

POSTCARD FROM NORTH CAROLINA

IN THE COOL OF THE MOUNTAINS

Kanlaya Supachana's northern Thailand roots
are bedrock to her Appalachian cuisine.

BY MEREDITH MCCARROLL



Dalaya owners
Kanlaya Supachana
(front) and David
Weeks, Sylva, NC,
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KANLAYA SUPACHANA PULLS INTO THE PARKING LOT OF DALAYA, THE RESTAURANT SHE owns in Sylva, North Carolina. On the doorstep of the tiny creekside restaurant, she spots a plastic grocery bag. Someone—perhaps a local farmer or a retiree with a backyard garden—has left her a gift of produce. She smiles and shakes her head; unsolicited deliveries like this one happen regularly at Dalaya. She peeps into the bag: Thai peppers. Perhaps she'll incorporate them into a new special tonight, or see how they work in sai-ua, a house-made herbaceous pork sausage served with northern Thai green chili dip. Midsummer in the southern Appalachian mountains yields many gifts like this—of produce and of neighborly connection. Supachana merges traditional recipes from the mountains of her native Thailand with the local produce of her new home in North Carolina. In doing so, she is not simply making a fixed menu of Thai food in Appalachia. It seems that Supachana is also making Appalachian food, deeply influenced by her experience in Thailand and evolving to incorporate her life here in the mountains of North Carolina.

Supachana left her hometown of Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, for New York City almost three decades ago. Friends who had moved before her encouraged her to join them, to “start working, make money,” she says. Supachana had earned a bachelor’s degree in management at Payap University in Chiang Mai and a master’s degree in economics from Meijo University in Nagoya, Japan. New York was a place to begin a new life.

When she first arrived, she began working in a Thai restaurant to support herself. Though she started off taking orders over the phone, she eventually stepped into the kitchen to make family meal for the staff. As she moved on to other Thai restaurants, she realized that cooking could be her new career. Over time, she learned the American format for Thai food: “Pad Thai. Pad see ew. Fried rice.” Everything rated on a one-to-five-star, spicy-heat scale, she recalls.

On her days off she experimented in her own kitchen, cooking the Thai dishes she was homesick for—like sai-ua, redolent with lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, and homemade curry paste—and eventually branching out into new ingredients and techniques. She brought home butternut squash blossoms from an Asian supermarket and learned to fry them to delicate perfection. For more than a decade, Supachana continued to cook in these two modes: by rote at work and with increasing skill and freedom on her own time.

In 2014, she and a partner opened Kao Soy in the Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn. Supachana then opened Chiang Mai just down the street from Kao Soy in 2015. Both restaurants specialized in the cuisine of northern Thailand, which rarely features on the Bangkok-centric menus of Thai restaurants in the United States. The cooler climate in northern Thailand yields

Supachana spent three years settling into Sylva. By the time she opened Dalaya, she was already part of this place.

more vegetable- and herb-centered dishes, while the hot and rainy south of the country produces coconuts that are central to southern Thai curries, which are typically spicier. Dishes like um som o, kang hung le, krabong hua plee, and tapioca-coconut soup expanded and complicated diners’ understanding of Thai food.

In 2016, Supachana lost the lease on Chiang Mai, when, she says, the rent became too much to afford. Her partner David Weeks convinced Supachana to leave New York and join him in Sylva, North Carolina. David grew up coming to western North Carolina as a child. He remembers fishing and camping in the region and decided that it was time to move his aging parents to the area they had grown to love.

“When he picked me up at the airport [in Asheville], I said, ‘Oh!’ It looks like Chiang Mai,” Supachana says. “We have the mountains, we have the creeks, the waterfalls.” Like western North Carolina, Chiang Mai province draws tourists with its natural beauty, its outdoor recreational offerings, and its comparatively cool temperatures.

Supachana found people in and around Sylva to be warm and welcoming. “Everywhere we go, the people smile and say ‘hi,’ like in my country,” she says—unlike her experience in New York City. She began to think about how her next venture would differ from her New York restaurants. In Sylva, as in Chiang Mai, rainbow trout is not only a menu item, but also a topic of discussion. The area is popular with fly-fishers, and Sunburst



ABOVE: Dalaya's cozy dining room, February 2023; RIGHT: Kao soy is one of Supachana's signature dishes.

Trout Farms—a third-generation trout farm that breeds fish in the waters of the Shining Rock wilderness—is just twenty minutes up the road.

Supachana spent three years settling into the region, getting to know growers, and serving select dishes (like sweet mango sticky rice and roasted beet and candied hibiscus flowers sorbet) at festivals and farmers' markets. During that time, she worked with Clean Slate, a local transitional housing program for women who have been incarcerated. Through that program, Supachana came to understand how neighbors help one another in her new town. She embedded herself into the community as a helper and a listener, even though she knew no other Thai people in the area. By the time her restaurant permits came through, she had already become a part of this place.

Dalaya is a portmanteau of David and Kanlaya. David primarily manages the website and social media, but sometimes helps in the kitchen as a line cook. The restaurant opened just before the Covid-19 pandemic hit. Despite the quick pivot to take-out, diners were eager to try dishes like

massaman neur—a curry with slow-braised beef short ribs from Hickory Nut Gap in Fairview, just an hour away. Customers waited up to an hour for their orders, Supachana recalls. And they kept coming back. In a time of isolation, many were eager to connect, and many did so through devotion to the food at Dalaya.

One group of diners, whom Supachana nicknamed the "Cullowhee Gang," began a weekly group order during Covid. They continue the tradition. Mostly retired professors from Western Carolina University in nearby Cullowhee, their appreciation of Dalaya is evident in their regular orders and in the ways they support Supachana. They are among those dropping off vegetables from their gardens and have been known to trade lawn care for food. They even pitched in to wash dishes when Supachana had difficulty with staffing.

Chris Cooper, a professor of political science and public affairs at Western Carolina, had a similar experience when he first ate at Dalaya. "It's not standard-fare, Americanized Thai," he explains. "It makes me endlessly happy that pad

Thai is not on the menu. They make me try different things. It stretches my palate in ways that make dining fun.”

To Supachana, pad Thai is not exactly the enemy, but its sweet-and-sour profile is “an American taste,” she says. She prefers to challenge diners’ expectations and palates. That familiar Sunburst Trout Farms rainbow trout is served in a savory naam yaa curry sauce with a soft-boiled egg, bean sprouts, pickled mustard greens, green beans, and lemon basil. She might convince a group to order naam phrik ong, a very spicy dip made of ground pork, tomatoes, and dried chiles that is common in northern Thailand. Or she’ll talk them into trying the plaa nueng si ew and then watch, delighted, as they lift chunks of whole filleted branzino from a steaming soy-ginger broth. After she brings a plate of the beef meatballs called look chin ping to a table, she might linger to witness the wide-eyed smiles that follow the first bites.

While her flavors were new and surprising to many of her customers, there was one who found familiarity and the comfort of Chiang Mai in Dalaya’s menu. As Supachana remembers, a young Thai woman moved to the area with her husband. The woman longed for the flavors of her childhood home, specifically kao soy—egg noodles in a Chiang Mai coconut curry soup with dark-meat chicken. She was heartened when she stumbled across Dalaya’s online menu. She was certain the chef must be from the same region as she was. When the couple visited, Supachana says, she and the young woman felt an immediate connection that led to a short-term kitchen job.

When I dined at Dalaya with a friend in late fall, I felt immediately welcomed. The unassuming restaurant overlooks Scott Creek, and the rustic décor with mismatched chairs and tables feels more like a home than a business. Supachana took our order, filled our glasses, cooked our meals, and made time to chat and learn our names. She recognized my friend as a returning customer and remembered her previous order. We started the meal with krabong—butternut squash, taro, and banana blossom fritters served with a chili-infused vinaigrette and finished with a pumpkin custard. Supachana recommended my friend try the kao soy. The dish came topped with a stunning display of crispy egg noodles with pickled mustard

greens, shallots, sweet soy sauce, and chili oil on the side. When I said that I was vegetarian, she helped me settle on the phat mii khanom sen—crispy tofu and pickled mustard greens over a bed of stir-fried rice noodles in Thai dark soy sauce. I’d grown up eating mustard greens, often served with a sprinkle of vinegar on top, and these pickled mustards were both new and familiar.

Cooper, the Western Carolina professor, loves to bring friends and visitors to Dalaya. He delights in watching Supachana challenge their preconceptions of what Southern Appalachian food can be. “To be Southern doesn’t mean that you don’t also have identities and roots in other places,” Cooper says. A meal at Dalaya “makes you feel rooted in two places simultaneously. It makes you feel rooted in the [North Carolina] mountains and it makes you feel rooted in Thailand. I think that’s what food can do for us in the best of circumstances.”

As we were leaving, Supachana packed up our ample leftovers. It reminded me of when I’d leave my grandparents’ house on the other side of the mountain from Sylva, my hands juggling



Tupperware filled with Granny’s home cooking. My ties to western North Carolina feel as firm as ever, despite my living now at the other end of the Appalachians—in Maine. To return home and discover restaurants like Dalaya, and to get to know new Southerners like Kanlaya Supachana, only confirms my connection to this always evolving place that welcomes both the new and the returning among us. 🍴

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