Thai Spices of Chanukkah

As many of you know (especially if you are from, or have family or friends in the United States), this Chanukkah is a rather historical one, where both Thanksgiving and Chanukkah overlap. The first time this happened was in November of 1888, very shortly after Abraham Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday, and once again in 1899. Since Franklin Roosevelt moved Thanksgiving back a week, thinking it would better stimulate the economic conditions of the country, this phenomenon happened once more in 1918, and never again until now. This year, 2013, Thanksgiving will fall on the second night of Chanukkah. An occasion such as this won’t be seen again until November of 2070.

For many residents of the U.S., the idea of "Thanksgivukah," took to the social media outlets like wildfire. The culinary possibilities, after all, left many drooling where they stood. Turkey? Latkes? Cranberry sauce? Sufganiot? Pumpkin pie? The excitement on Twitter is palpable. Except for me, for, I have a confession: I hate turkey.

As a native of South East Asia, I tried really hard to like turkey. I ate it faithfully every year, to show my solidarity to my new homeland. I watched it roasting, turning a beautiful shade of caramel brown. Every year, my hopes lifted. Every year, I choked down bite after stinky, gamy bite of this foul bird (Yes, pun intended). Over the many years that I have now lived in the United States, turkey proponent after turkey proponent eagerly sought me out, thinking I needed to only taste theirs, and my aversion to turkey would be a thing of the past. "But, I’m sure they didn’t make it like I do. I have a secret." They all had secrets. Brines similar to witches’ brews, paper bags, marinades, special sauce, smoke houses. All promised to be the cure to the run-of-the-mill turkey. Admittedly, some were better than others, but I, too had a secret: I’d rather be smoking, brining, saucing, or marinating a brisket. A sausage. A chicken. Anything. I kept my mouth shut. Far be it from me, a sweet Thai woman to be opinionated.

After I got married, I decided to take things into my own hands for Thanksgiving. I generally don’t serve turkey. My guests are confused, but overall, they’re okay with it. When I do serve turkey, I curry or spice the living daylights out of it, hoping against all hope, it will transform into something else. Sometimes, it does, but I can’t help thinking at times, how much better it would have been, had it been a chicken. Many people ask me about my Thanksgivukah menu, as the day approaches. It’s become a standard greeting these days in the foodie community. I proudly announce that, yet again, I will not be roasting a turkey.

But, if you’re anything like me, turkey’s no exception; anything can benefit from spice and curry. So ditch the turkey and add Asian flavor to your holidays this year. Here are two Thai-inspired twists on otherwise “traditional” Chanukkah foods, sure to zest your holidays up a bit.
Mee Krob, As I Remember It
(About 4 Snack-Sized Portions)

- 1 “bail” thin rice vermicelli noodles
- 1 cup (approximately) vegetable oil, for deep frying (there will be plenty of leftover oil)
- 2 tablespoons tamarind paste (or unseasoned rice vinegar)
- 1/4 cup palm sugar or brown sugar, packed
- 2 tablespoons chili sauce, like Sambal Oleak

Make the Noodles:
Rice vermicelli, unlike their thicker counterparts, need no reconstitution prior to use – at least for our purposes. It usually comes in large bundles, composed of several smaller “bails” inside. Since the ingredients are rice and water, Star-K, as of this writing, approves the use of rice noodles without a hechsher.

Rice vermicelli, the noodles used in this recipe, comes in large bundles containing several smaller “bails.”

We will simply fry the noodles first. This process is extremely fast, and pretty entertaining to watch. If you’d like, you can fry up multiple bales and reserve some for other uses. They make dramatic salad toppers; just make sure you top the salad AFTER you apply the dressing.

1. In a wok over medium heat, add oil and heat until glistening. Test the temperature by tossing in a piece of rice noodle. If it immediately sizzles and puffs up, it’s ready. While the oil is heating, fluff and separate the noodles in a large (clean) paper grocery bag (this cuts down on pieces of rice noodle flying all over the place when they break). It’s okay to break them, so don’t worry too much. The objective is to spread the noodles out into as much of a single layer as possible.

2. When oil is hot, carefully place a small quantity of the noodles into the hot oil. When they puff up, carefully turn them over, so as to get any un-puffed noodles that might be hiding on the other side. Remove immediately from oil and drain on paper towels. Repeat until all the noodles have been fried.

Frying rice vermicelli is very quick, and requires not rehydration of the noodles before hand.

Now Make the Syrup
This syrup is made from tamarind, a sour fruit which can be found all over Africa, the Middle East, and throughout Asia, and is readily available in specialty shops with a hechsher. It’s generally sold as “paste,” or “concentrate,” but you can use either interchangeably in this recipe. If you can’t find any, unseasoned rice vinegar is an acceptable substitute.

1. Pour out the oil from the wok into a heat-safe container, being careful not to splash it onto yourself. Wipe the wok clean. While still keeping the wok over medium heat, add tamarind, sugar, and chili paste and stir to combine. When the mixture begins to bubble, lower the heat and allow to boil for about two minutes, or until mixture becomes slightly thickened and syrupy.

2. Place fried noodles into the wok, and “fold” the noodles into the syrup. This will take a few minutes, but the result should be a more or less even distribution of the syrup coating the noodles. You will also break some noodles. Again, it’s okay, as long as it’s not excessive.

The syrup can be made in advance, as well as the noodles, but it’s much easier to coat the noodles when the syrup is warm, so if you decide to do this, just heat the syrup up a bit in the wok before putting the noodles in. Mee Krob is generally eaten at room temperature, so there isn’t any rush to eat it.
"Tom Yum" Latkes

Seasoning:
- 2 stalks of lemongrass, trimmed with dead leaves removed (alternatively, use 2 tablespoons or so of dried, powdered lemongrass)
- 3 shallots, quartered
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper or, to suit taste
- 2 teaspoons paprika
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 1/2 teaspoons sugar
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 4-5 kefir lime leaves
- 1 teaspoon oil
- 1 handful cilantro (optional)

For Latkes:
- 2 pounds (approximately), shredded potatoes
- 2 eggs, beaten
- lemon juice
- kosher salt
- potato starch

1. Up to a day in advance, shred 2 pounds of potatoes. Liberally sprinkle with lemon juice and kosher salt, and toss to combine. Place potatoes in a colander to drain. The lemon juice will prevent the potatoes from discoloring, and the salt will help remove moisture.

2. For the Tom Yum paste: wash lemongrass and remove the fibrous bottom and the scraggly top portion. There should be a good 10 inches or so that is light green; this is what you want to use. Slice and place into a food processor (this can also be done with a mortar and pestle). Add peeled and quartered shallots, cayenne pepper, salt, pepper, paprika, kefir lime leaves, and sugar. Process for a few seconds at a time, scraping the sides down with a spatula. When the particles become fine, slowly drizzle about a teaspoon of oil while processing and blend until the ingredients come together into somewhat of a paste. If it’s a little lumpy, that’s okay, as long as you can’t easily distinguish one ingredient from the other.

3. Place shredded potatoes, a few handfuls at a time, into a dish cloth and fold cloth into thirds lengthwise. Wring the cloth with potatoes inside until you’ve extracted as much moisture as you can. Set aside in a large bowl. Continue with remaining potato shreds. Sprinkle potatoes with kosher salt, to taste (about a tablespoon will do it). Add beaten eggs and about 1/4 cup of potato starch. Add Tom Yum paste from food processor, and toss to combine.

4. In a large skillet over medium heat, add about 1/2 an inch of oil. When glistening and hot, carefully add potatoes. It’s best to spread out the piles of potatoes into uniform patties, rather than a mound. Flip latke when browned on one side, and continue browning on the other. Remove when desired crispness is achieved and drain on paper towels. Serve hot.

Allaya Fleischer is a foodie and world traveler who unifies her life experiences, diverse friendships, and family history through food. Originally from Thailand, her stays and travels took her through Germany, France, England, Barbados, Nepal, Japan, Hong Kong, Korea, and finally to the United States, among other places. See Allaya’s blog, I Speak Food, at www.allaya.com and her companion Facebook page at www.facebook.com/ISpeakFood. You may also follow @allayaf on Twitter.