In the Thai rendition, called *taohuay namking*, it's served topped with *pahtongkoh*, crispy fried dough, creating a mixture of textures and flavours. Transmuted into ice cream form, the flavours of the mild soybean curd and the spicy kick of the ginger broth are melded into each bite. Mini *pahtongkoh* are studded in the ice cream base for that authentic crunchiness.

For a more substantial offering, a

better than an ice-cold young coconut served up beachside in its shell, or perhaps a juicy pineapple. Between the two, the happy compromise is fruit ice cream, not a novel concept in itself as ice cream flavoured with everything from the now-standard mango to lychee to pungent durian have been widely available in the Asian markets for a long time.

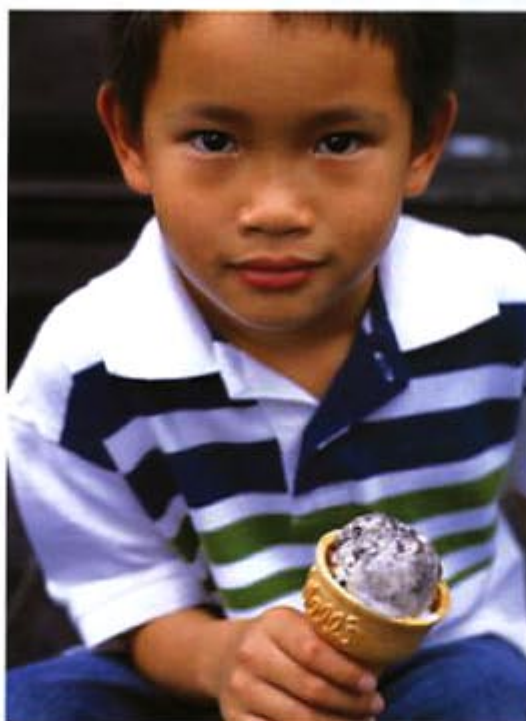
It's rare to do a double take when your dessert arrives at your table. But if it looks like

a watermelon and tastes like a watermelon, then surely it must be watermelon sorbet? Served up like a wedge of watermelon neatly sliced off and peeled, the gritty consistency of the sorbet is strangely reminiscent of the sandy texture of the best watermelons. With each spoonful melting into sweet juice in your mouth, the only tip-off that you're not eating the actual fruit is that the watermelon seeds you're crunching on have been thoughtfully replaced by the pre-shelled variety.

Those with a sweeter tooth need not despair that ice cream nouveau is confined to all low-calorie treats. Head over to Vanilla Industry at the new Playground retail centre on Soi Thonglor in Bangkok to sample some serious desserts. The enticing cake display includes apple crumble, toffee "bannoffee", key lime pie, raspberry fresh cream cake, cookie and cream cake, and brownie. In a shop where pastries rule supreme, it's no surprise that ice cream takes on the guise of a well-known bakery selection. In an uncanny reincarnation of the eponymous desserts, the apple crumble ice cream is a faintly pink-hued mix of gently spiced apples and nuggets of buttery crumble topping, while the toffee "bannoffee" ice cream features treacly threads of golden brown toffee swirling around slivers of nuts and some crunchy bits of biscuit.

To wash it all down, stop off at Bangkok's Jerlot Coffeespace at nearby Soi Ekkamai,

which appears to be another hip coffee shop where an eclectic mix of antique reproductions and sleek modern furniture provides a laid-back lounge for young



twentysomethings. That is, until your drinks show up.

In another ice cream sleight-of-hand, the coffee cup gives off wispy curls, not of steam, but of icy vapours. Look down and sure enough, it's as if your latte went straight from the espresso maker with a detour via an industrial deep freezer on the way to your table. If you fancy tea instead, there's the choice between lemon tea and Earl Grey. The only difference is that instead of

waiting for your drinks to cool down, here you have to wait for them to defrost.

After a hectic day, you might need to unwind by capping off the afternoon with something a little stronger than caffeine. A beer ice cream perhaps? A shot of home-grown Thai favourite Red Bull ice cream? Or maybe a cool cocktail ice cream? The mixed drink menu offers pina colada, tequila sunrise, Kahlua amaretto and kamikaze. These are no watered-down kiddie drinks — in the tequila sunrise, lurking inside the orange juice, suffused with a dramatic grenadine-pink blush, is a palpable splash of tequila. The pina colada features a frothy pineapple and coconut mix laced with a heady dose of rum.

With drink in hand, the nicotine fiends among us might find that the night out would be incomplete without a cigarette or two. Reach over for the ashtray on the counter, and you might find it's already full of Marlboro cigarette ice cream, an inky dark dessert topped with a smoldering layer of grey "ash", artfully created by a sprinkling of poppyseeds. Push aside the unlit cigarette casually propped on top to venture a spoonful and you will find out that it's not just a visual gimmick — the ice cream is definitely infused by the unmistakable smell and taste of cigarettes. It's apparently a big hit with smokers, and even non-smokers will appreciate this whimsical, less-foul contribution to Thailand's off-beat ice cream repertoire. ☞