

Kin/eat

On my twenty-first birthday my mum gave me a notebook; pocket sized with a hardcover and twin loop wire binding. The cover was brown and on the front was a photo realistic illustration of two smiling pigs having a bubble bath in a barrel. The notebook was swollen with things glued, sticky taped, and folded inside. Slipped between the back cover and the last page was a photo of me and my brother sitting on either side of Santa, taken at Chatswood Westfield in 2001; I was four and he was three. On the back of the photo, noted in mum's handwriting in blue pen that had seeped into the paper was "Just for you Nicole + Dylan". Inside the notebook, mum had written recipes in Thai and English, and glued in clippings of recipes from Thai and Australian magazines and newspapers. She had collected recipes passed on from her mum and her sisters, as well as ones she'd created with my dad over the decade they ran a Thai restaurant on Cameraygal land.

In January, my best friend Aden told me he was moving to Naarm at the beginning of April. Aden and I met when he was eighteen and I was nineteen at our retail job selling Levi's jeans. We've lived together for half the time we've known each other and he claims that eating my mum's food expanded his stomach irreversibly— he also claims that I taught him how to cook. Every evening around 6pm when he finishes work, Aden will text me "Wyd for din". We'll usually text back and forth or call each other to chew over what we're craving— something from this part of the world, maybe this cuisine, an assemblage of these ingredients, or this specific dish. His favourite dish at the moment is *pad krapow* (Thai basil stir fry) with jasmine rice topped with a fried egg, sunny side up. As a parting gift, Aden asked for a PDF file of the recipes I'd cooked for him and we'd cooked together.

Companion, from Latin *cum panis/with bread*, means sharing food together— and so, companions are those we eat with. As mum arranges a plate of apples or oranges, or a single pomelo or dragon fruit for her home shrine— made DIY inside a white three tier shelving unit— she places it on the bottom shelf in front of photos of her mum and dad (my Khun Yai and Khun Ta). The shelf above holds images of Rama V (next to shots of Hennessy which is considered to have been his favourite) and Rama IX, idols of angels and creatures, and idols of Ganesha, Jesus, and Mary gifted to my mum by her non-Buddhist friends. The top shelf is reserved for idols of buddhas. Mum offers them food because nourishment and vitality are the highest form of gratitude, or the most difficult to

surrender. When the three sticks of incense have finished burning, Khun Yai, Khun Ta, and the deities have finished eating. Mum will then ask them for permission to eat the fruit; to cut it up into smaller segments and share it with family, friends, and neighbours. This fruit, touched and eaten by deities, is considered to be lucky and therefore medicinal. Through the fruit, we become messmates who are no longer separated by realms, mediating companionship between loved ones who have passed, ancestors, buddhas, deities, gods, angels, creatures, kings, family, friends, and neighbours.

Everyday at the restaurant when my aunty made the communal staff meal at 4pm, she would set aside a small portion for my mum to offer to the spirits of the land– the traditional owners who offer ongoing protection of the land and its inhabitants, but also spirits that wander through. Sometimes, the staff meal would be a stir fry or curry with jasmine rice, sometimes it was noodles. Mum placed the plate of food and a glass of water outside and lit five sticks of incense to signify to the spirits that the food was ready. They would be left overnight into the following afternoon, being replaced by the next staff meal. Dylan and I sat and ate with mum, dad, our aunts, and the staff, sharing the staff meal that doubled as our afternoon tea. After eating, we played outside in the sun and watched as ants moved back and forth from the plate of offerings. They moved in a frenzy, gathering what they could before the magpies and kookaburras came. I asked mum if there would be enough food for the spirits and she told me “the animals are the spirits of the land... the spirits eat the offerings through the animals”. The restaurant was located inside Lane Cove Country Club which overlooked the ninth fairway of a golf course that backed onto bushland. I wondered what spirits, entities, creatures, animals, organisms and critters came out of the bush at night to share the staff meal with me, Dylan, mum, dad, our aunts and the staff.

On the last day of class for my Honours year, I brought *kalamae* (sticky rice toffee) as part of my work. During my last crit, I shared it with my teachers and classmates. I had made extra and sent a voice message into the group chat saying “I’m bringing in Thai sweets again tomorrow... these ones are particularly special because I made them with my brother while my mum was singing karaoke in the background... she also helped stir it... I’m hoping some of you are around or coming in because I’d love to be able to share them with you... the stickiness is supposed to bind the community together... so everyone come along and bind yourselves to me and each other.” *Kalamae* is made by combining coconut milk, palm sugar, and glutinous rice flour in a big brass pot on a low

charcoal fire. It is an auspicious sweet traditionally handed out and eaten only at Mon (peoples indigenous to lower Burma and west-central Thailand) weddings. Eating *kalamae* would wish for the couple's love to be *neaw nan* (sticky and tight). As the couple's family and friends would spend hours preparing it, *kalamae* came to symbolise the stickiness of community. It is now prepared and eaten in the lead up to *Songkran* (Thai New Year). The community takes turns stirring the mixture until it is fully combined and cohesive— when the wooden spoon is heavy with stickiness and difficult to lift. *Kalamae* is tender and has the texture of mochi but tastes like caramel-y toasted coconut. When eaten, the stickiness that sits in your stomach binds you to your family, and your family to the community. Those that eat the same batch of *kalamae* are bound through their bodies. Lev responded “yooo im working tomorrow and im getting anxious that I will miss out on the thai binding ceremony with the homies, out of curiosity is it still effective if i eat it another day ?”

Kin khao yang? my mum, dad, and aunty ask me. They ask me when I'm visiting, or over the phone when we haven't spoken in a little while. I ask the same of my brother when we see each other. *Have you eaten yet?*, or translated directly, *Kin/eat khao/food/rice yang/ yet?* It is a warm greeting used to show someone that you care about them. By asking *Kin khao yang?*, one is able to gather whether their loved one is nourished, whether they are eating well, whether they have time to eat, or whether they should get together to share a meal. If I have eaten, the other person will ask what I ate, and we describe to one another the meals we have eaten so far that day. Mum will ask about the ingredients and how it was made; when I tell her “basil pesto pasta”, she'll say, “I ate *pad krapow* so we both ate basil today”, or when I tell her “I ordered the special braised eggplant from the Chinese restaurant around the corner”, she'll say, “I ate *gang keaw wan* (green curry) and that had Thai eggplant in it so we both ate eggplant today”. By stating this, mum is acknowledging a shared and communal metabolic experience, one that is ongoing even when we are apart. Both our bodies are intaking food, tasting and feeling different varieties of the same herb— sweet basil tastes sweeter, milder, more peppery, and feels softer in the mouth, whereas Thai basil tastes spicy with an anise-like flavour and is more sturdy, resulting in more chewing. Both our bodies then chemically and mechanically break it down, absorbing it into our bloodstreams, and carrying the nutrients to each cell— both basil carry vitamins A and C, potassium, manganese, copper, and magnesium, however, sweet basil is better for vitamin K and iron, and Thai basil is better for vitamin E. Finally, much later, both our bodies remove the undigested material.

As I sit at home on my couch with a plate of basil pesto pasta topped with Parmigiano Reggiano cheese balancing on the arm rest, and my mum sits in her home at her dining table with a bowl of *pad krapow* and jasmine rice topped with a fried egg, sunny side up, the ingredients that make up each dish have traveled toward us. In her book *Eating in Theory*, Annemarie Mol states “as I eat, I am not simply where I am. I am not just here”, explaining that “while walkers (putting one foot in front of the other) move their bodies through their surroundings, eaters (as they bite, chew, and swallow) move their surroundings through their bodies”.¹ The pasta I boiled was made in the city of Parma in the Emilia-Romagna region of northern Italy, and the jasmine rice in mum’s rice cooker was grown and harvested in the Phayao province in northern Thailand. The Parmigiano Reggiano cheese I grated on top of my pasta was produced in Cremona in lower Lombardy, bordering Emilia-Romagna and connected to Parma through the fertile Po Valley. The fish sauce mum used to deepen the savoury and caramel flavour of the pork in her *pad krapow* was produced in Klong Dan in the Samut Prakan province with anchovies caught in the Gulf of Thailand– the same waters that her dad, my Khun Ta, spent many years in during his time in the navy. The herbs and vegetables we used were grown and harvested in places across so-called Australia. Bits of Italy, Thailand, so-called Australia, and other places are folded into our bodies and assembled inside us; as eaters, we become mixed up and entangled with our surroundings.

Mol states that “when it is modelled on eating, being is not just local. Composed out of elsewheres, my body gets spread out to sites nearby and far away... I am by no means everywhere, but neither am I just here. The metabolic body suggests a model of being as neither fully here nor completely there, as here and there, multisited, dispersed”.² When I eat *pla salit* (sun dried gourami) and rice, I am sitting on Khun Yai’s lap. She is using the warmth of her palms to press the fish into rice, shaping it into little balls that she hand feeds me. When I eat *pla salit* and rice with *tom jab chai* (Thai vegetable soup), I am also sitting across from my mum at her dining table. She is eating but discreetly watching everyone else’s bowls. She straightens her back, eager to ladle more soup for Dylan after noticing him use both hands to tilt the remnants in his bowl into his mouth. When I eat pla

¹ MOL, A. (2021). *Eating in Theory*. Duke University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1h0p5r1>

² IBID

salit and rice with *tom jab chai* and *kai jeow* (Thai omelette), I am also standing in my kitchen with my lower back resting against the counter. I am chatting with Aden as we wait for the oil in the pan to heat up– he'll ask me if I think the oil is hot enough, if he's pouring the egg mixture from high enough, and whether it's weird to have *kai jeow* with Lao Gan Ma (crispy chili oil). With one meal, I am able to be with those who cannot always be near– I am there, with them, but they are also here, with me. Through eating, we are able to find ways of being together, across time, over long distances, and between realms.

Kalamae recipe

Ingredients:

- Glutinous rice flour (200g or 1.5 cups)
- Salt (¼ teaspoon)
- Coconut milk (500ml)
- Palm sugar (240g or 12 tablespoons)

Method:

1. In a large bowl, combine glutinous rice flour and salt
2. Add coconut milk and whisk until the mixture is smooth
3. Strain the mixture into a large pot over medium-low heat
4. Stir the mixture until it starts to clump, when there is some liquid remaining, add palm sugar
5. Continue stirring until the sugar is completely dissolved
6. Continue stirring on low heat for about 1 hour or until the mixture is smooth, sticky, and shiny
7. Leave to cool and transfer to banana leaf or non-stick tray
8. Optional: add toasted nuts or sesame seeds