

HEADLINE: From the paddy into the pan

SUBHEADLINE: A recent contest asked cooks from all over the world to create a dish using Thai fragrant rice as the main ingredient

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

Whereas American fast food chains are high on the menus of Thai people, traditional Thai cuisine is a favourite everywhere else in the world. ``Thai cooking is the second most popular Asian cuisine in the world, just behind Chinese but before Vietnamese cooking," said Bangkok native, R.L. Swasdee, better known as Dr Foo, a world renowned Thai celebrity chef and food scientist based in Texas, US.

``Nearly every single restaurant in the US or in Europe is serving some kind of Thai curry with rice or Thai noodle dish like pad thai. Thai cooking is unanimously favoured _ it is renowned for its balance of taste, beautiful presentation and nutritious value," continued the resourceful Dr Foo, who is also the dynamo behind Gemsugar, herbal sugar crystals newly introduced in Thailand.

The Thai celebrity and television show host Tommy Tang, also based in the US, further added, ``I don't really understand why people in Thailand think our national food is so uncool. In America, Thai delicacies are a big hit, whereas fast foods are for those who have no taste. Here, everything seems to be the other way round," he said.

Flown in directly from the US, both culinary experts Dr Foo and Tommy Tang were in town last week to take part in the final judging of the first-ever ``Thai Hom Mali Rice International Recipe Contest", organised by the Ministry of Commerce and the Department of Foreign Trade.

The competition asked for a submission of an original recipe, with picture, of a dish using Thai rice as the main ingredient.

The contest, for which a Royal Trophy has been graciously granted by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, attracted 100 or so entrants from all over the world.

Part of a worldwide promotion campaign for the ``world's only naturally fragrant rice", previously known as jasmine rice or fragrant rice, the contest helped promote the number one ingredient in Thai cooking.

``Thai Hom Mali rice is so aromatic, with a pretty grain and good texture. I am 100 percent behind it and I wish all the Thai restaurants around the world would use it," commented Dr Foo.

``The four main judging criteria were creativity, the use of the rice in a prominent way, suitability for the public and of course, taste. The prize winners were backed by 80 percent of the panel's vote," Dr Foo Swasdee added.

The last round of the competition took place last Friday, August 25, at the Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit and was presided over by Dr Supachai Panitchpakdi, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Commerce. An audience of ambassadors, dignitaries, members of the Rice Exporters Association, culinary experts and members of concerned agencies such as Thai Airways International, the Tourism Authority of Thailand and the Thai Gem and Jewellery Traders Association, also attended the cheerful event.

The judging panel was chaired by Thanpuying Pensri Vajarodaya.

``This contest is aimed at promoting the export and consumption of Thai Hom Mali Rice around the world, which has now established a quality standard and quality certification mark," commented the Minister of Commerce, who hopes this international contest will become an annual affair.

The first prize in the individual category went to Ms Intukarn Sirisant from Thailand, who came up with a recipe of ``Hom Mali Porcupine Balls" inspired by Chinese dim sum. The Institutional first prize was awarded to Interproduce Foods Co Ltd Thailand, who presented the recipe ``Hom Mali Rice Burger".

Khao Hom Mali is a growing part of Thailand's rice exports. In 1999, 17 percent of all rice exported was Thai Hom Mali (1.14 million tonnes), whereas the total amount of rice exported by Thailand (6.7 million tonnes) makes up 42.8 percent of all the rice exported worldwide.

The many ingenious recipes created by cooks and culinary experts from all over the world will be assembled in a book to be published soon. The entrancing fragrance of Thai Hom Mali will thus be able to follow you up to your own little kitchen.