

A TASTE FOR THAILAND

CONTEMPORARY THAI CUISINE HAS BLOSSOMED IN BANGKOK, THANKS TO A GROWING COTERIE OF CHEFS WHO ARE ADAPTING LOCAL FLAVORS AND INGREDIENTS IN SURPRISING NEW WAYS.

BY CHRIS SCHALKX

Forest Meets the Sea, a crowd-pleasing dish at one-Michelin-starred Sorn.

IT WASN'T TOO LONG AGO

that a fancy meal in Bangkok meant booking a table at one of its many high-end Italian, French, or Japanese restaurants. Thai food was for the masses, and hardly ever a white tablecloth affair. This changed when restaurants like Nahm started gaining recognition abroad, and rumors of Michelin inspectors sniffing around added oil to the fire. Now, the capital's Thai dining scene is as diverse as it is delicious. Whether they're helmed by chefs fusing local produce with European techniques or hardcore purists diving deep into royal cookbooks and far-flung corners of the kingdom to rediscover forgotten flavors, these 15 restaurants are all worth seeking out.

• 100 MAHASETH

From dry-aged ox tongue to grilled duck hearts and pig's brain mousse, no part of the animal goes to waste at this nose-to-tail dining joint where the cuisine is inspired by that of Isan, Thailand's vast northeastern region. Inside an open kitchen, flanked by dry-aging cabinets and chalkboard menus, chef Chalee Kader cooks up punchy food that boldly reintroduces forgotten flavors like bile and beef liver to the Bangkokian palate. That's not to say it's all offcuts and entrails, though: a good part of the menu is occupied by wagyu strip loin, flank steak, and short ribs, all sourced from judiciously selected farmers and butchers from around the kingdom. Crowd-pleasers are the silky-smooth charcoal-roasted bone marrow topped with perilla seeds and slivers of lemongrass, a *sai oua* (northern Thai sausage) hotdog on a brioche bun with chili jam, and braised pork tripe deep-fried to crunchy perfection (198/3 Mahaseth Rd.; 66-2/235-0023; fb.com/100Mahaseth).

• 80/20

Established four years ago, 80/20 has been a key player in the movement that saw historic Bang Rak transform into one of Bangkok's hippest districts. Tucked amid age-old street food joints

in crumbling shophouses, it introduced innovative Thai fusion fare using 80 percent local ingredients (many of which even most Thais had never heard of). A complete makeover last year steered the restaurant further in the fine-dining direction, and chef-owner Napol "Joe" Jantraget now proudly sources all his produce from around the country. The nine-course tasting menu is characterized by bite-size portions of house-fermented and pickled goods like umami-rich duck sausage and a cobia crudo with preserved palm hearts. Jantraget's wife, Nagoya-born Saki Hoshino, takes a similar approach on the dessert menu, for which she ages *maprang* (mango plum) fruit in beeswax and uses house-brewed *sato* (a sweet fermented rice wine) in many of her creations (1052-1054 Charoen Krung Rd.; 66/99-118-2200; 802obkk.com).

• BO.LAN

Occupying a handsome wooden villa just outside the hubbub of trendy nightlife district Thonglor, Bo.Lan has earned itself a stellar reputation for real-deal Thai food, unadulterated for Western palates. Chef-owners Duangporn "Bo" Songvisasa and her Australian partner Dylan Jones stay true to Thai culinary traditions, drawing on ancient royal recipes and trips into the countryside to uncover long-forgotten flavors and source artisanal ingredients (some of which are available at the on-site grocery). The dishes of the seasonal degustation menus are served family-style and run the gamut from chili-tinged fern salad to galangal coconut soup with Chacheongsao duck and banana blossom. Perhaps best of all is the restaurant's admirable mission to reduce its carbon footprint to the bare minimum by recycling waste, growing its own herbs and vegetables (while working closely with sustainability-minded farmers), and filtering and bottling water in-house to cut down on single-use plastic (24 Soi Sukhumvit 53; 66-2/260-2962; bolan.co.th).

• FRONT ROOM

Following a 12-year stint working for some of Denmark's top tables (including Noma and Frederikshøj), Chiang Rai-born chef Rungthiwa "Fae" Chummongkhon returned to her motherland to helm the kitchen at Front Room, the Waldorf Astoria's signature restaurant. Here, she draws from her experience with New Nordic cooking techniques to reinterpret locally sourced Thai produce, resulting in intricately plated dishes where cured, fermented, and smoked ingredients take center stage. The seven- and 10-course tasting menus open with the likes of aromatic sunchoke crisps, tacos stuffed with miniature starfruit and sweet potato, and morsels of air-dried duck with zingy pickled carrot, then follow with a smorgasbord of creative plates where familiar hints of Thai flavor tease the palate. The lineup changes every four months, but Fae's signatures (such as Raised in Khorat, which describes beef tartare with pickled papaya and northern Thai spices) remain available on an à la carte basis (Waldorf Astoria Bangkok, 151 Ratchadamri Rd.; 66-2/846-8888 waldorfbangkok.waldorfastoria.com).

• FUNKY LAM KITCHEN

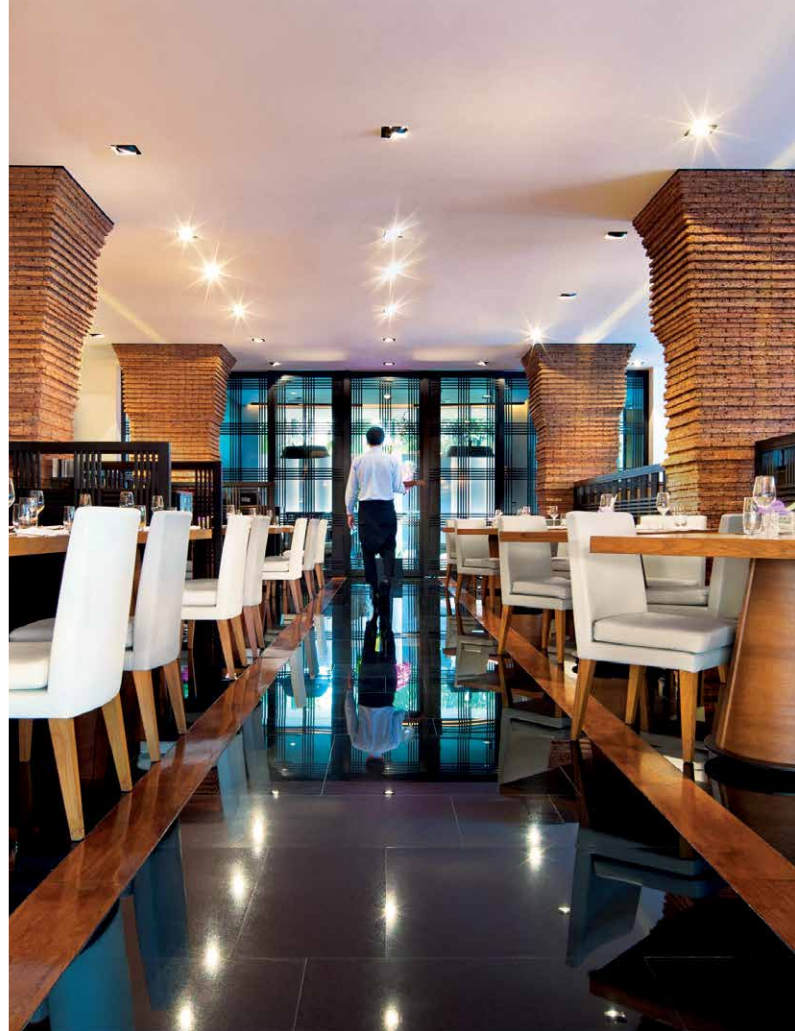
Descended from Lao royalty, nightlife kingpin Sanya Souvanna Phouma (of Sing Sing Theater and Maggie Choo's fame) and his cousin Saya Na Champassak created Funky Lam as an homage to the cuisine of their ancestors. Taking over a space that hosts a popular brunch café during the day, the restaurant comes to life at nightfall, when its red neon lights flicker on and the aroma of *padeak* (a pungent fermented fish paste) starts wafting in from

Diners at the Waldorf Astoria's Front Room can watch food being prepared in the open kitchen.



Clockwise from top left: Pork cheek with fermented black garlic and potato purée at Front Room; Saawaan's chef Sujira "Aom" Pongmorn; inside the chic dining room at Paili. Opposite: Kitchen-side seating beckons at the recently revamped venue 80/20.





Right: Sorn's chef Supaksorn "Ice" Jongsiri outside his restaurant. Opposite, from far left: Specialties at Nahm include *miang* (food wrapped in leaves) with a filling of lobster, chicken, green mango, and snake fruit; inside the same venue.



the kitchen. Inspired by the recipes of Phia Sing, the last cook of the royal household in Luang Prabang, the menu features elevated takes on Lao and Thai classics, matching Laos's fiery and herbaceous flavor profiles with high-end ingredients like Australian trout and foie gras. The pho-like *feu kradook* topped with strips of wagyu and roasted bone marrow is a must-order, as is the perfectly tender grilled chicken with avocado *jaew*, a Laotian chili dip (*The Taste Mall*, Soi Thonglor 11; 66-2/050-0469; funkylamkitchen.com).

• ISSAYA SIAMESE CLUB

A trip to Issaya Siamese Club might involve getting lost in a warren of streets deep inside the Sathorn district, but few will disagree that the journey is worth it. Set inside a palm-fringed, 100-year-old Thai villa, this venue is the creation of celebrity chef Ian Kittichai, who, with the help of executive chef Andrew Martin (previously at 80/20 and Nahm), manages to hit the sweet spot between fine dining and tourist-friendly fare. Flavors are traditional but deliberately kept on the mild side, making them accessible to Thai food fans with low heat tolerance. Order the signature massaman lamb shank, served with tangy cucumber relish to cut through its sweetness, and *kor moo yang*, strips of pork neck grilled tableside, then dressed with coriander, shallots, and roasted rice. Do leave room for desserts, as they're nothing short of spectacular. Highlights include a playful *trompe l'oeil* take on mango sticky rice, and the theatrical Broken Bucket, in which coconut, passion fruit, and white chocolate end up smashed all over the dining table (4 Soi Sri Aksorn, Chua Ploeng Rd.; 66/62-787-8768; issaya.com).

• LE DU

Taking its name from the Thai word for "season," Le Du focuses on seasonal Thai produce prepared with modern Western techniques. With stints at New York's Eleven Madison Park and Jean-Georges under his belt, chef Thitid "Ton" Tassanakajohn opened the restaurant in 2013 and has been a key figure in the local dining scene ever since. Michelin recognition and judge appearances in *Top Chef Thailand* have launched him into culinary stardom. He now operates multiple restaurants, including a Taipei outpost of his other acclaimed Bangkok venue, Baan, but you'll often find him cooking in his humble kitchen at Le Du, dishing out progressive, produce-driven creations that use daring ingredients such as ant larvae and pork tongue. Somehow, chef Ton has also managed to carve out time to become a certified sommelier, so expect the wine list to be excellent (399/3 Soi Silom 7; 66/92-919-9969; ledubkk.com).

• NAHM

Despite the departure of founding chef David Thompson last year, the COMO Metropolitan hotel's Nahm restaurant remains one of the top choices for authentic Thai fare made with premium ingredients. Now that it's helmed by Bangkok-born chef Pim Techamuanvitt—whose San Francisco venue Kin Khao has held a Michelin star since 2015—the spice levels have been turned down a notch, and more ingredients (fish sauce, palm sugar, curry paste) are sourced from local communities around the country. Still, the kitchen stays true to Thompson's legacy, so diners can expect many of the same classic dishes that bagged the restaurant a Michelin

star for two years running. Nahm's portions of deep-flavored curries, wok-fried meats, and complex relishes are generous, so they're best enjoyed family-style. The tasting set menu offers the most bang for your buck, allowing you to sample a number of specialties at a fixed price (COMO Metropolitan Bangkok, 27 South Sathorn Rd.; 66-2/625-3388; comohotels.com).

• PAII

One of Bangkok's most dapper seafood venues takes pride of place inside the W hotel's House on Sathorn, a 19th-century mansion that once served as the Russian embassy. Matching the neoclassical exterior, Pail features Corinthian columns in canary yellow, complemented by brown-marble and teakwood furnishings. A similar boldness prevails on the menu, which is dominated by sizeable servings of premium, locally sourced seafood, and occasional imports from France or Japan. It's all about robust Thai flavors here. Think charcoal-grilled giant river prawns dressed with sweet red *choo chee* curry, mud crab from Samut Songkram baked in natural clay and lemongrass, or French razor clams flambéed tableside with Mekhong rum and a punchy house-made XO sauce.

If you're dining with a group, don't miss the hulking portion of fluffy fried rice from Nakhon Pathom hidden under an almost obscene amount of steamed Surat Thani mud crab (*The House on Sathorn*, 106 North Sathorn Rd.; 66-2/344-4025; paiibangkok.com).

• PASTE

Don't let Paste's setting in the sleepy Gaysorn shopping mall fool you. From within its airy, cream-colored dining room, it serves up exquisite Thai fare more than a few cuts above even the most sophisticated mall meals. The artful, flower-adorned presentations might be modern, but the flavors are rooted in tradition. In the words of chef co-owners Bongkoch "Bee" Satongun and Jason Bailly, this is "Thai heirloom cuisine," the result of deep devotion to historical recipes and culinary techniques gleaned from their frequent travels around the country. A helping of the signature smoky yellow curry with Australian spanner crab will show you just why this venue snags accolade after accolade—including a Michelin star and a spot on Asia's Best 50 Restaurants list—and has already branched out to Luang Prabang and, soon, Vientiane (3/F, Gaysorn, 999 Ploenchit Rd.; 66-2/656-1003; pastebangkok.com).

● PHED PHED CAFÉ

Nestled on a leafy lane in the quiet suburb of Ari, Phed Phed (Thai for “very spicy”) draws foodies from far and wide with fiery Isan fare that makes even the most seasoned chili-eater blush. Its decor is rustic and simple, with jolts of electric blue and white-marble tabletops providing a contrasting backdrop to the flaming orange and bright green dishes the kitchen serves up. A key ingredient is the house-made *pla ra*, a fermented fish sauce that gives Phed Phed’s *som tam* (Thai papaya salad) its distinctive kick. The som tam is available in more than 20 varieties, with mix-ins including sour pork sausage, salted raw blue crab, or sour mango—all designed to deliver a tongue-numbing hit. Ask for your dish to be prepared “*phed nit noi*” (less spicy) to tone down the heat, or order an array of milder Isan snacks like grilled pork neck and steamed sausage (*Phahon Yothin Soi 8*; 66/98-263-5715; *phedphed.com*).

● SAAWAAN

After earning her stripes at Bangkok institutions like the Mandarin Oriental hotel’s Lord Jim’s and Sra Bua by Kiin Kiin, twentysomething chef Sujira “Aom” Pongmorn moved on to open a place of her own last year. Within its dark wooden interior, fine floral wallpaper and chrome cloud-shaped wall ornaments nod to the restaurant’s name (Saawaan mean “heaven” in Thai). Food-wise, the chef takes on Thai street food and mostly forgotten rural fare and reinterprets it into a tasting menu of nine courses, each

one exquisitely plated and named after the cooking method used (“fermented,” black pork with pickled cucumber; “charcoaled,” giblet-stuffed quail from Nakhon Pathom). The focus is on seasonal and local ingredients, though little luxuries like caviar served on a blini-like Thai coconut pancake, and Hokkaido sea urchin with madan fruit and chili make an appearance too. Wine pairings are available, but for something unique, complement your meal with forest-grown teas from northern Thailand (39/19 *Soi Suanplu, Sathorn Rd.*; 66-2/679-3775; *saawaan.com*).

● SORN

Scoring a table at this one-Michelin-starred venue inside a stately Art Deco villa involves either a multi-month wait or a miracle on the part of your hotel concierge. Here, chef Supaksorn “Ice” Jongsiri, who first made name for himself cooking home-style southern Thai fare at his eponymous restaurant Baan Ice, takes the region’s cuisine to fine-dining heights. During a 20-course menu, diners meander through the jungles and seas of southern Thailand’s 14 provinces, starting with one-bite wonders like raw Phuket lobster served at 2°C and a spicy crab claw topped with crab roe and yellow chili paste; followed by an array of complex curries, soups, and stir-fries meant to be shared family-style. Each dish is meticulously prepared using traditional southern techniques (charcoal grills, clay pots) and ingredients. Get your camera out for Forest Meets the Sea, a patchwork of southern herbs, vegetables, and crispy turmeric rice dressed with a sauce of fermented fish innards (56 *Soi Sukhumvit 26*; 66/99-081-1119; *sornfinesouthern.com*).

● SRA BUA BY KIIN KIIN

A one-Michelin-starred offshoot of Copenhagen’s most acclaimed Thai restaurant, Sra Bua by Kiin Kiin perfectly matches its setting in the opulent Siam Kempinski hotel. Against a backdrop of teak with colorful strips of silk, an indoor *sala* (pavilion) and lotus pond set the scene for an indulgent dinner. Molecular gastronomy is the name of the game here, with seasonally rotating tasting menus offering haute-cuisine renditions of Thai classics in all their theatrical glory. Red curry is served as ice cream with lychee foam and lobster, a spicy-sour fish soup comes with “noodles” piped from a tofu-filled syringe, and the amuse-bouche is wrapped in edible algae “plastic.” All, of course, with a heavy helping of dry ice and smoke-filled cloches for added drama (Siam Kempinski Hotel Bangkok, 991/9 *Rama 1 Rd.*; 66-2/162-9000; *sraubykiinkiin.com*).

● SRI TRAT

Flavors from Thailand’s eastern seaboard are underrepresented in Bangkok’s dining scene, but the Sripinyoo family (originally from the province of Trat) aims to change that with this two-year-old restaurant. In its dimly lit dining room—all dark wood, azure leather couches, and exposed brick walls—patrons are taken on a culinary journey through Thailand’s southeastern provinces, known for their rich seafood curries and inclusion of fruits in hearty dishes. Family recipes make up most of the menu, with standouts including a creamy mud crab chili dip served with vegetables, massaman curry with young durian, and briny triangles of minced pork and Trat anchovy. All are prepared under the watchful eye of the family’s matriarch, a former beauty queen whose mural portrait overlooks guests in the dining room. Sri Trat is hugely popular, so booking ahead is recommended—even on weekdays (90 *Soi Sukhumvit 33*; 66-2/088-0968; *sritrat.com*). ●



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THEIR RESPECTIVE ESTABLISHMENTS



Jasmine flower panna cotta at Issaya Siamese Club. Opposite: Bongkoch “Bee” Satongun, one of Paste’s two chef-owners.

Buying Time in Bangkok

Forget elephant key-chains and fridge magnets—Thailand’s capital has an exciting retail scene and plenty of local designers whose creations will make worthy additions to your home and wardrobe. **BY CHRIS SCHALKX**



WITH NEW SHOPPING CENTERS OPENING up almost every other month and one of the world’s largest weekend markets, Chatuchak, within city limits, Bangkok makes it dangerously easy to part with your bahts. But you have good reason to: recent years have seen a host of independent local designers and entrepreneurs showcasing Thai creativity in malls and crumbling shophouses. Plot the following stops on your itinerary to shop for quirky crafts, envelope-pushing fashion, and homewares you won’t find anywhere else.

SIWILAI A quartet of heavy teakwood doors on the fifth floor of the ritzy Central

Embassy mall lead to Siwilai, which reflects the street-style trends of Bangkok’s young, hip, and well-heeled. The design bigwigs of Yabu Pushelberg developed the space as a luxurious rendition of a Thai market square, complete with wooden shutters, woven straw floor covers, and rattan poufs lined with colorful Thai silk. The merchandise on its racks is of a similar design caliber: smart shirts, handbags, and sneakers from international it-brands such as Simona Rocha, JW Anderson, and Stussy. It’s the homegrown labels that command the most attention, though. Keep an eye out for uber-cool shirts emblazoned with Russian, Thai, and Arabic scripts

by The Only Market, and swimwear in a multitude of eye-catching patterns by Timo (siwilaibkk.com).

BOYY The signature leather buckle bags by Boyy can be spotted dangling off the shoulders of fashionistas from Tokyo to Paris. Launched in New York by Canadian designer Jesse Dorsey and Bangkok native Wannasiri Kongman, the brand’s aesthetic hits the sweet spot between feminine and macho. Its highly coveted bags can be found in several boutiques around the city, but the flagship store in Gaysorn Village stocks the biggest collection. Here, a mélange of powdery pastel colors and

CHRIS SCHALKX

sand-colored marble plays backdrop to leather bags, loafers, and sunglasses in a multitude of hues. Next door, the Boyy & Son terrazzo-covered café is a popular meeting point for Bangkok's fashion insiders and snap-happy café hoppers (boyybag.com).

O.D.S. Short for Objects of Desire, O.D.S. takes up much of the third floor at the Nendo-designed Siam Discovery mall in the thick of Bangkok's prime shopping district. On its long display tables, you'll find a cross-section of contemporary Thai design, providing visitors with more insight into the local design landscape than many museums are capable of. From colorful framed photo collages by Bangkok-based Pariwat studio to cheeky handmade ceramics by ZXXG, goods on sale span all ends of the design spectrum—and then some. The gallery space at the heart of the store often hosts exhibitions from up-and-coming Thai artists (Gongkan and Jirayu Koo among them) and is worth a visit in its own right (fb.com/objectsofdesirestore).

THAI HOME INDUSTRIES In business for more than 60 years, this homewares store

just a few doors down from the Mandarin Oriental hotel has grown into one of the most respected names in the Thai craft scene. Behind a shimmering temple-like facade (the building once served as monks' quarters), teakwood vitrines display woven bamboo fans and baskets alongside thick cotton pajamas and mother-of-pearl combs—all handmade by artisans in the shop owner's network. The best sellers are the heavyweight silver cutlery pieces. Meticulously shaped by hand, they're made to last a lifetime. These can be found on the tables of Bangkok's top restaurants, and have even inspired knockoffs in markets from Chatuchak to Chiang Mai (35 Soi Oriental, Charoen Krung Soi 40).

AOON POTTERY With its rustic wooden furniture and muted *Kinfolk*-esque color scheme, Aoon Pottery seems to have come straight out of an artists' village in the Chiang Mai countryside. Taking over three stories of a renovated shophouse on the fringe of Chinatown, it's the studio of ceramicist Pollasate Lohachalatanakul, who specializes in pieces that are raw and rustic in style. Guests can visit his workspace on the second floor to pick up beautifully

glazed plates, cups, and bowls, while also seeing every step of the production process. Downstairs, the ceramics serve their purpose at the small café, where home-cooked family-style meals (pork satay, garlic chicken) and teas from Northern Thailand dominate the menu (aoon-pottery.business.site).

(UN)FASHION VINTAGE COLLECTION

Whether you desire retro items that are sold by the kilo or highly curated, Bangkok is arguably one of the best places to seek out vintage goods in Southeast Asia. Case in point: (Un)Fashion. As part of a cluster of sleek boutiques and cafés in the hip Ekkamai neighborhood, it's the address of choice for fashionistas on the hunt for one-of-a-kind leather boots, backpacks, and belts mostly imported from Italy and Japan. Visit on a Wednesday, when new items come in, and you might just uncover a vintage Celine wallet or a pair of Jimmy Choo pumps in mint condition. And while many vintage boutiques of a similar caliber charge prices almost matching the new stuff, the goods here are remarkably affordable—with leather pouches starting from just RMB 70 (fb.com/unfashionvintage).

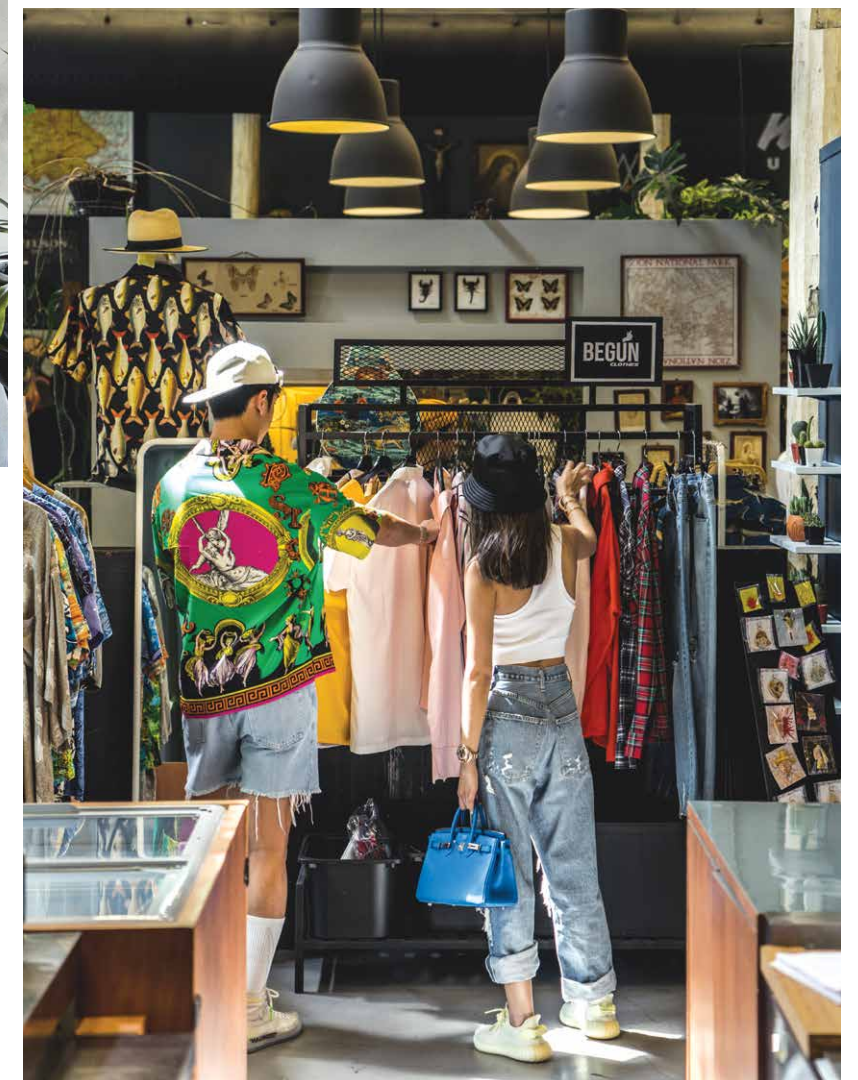


WORKMANSHIP GENERAL STORE

Also in Ekkamai, this is a choice spot for vintage furniture and old-world industrial Americana. Tucked away in an alley just off Ekkamai's main drag, the warehouse space is filled to the brim with brown leather sofas, taxidermy, and weathered metal chairs. Most of the furniture dates back to the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, but occasionally, the owner digs up items from as early as the 1800s. And while heavy furniture predominates, you'll find plenty of suitcase-friendly stuff on display: vintage signboards, brass ornaments, and even cast-iron toy soldiers (workmanshipgeneralstore.com).

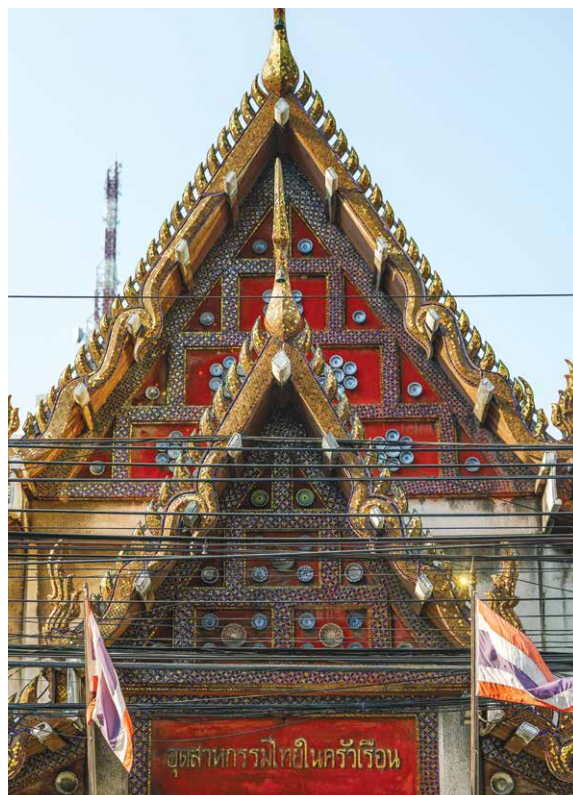
SOMETHING ABOUT US This all-white concept shop on tourist-thronged Phra Sumen Road (just around the corner from the infamous backpacker hub of Khao San Road) serves as the perfect antidote to the nearby stalls hawking dime-a-dozen trinkets and ill-fitting elephant pants. Set up by Korean native Kim Jinyoung and her Thai husband, Something About Us aims to bring in the best of both countries. Locally sourced highlights include stationery from illustrators Ease Around, cutesy soy wax candles by Summerstuff Marine, and all-natural wellness products by Vera, while the clothing racks are mostly filled with pastel-tinted Korean imports reflecting Seoul's latest street-style trends (fb.com/shopsaubkk).

WAREHOUSE 30 From the team behind TCDC (Thailand Creative & Design Center), which moved into the historic Grand Postal Building in 2017, Warehouse 30 further



cements Bangkok's riverside area as the city's de-facto creative district. Leading Thai architect Duangrit Bunnag took the lead in renovating the row of World War II-era warehouses and fitted them out with an indie cinema, restaurants, and multiple retail spaces. It's a one-stop-shop for the best of what Bangkok has to offer, such as the locally sourced coffee at Li-bra-ry café or the foraged Thai fare at The DAG. On the shopping front, seek out Lonely Two Legged Creature for sharp, understated attire spearheaded by Bunnag himself, Horse Unit for expertly curated vintage military paraphernalia, and the building's own Warehouse 30 Market for sustainably produced soaps and cosmetics by independent local brands (fb.com/thewarehouse30).

HERITAGE CRAFT On a mission to preserve the rich, varied cultural heritage found between the country's northern hills and its southern shores, the Thai-British owners of the ThaiCraft social enterprise work closely with artisans from around the kingdom to produce homeware and accessories with traditional techniques. From their office-cum-retail space in a crumbling shophouse just a stone's throw away from the street food bonanza of Sam Phraeng, they sell the fruit of these collaborations, including woven storage baskets from Rayong Province, silver jewelry made by Karen tribes around Chiang Mai, and organic spa products from a disadvantaged community in Bangkok's suburbs. There's a small café to boot, with cakes and coffee following the same fair-trade credo (heritagecraft.org). ●



From far left: Modern rattan wares at O.D.S.; the rooflines of Thai Home Industries, which occupies a building once used as monks' quarters. Opposite, from left: Heritage Craft showcases handmade goods from across Thailand; browsing the stores at Warehouse 30.

CHRIS SCHALKX