

Fusion cuisine seems to be all the rage lately, but for those who have enjoyed the dishes Head Chef Sukie Sookchom pushes out through the kitchen door at Silk Thai Cafe, authentic Thai treats are the name of the game. From skilled traditional flavor-layering techniques, to her magically experienced usage of Thai spices on each plate, she is the lifeblood of the cafe's menu.

Nestled in an international port where foreign cuisine runs rampantly generic and Americanized, Sookchom's little kitchen enables her to bring the cultural soul most of us can only dream of having served in our towns. Born into the agricultural city of Udon Thani, Thailand, she spent decades learning tricks of the trade for her country's most cherished dishes. As the child of a prosperous rice farmer and food passionate mother, Sookchom came by cooking honestly. "I saw my mom, grandma, even my dad and brother cooking all the time, so it was something everyone did coming from a farm family on the paddy."

Given that influence, her choice of career in the food realm came without much tussle, and the young cook earned a spot in a rigorous Thai culinary academy. Sookchom spent each day in standardized technical courses, followed by further schooling in family secrets by her mother and grandmother upon returning home each night. On weekends, the aspiring chef continued to practice cooking for her family, starting from scratch and preparing everything in her dishes the old-fashioned way for quality and peak flavor.

All meals were produced by hand, from the laborious harvesting and preparation, to the finesse required for cooking each ingredient. With great care Sookchom practiced the ancient art of flavor layering, ensuring each element was cooked in proper order upon the last, the way one might compose the notes of a symphony. She says, "Back then it took four hours just to make one dinner in Thailand, but it was much better fresh that way." Her dedication to the trade is not only unyielding, but remains passionately tied to her love of family and food. "It's a big traditional thing passed down from families in Thailand," says Sookchom.

As co-owner of Silk Thai Café, Gil Simmons says she's got a real passion for cooking. "She's been in this restaurant for the past 12 years – cooking all day and then going back home to cook more, still loving to cook after all that really proves her passion." When Sookchom cooks, that love for Thailand comes out to shine, truly highlighting the passionate aspect of culinary arts,

says Simmons. “It’s a remarkable blend of spices – like a fine wine with a beginning, middle, and end – from the layering she does and the care she takes.”

To Sookchom, staying true to the traditional Thai style and family recipes is not only a means of honoring the culture of a land she treasures deeply, but she also recognizes the healing powers of quality ingredients. “We have specific spices and herbs that we know are good for the body, and they make the food taste much more complex. I never get sick or have problems with health because Thai food keeps my cholesterol low and immune system strong.”

The work Sukie Sookchom does at her restaurant reflects more than a job cooking genuine Asian food in the United States; her love and care stem from a deeper desire to stay near to the land and people who raised her. Since moving her life and craft to America, each recipe, all her secret techniques, and every pungent ingredient have become a delicious reminder of her homeland where she “could see so many rice paddies with beautiful fish swimming around.”

What Sookchom manages to accomplish in her kitchen is less of a science and more of an earthy alchemy, it is her raw passion for Thailand in the most unique and personal way. Through the meals she adopted from family, combined alongside herbs and spices distinctive to the land that sustained her, Sukie Sookchom has effectively bottled her heritage into a marketable labor of love. Just one curried mouthful and you’ll never want to leave that nostalgic nirvana she creates on your plate at Silk Thai Cafe.