



# A TASTE OF HERITAGE

David Thompson's **Nahm** embodies the culinary spirit of Thailand in the heart of Bangkok

**Words:** Becca Hensley

If you can't stand the heat, stay out of Asia's number one restaurant — Bangkok's Nahm. Aussie expat David Thompson will ask about your ability to tolerate your tongue aflame, but he really doesn't plan to do anything about it. Rather, he expects you to trust him. And, like the sages who can walk across hot coals, even the temperature-timid will find themselves embracing a bit of the burn to reach the other side of the rainbow.

And, that's what a meal at Nahm is like: a metaphorical rainbow of flavours and textures, sights and sounds. With each taste, a little bit of Bangkok comes to life in your mouth: the silks and satins, the crowded markets, the bit of brackish wind that wafts through the air, and the affable, open hearts of the population.

In Como's Metropolitan hotel, amid the bustle of urbane downtown, Nahm is the sort of place you expect to see a supermodel confabulating with a Formula 1 driver or a polo star. With interiors kitted out by Japanese designers, Atelier Ikebuchi, the 112-seat restaurant, complete with outdoor poolside terrace, subtly reflects artisanal Thai culture via silk upholstery, handmade wooden screens with a woven motif, walls awash in gold leaf and temple-worthy red-brick columns. A discrete murmur imbues the space, which smacks less of conversation and more of awe, as if diners are so busy moaning with joy that they can barely share in a convivial tête-à-tête. And that's what's happening of course, because Thompson's food, drawn from recipes gleaned from ancient

funerary texts and gathered from interviews with elders, ultimately takes diners to another plane of Thai existence.

Having slurped up pad thai and impaled satay chicken on the street with gusto already, my dining companions and I are not sure Thompson can improve on Bangkok's affordable street fare culture as we visit Nahm for lunch. But that isn't what he's trying to do. Having garnered a Michelin star at (now closed) Nahm London, fluent-in-Thai Thompson opened Nahm Bangkok in 2010 to present an authentic chapter of Thai cuisine that was being lost to modernity. Like an anthropologist, he collects timeworn recipes and adheres to ancient cooking techniques — think: a gargantuan mortar and pestle, house-made coconut milk and curry pastes, and bright, fresh ingredients.

As suggested by our server, we share a bounty of menu delights. Our amuse-bouche, triangles of pineapple and satsuma topped with ground pork, caramel-like palm sugar and tamarind marmalade, gets the party started. Light-as-air coconut wafers, folded like tacos and filled with a gingery prawn mixture, release a crunchy umami; they disappear in two bites. A diminutive, popcorn-like rice cake is capped with blue swimmer crab, peanuts and pickled garlic. And, that's only the beginning.

From there, we nibble a sweet-and-salty salad of river prawns and chewy Asian pennywort, flecked with garlicky pork. We sip a hot, sour chicken, prawn soup emboldened with woody,

wild mushrooms. A coconut and turmeric curry, spiked with calamansi lime, envelops delicate blue swimmer crab; and fragrant Thai basil lights up a spicy green curry with beef.

When deep-fried grouper with fish sauce arrives, we protest — but only for a second, pausing just long enough to ingest every morsel. Intermittently, we sip a Thai Chenin Blanc, which has a medium sweetness too cloying to drink alone, but syncs nicely with Nahm's vibrant, varying flavours. The *coup de grâce* — poached persimmon enveloped by sweet wafers and crowned with gold duck egg noodles — borders on celestial.

Ultimately, what distinguishes Thompson's Thai cookery is that it manages to be both authentic and like nothing else anyone of this century has tasted until now. His cuisine, like an offering to the monks at the temple, pays its respects to his adopted homeland and its past, while paving the way for yet untried, tastebud-titillating possibilities. ■

### The important bit

**What:** Nahm

**Where:** Metropolitan by COMO, 27 South Sathorn Rd, Bangkok

**Price:** the tasting menu costs THB 2000 (US \$62) per person

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