



Burma: Rivers of Flavor

By Naomi Duguid

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Winner, IACP Cookbook Award for Culinary Travel (2013)

Naomi Duguid's heralded cookbooks have always transcended the category to become "something larger and more important" (*Los Angeles Times*). Each in its own way is "a breakthrough book . . . a major contribution" (*The New York Times*). And as Burma opens up after a half century of seclusion, who better than Duguid—the esteemed author of *Hot Sour Salty Sweet*—to introduce the country and its food and flavors to the West.

Located at the crossroads between China, India, and the nations of Southeast Asia, Burma has long been a land that absorbed outside influences into its everyday life, from the Buddhist religion to foodstuffs like the potato. In the process, the people of the country now known as Myanmar have developed a rich, complex cuisine that makes inventive use of easily available ingredients to create exciting flavor combinations.

Salads are one of the best entry points into the glories of this cuisine, with sparkling flavors—crispy fried shallots, a squeeze of fresh lime juice, a dash of garlic oil, a pinch of turmeric, some crunchy roast peanuts—balanced with a light hand. The salad tradition is flexible; Burmese cooks transform all kinds of foods into salads, from chicken and roasted eggplant to spinach and tomato. And the enticing Tea-Leaf Salad is a signature dish in central Burma and in the eastern hills that are home to the Shan people.

Mohinga, a delicious blend of rice noodles and fish broth, adds up to comfort food at its best. Wherever you go in Burma, you get a slightly different version because, as Duguid explains, each region layers its own touches into the dish.

Tasty sauces, chutneys, and relishes—essential elements of Burmese cuisine—will become mainstays in your kitchen, as will a chicken roasted with potatoes, turmeric, and lemongrass; a seafood noodle stir-fry with shrimp and mussels; Shan *khaut swei*, an astonishing noodle dish made with pea tendrils and pork; a hearty chicken-rice soup seasoned with ginger and soy sauce; and a breathtakingly simple dessert composed of just sticky rice, coconut, and palm

sugar.

Interspersed throughout the 125 recipes are intriguing tales from the author's many trips to this fascinating but little-known land. One such captivating essay shows how Burmese women adorn themselves with *thanaka*, a white paste used to protect and decorate the skin. Buddhism is a central fact of Burmese life: we meet barefoot monks on their morning quest for alms, as well as nuns with shaved heads; and Duguid takes us on tours of Shwedagon, the amazingly grand temple complex on a hill in Rangoon, the former capital. She takes boats up Burma's huge rivers, highways to places inaccessible by road; spends time in village markets and home kitchens; and takes us to the farthest reaches of the country, along the way introducing us to the fascinating people she encounters on her travels.

The best way to learn about an unfamiliar culture is through its food, and in *Burma: Rivers of Flavor*, readers will be transfixed by the splendors of an ancient and wonderful country, untouched by the outside world for generations, whose simple recipes delight and satisfy and whose people are among the most gracious on earth.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Author Interview with Naomi Duguid

Why did you title the book *Burma* rather than *Myanmar*?

"Myanma" was historically used only for the small central area where the dominant Bamar population lived. It's a name that excludes the huge outlying areas where the Shan, Kachin, Karen, Chin and other peoples are the majority. In 1989, the government--then a repressive military regime--decreed that the country's official name would change from Burma to Myanmar since "Burma" was seen as a relic of colonial times. Now that political climate has relaxed, you hear people using both terms, but for more than two decades, people were punished for saying "Burma" instead of "Myanmar."

What are the staple ingredients of Burmese cooking?

The flavor staples are shallots, turmeric, limes and freshly squeezed lime juice, roasted chopped peanuts, fresh greens, chiles (though not in punchy, hot quantities usually), fish sauce, shrimp paste, shallot oil, chile oil, fresh herbs, and more. The staple foods are rice and noodles, vegetables, fish, and chicken or meat.

How does Burma's cuisine reflect its culture, its patterns of daily life?

Sharing borders with China, India, Thailand, and Bangladesh, Burma has been an Asian crossroads--and a place of fascinating layers of food culture--for centuries. The main meal of the day, served at noon, centers around rice. It always includes salads and curries served family-style and shared. This way of eating lunch sums up a lot about Burma. People eat together and share food. There's no rigid order of courses or dishes; and you can adjust the flavors of what you are eating by dabbing on a chile sauce or squeezing on a little lime juice. In other words, there's conviviality, generosity, and flexibility. And now that the political situation in Burma is improving, the inherent good-humored joking and intense discussions that people thrive on are once more happening in tea shops and out in the street, rather than behind closed doors.

What is a typical day of eating in Burma?

Breakfast and snack options are wonderfully enticing, most of them available in tea shops or at street stalls. They include a flatbread with savory cooked beans on top; the national noodle dish *mohinga*, rice noodles in a light fish broth with crispy toppings and a wide range of condiments; other noodle dishes, with rice noodles or egg noodles, and a topping of some meat and herbs; and simple rice, lightly fried with peas and topped with a little meat or vegetables.

Lunch is the main meal. Each person has a plate of plain rice and a small bowl of soup, and then shares in the array of other dishes on the table. There is meat and/or chicken curry, a fish curry or small fried fish, a vegetable curry, a salad or two--Burmese salads are inventive and loaded with flavors and textures--and several spicy pungent condiments, as well as a plate of raw vegetables and another of steamed vegetables, which serve as a kind of non-spicy break from the bigger flavors of the curry. The meal finishes with a little fruit or some palm sugar.

Sweets are eaten as snacks in the afternoon or evening rather than as "desserts" at the end of a meal. In the evening, people eat noodle dishes or a light meal of rice, soup, salad, and chile sauce. At any hour, they can seek out street foods of all kinds, including savory crepes or deep-fried snacks.

The country has many ethnic groups and thus many cuisines; what are the main ones--and are there any common factors?

Salads are one of the glories of the cuisine no matter where you are in Burma. They're flavored with fried shallots, roasted peanuts, lime juice, and more. Noodle dishes, often served with a broth and a wonderful array of condiments, are another common thread. In all the food there's a subtle dance and balance between tart, salty, and sweet, with a touch of chile heat. (More chiles are used on the West coast, but they're generally on the table as an optional condiment rather than as a dominant fiery taste in cooked dishes.)

Central Burmese cuisine, also referred to as Bamar, has a lighter touch than central Thai--less sweet, less chile heat, more fresh vegetables on the table. For the main meal of the day, there are a whole set of small dishes on the table: a vegetable curry, a meat curry, a fish curry, a salad, and several condiments, as well as plain steamed and raw vegetables. Shan cuisine employs salt rather than fish sauce, lots of fresh herbs, vegetables cooked with meat in succulent curries, inventive noodle dishes, and salads flavored with toasted sesame seeds along with lime juice and sliced shallots. Kachin cuisine, from the far north, is light, includes lots of fresh herbs, and subtly balanced flavors in both the meat and the vegetable curries.

What is the dish from *Burma* that anyone and everyone must rush home and make tonight?

The Lemongrass Sliders (p. 192) are a great and easy introduction to the possibilities in the book, and so are many of the salads. The Ginger Salad (p. 48) is one of my favorites. For those who like chile heat, my favorite condiment, Tart-Sweet-Chile-Garlic Sauce (p. 36), is another good place to start.

You've been traveling in Burma since 1980; what changes have you observed?

In the eighties Burma was a country that had been closed off from the rest of the world. There was an old-world charm to that, but also a lot of suffering and poverty.

Then came the military crackdown of 1988 and more than twenty years of real fear and oppression. That was the vibe when I started work on this book in early 2009. Though people might have a sense of fun and ease in the privacy of their own homes, they were cautious and serious out on the streets and wary of being seen talking to a foreigner.

Now that has changed, in a dramatic and wonderful way, and very quickly. Late in 2011, with reforms and a relaxation of censorship from the top, people lost their fear. They suddenly became confident that Burma was truly emerging from the black hole of oppression. Now there is laughter and open discussion in tea shops and on the streets.

In researching and writing the book, I wanted to celebrate the richness of the food cultures of Burma and the vibrancy of individuals. I decided that there was no room for the army in the kitchen, so I put all the history of bad times at the back of the book.

I've seen the start of a dramatic long-overdue transformation over the last year. But there are still huge issues in Burma: attacks by the army on the people of Kachin State (a place rich in resources that shares a long border with China); unresolved conflicts in many border areas; and real questions about who is going to benefit from the exploitation of the country's natural resources.

The world has realized Burma's geopolitical importance, especially given its rich oil and gas reserves. No wonder foreign companies and governments now want access. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has been calling for a freshly negotiated political agreement among all the ethnic communities, including the majority Bamar people, and she is also asking that investors focus on building capacity in Burma, from education to roads and services. She's right on. Let's hope the world listens.

What do you wish more people knew about Burma?

At the very least, I hope the book encourages people to learn where it is. Its critical keystone location between India and China and Thailand means Burma will be a big player in Asia. And I'm hoping the book helps people learn about the country's different cultures. The Bamar are the majority people, but a quarter of the country is non-Bamar, made of a number of distinctive cultures. I use food as the medium for explaining them, and so, for example, the Shan and Kachin recipes are a delicious introduction to those cultures.

Your book is studded with stories of individuals that shed light on daily life in Burma. How did you meet and cook with people without speaking their language?

The language of food and markets is a language of gesture. Because it was important until the recent reforms to give people time to get used to me, I would go to smaller places and hang around, sipping a tea in tea shops, pedaling around on an old bicycle, taking photos of shallots and fish and anything else that caught my eye in the amazing markets. And gradually, after several days in a place, I would become a familiar sight so that people would start to connect with me, open up a little.

The wonderful thing about a place like Burma, where food is made in the street and kitchens are often open air, is that there are endless opportunities to watch and learn as people cook, and to taste and eat at all hours. There are a remarkable number of older people who speak beautiful English, and many young people are eager to practice their English, once they feel relaxed enough to approach a foreigner. I also found that small guesthouses were places where I could safely ask questions about foods I'd encountered.

Where in Burma would you send people who want to explore its food?

Rangoon/Yangon has lively markets with foods from all the regions of Burma so it's a great place to start sampling the country's rich culinary traditions. But I think that food in smaller centers is that much closer to home cooking. So I'd send you to Bagan to see the ruins and to eat lunch under the tree in Old Bagan. I'd send you to Inle Lake to eat Shan food at the market in Nyaungshwe and to visit the villages and floating markets on the lake and to check out a couple of wineries. And farther afield, there's sleepy, beautiful Mrauk U in the far northwest, a great place to get a taste of village life and to explore the ruins of a bygone age. If you have more time, then Hpa'an and Mawlamyine on the Salween River are fascinating places, with spectacular Buddhist temples in lovely settings.

Review

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

FINALIST 2012 – Gourmand World Cookbooks Award—Asian Cuisine

FINALIST 2013 – James Beard Foundation Book Awards—International

WINNER 2013 – International Association of Culinary Professionals Cookbook Award—Culinary Travel

WINNER 2013 – Taste Canada Food Writing Awards in the Regional/Cultural Cookbooks category

“A timely, as well as absorbing and gorgeous, guide to a cuisine that has remained relatively unknown and

untouched.”

—Julia Moskin, *The New York Times*

“A colorful immersion into the daily market and table of the Burmese people, this volume is an invitation to celebrate the Burmese people and their transformation.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Like her other cookbooks, it’s a richly photographed tome that gives armchair travellers a look at a country’s culture through its food.”

—*The Georgia Straight*

“A book of genuine discovery, a transportive and hunger-stoking look into what may be one of the world’s last great but little-known cuisines.... One of the great qualities she brings to her books, over and above her curiosity and her ability to bring a far-away place into three dimensions: her gentle coaching. The food seems strange, but anybody can make it. She empowers cooks in a way that few other authors do. Eating with Duguid [feels]...like discovering a lost world.”

—Chris Nuttall-Smith, *The Globe and Mail*

“She isn’t merely offering up a culture’s recipes, she wants us to understand our oil (Is it hot enough? Is it too hot?) the way a Burmese cook does.”

—*LA Weekly*

“Duguid’s thoughtful efforts to capture the taste of the country more than satisfy homebound, curious palates.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“Extraordinary.”

—*The Gazette*

About the Author

NAOMI DUGUID is a photographer, writer, world traveler, and great cook. Her first book, *Flatbreads & Flavors: A Baker's Atlas*, won the James Beard Award for cookbook of the year and the IACP Julia Child Award for best first book. With Jeffrey Alford, she is the author of 5 subsequent well-received cookbooks: *HomeBaking*, *Seductions of Rice*, *Hot Sour Salty Sweet*, *Mangoes & Curry Leaves*, and *Beyond the Great Wall*. Duguid's articles and photographs frequently appear in *Food & Wine*, *Eating Well*, and *Gourmet* magazines. Her stock photo agency, Asia Access, is based in Toronto, where she lives when she is not on the road. The author lives in Toronto, ON.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Paul Tirrell:

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