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Custard Tarts
Epicurean Adventure
Laos Sampler
Seafood Shortage

Dan or *tan* tart is the Chinese equivalent of egg custard pie. But its flavor is infinitely subtler, with no overpowering vanilla, and only lightly sweetened. Commonly baked in small rounds of flaky pastry, you're likely to find these paraded at *dim sum* or *yum cha* luncheons. We chanced upon Singapore's best when Robert & Morrison globetrotted there in April: Tong Heng's *tan* tart is different than most, as its cooked in a diamond shape, and the *sou pei* or "crisp skin" pastry is more like classic *pâte feuilletée*. Not surprisingly that some historians contend Portuguese *pasteis de nata* is the origin of this recipe.

The best tarts literally crumble into a thousand bits with each bite. "You can't have both crisp and tender," writes Shirley Corriher in her cooking theory book. But here, she's proven wrong. Even more importantly, the best pastry is made with two separate doughs, then folded and rolled together like *détrempe* in a classic French pastry. As for the secret of its lighter-than light, just-set custard texture: fine straining and very slow baking. Surprisingly, the ratio of whole eggs versus tender egg yolks is secondary. Just imagine the lightest quiche imaginable, and then double it!

Although round *tan* tarts are more common these days, the squarish-diamond shape actually pre-dates Western-influenced round tarts. Chinese pastry chefs traditionally formed patty shells by pinching opposite corners to form a cup, which allowed for baking without a shell. If you are heading to Singapore soon, you are in luck on your outbound journey: Tong Heng has an airport shop in Terminal 2 where you can purchase them before your journey home. Ias, these delicate custard tarts do not travel well, and the custard sets unflatteringly upon refrigeration.

Better yet, join our **Singapore & Thailand Epicurean Adventure, Oct. 2-16**, and discover first hand the joys and delights of *tan* tarts. The tour begins in ultra-modern Singapore, but just as quickly you'll discover this island city's ancient Asian cultures steeped in tradition. We've included food tours of Singapore's ethnic Indian, Malay and Chinese quarters, plus attend a Thal Bohri banquet in a local family's home. This ethnic Indian minority group's meals have a unique way of combining sweet and savory flavours. For example, dinners begin with salt tasting, which represents that all people are equal. Likewise, a sweet dish begins the menu, as this symbolizes that guests will only talk sweetly during their meal. We've also added a second gala dinner in a Singapore high-rise apartment – another unique opportunity to meet and socialize with locals in their home territory. At this encounter, we're encouraging everyone to bring a favorite local wine from home to share with our hostesses.

We then fly to Thailand to **learn fruit and vegetable carving** at a special food styling workshop, **sample regional dishes** from around the kingdom, and **visit local markets** rarely viewed by tourists. Our favorite is a recently restored turn-of-the-century riverside market that is often used as a period movie set backdrop. We also include stops to Chiang Mai, Thailand's Lanna capital in the far north, plus the 12th century historical capital of Sukhothai – where you'll have a chance to scythe rice from the field. Our final night is a banquet cruise on the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok.

Early bird discounts for our October tours are available now until June.

Those coming with us on our Laos Food Sampler (16-22 Oct.) will have a special cooking class of local dishes, including delicious *jeow* chili jams. Not to mention the holiday celebrations in toe during that time of the year. Last October, Robert and Morrison traveled to the Thai-Lao border to view the spectacular Fireboat Festival in Nakhorn Phanom. And we can't wait to repeat the trip in '05 with the **Laos Food Sampler** tour group! Culminating on the full moon in October, Thailand's northeastern Isan provinces celebrate the *Lai Rua Fai* (fireboat) festival by launching magnificently crafted candle-lit lantern murals – about the size of giant billboards. They float down the Mekong at night, with rural Laos serving as our backdrop. This spectacle is Nakhorn Phanom's answer to the nearby Nong Khai fireballs. There, tourists stand interminably until the early hours to view inexplicable gas bubbles rising from the water. Locals claim it's a religious miracle, but the wait is rather boring.. These annual river "farts" may be mysterious, but we'll choose the fireboats any day. Crossing the Mekong, the oft-described "laid-back and quiet" Laos capital of Vientiane is anything but... The Lao are in full celebratory mode for *Awk Phansaa* Buddhist Lent, and the riverside park teems with tens of thousands of revellers. We arrive in time for the popular boat races on the afternoon of the last day, then just as suddenly, Vientiane slips back into its quiet self. We had an absolute ball visiting last year, and have consequently included both events on our Laos Food Sampler. On this upcoming trip, we are also flying to Laos' former imperial capital, Luang Prabang – called the best-preserved city in Southeast Asia. It's Unesco heritage preserved status makes it worth the several days we've planned here.

For those wanting to lengthen the tour for a few days, we've also arranged free stopover rights in Cambodia visiting the magnificent ancient temples of Angkor. This free stop over saves you \$400 in air fares alone! We cannot encourage you enough: visit Angkor now, not later. Each year, tourist numbers double, and the monuments of Cambodia are threatened with mass visitors, so enjoy the temples now in relative peace. We're also offering extra-special never-to-be-repeated soft-opening rates at a brand new luxury hotel.

When last in Cambodia, we visited the impressive Paul Dubrule cooking school, which trains disadvantaged Cambodian youth the skills to land and hold a job in the hospitality industry. The school is named in honor of one of Accor hotels' founders, although it has no official link with the training program today. Seems Mr. Dubrule was bicycling his way through Asia (at a very spry age!) when he stopped in Siem Reap to observe NGO/non-governmental organization training programs. He was so impressed with the needs of Cambodians, that he instantly bequeathed the funds to build this fine cooking school. Money for the school's on-going operation are in dire need, however. We are likewise impressed, and consequently, **we're donating a portion of our October food tour proceeds to the on-going progress of this school.**

On the book front: *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture* is an insightful look into one of our favorite destinations. Brand new and profusely illustrated, its written by Philip Cornwall Smith, an English expat with many years' residence in this Kingdom of Smiles. Indeed, *Very Thai* is so good, it's already heading into Thai translation. Highly recommended.

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/9748225615/qid=1109999663/sr=2-1/ref=pd_bbs_b_2_1/002-8106598-1162453

Fishy Business: "There was a poor sable catch this last year," apologized our waiter at David's Deli in San Francisco. This venerable eatery has served the delicious smoked white fish for some 52 years, but its no longer available here, in spite of its perpetual inclusion on the printed menu. Small wonder, after hearing the plight of the world's fisheries. Consumers might well wonder where tonight's fish dinner comes from. A real eye opener is *The End of the Line: How over-Fishing is Changing the World and What we Eat* by Charles Clover (Ebury Press, £14.99). Revealingly, as much as 85% of "by-catch" is flung back into the sea, but it's not only prawn trawlers that are the worst offenders. Ever-larger ships with sonar detection and sea-mapping software enable yields far larger than can be replenished. Sadly, even the solution of fish farming has its own ecological problems, such as water contamination, over-reliance on antibiotics, and general cruelty. Not only that, it can take some 20 tonnes of dead, ground up fish to raise just one tonne live harvest. This book has sold so well in hardback, it's just had a March paperback printing. But where is the American edition??? Available through Amazon UK

http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0091897815/qid=1105250961/sr=2-2/ref=sr_2_9_2/026-8146656-1623610

Bravo to Didier Corlou, exec. chef at Hanoi's Metropole Hotel. His book *Didier Corlou's Vietnamese Cuisine, or Ma Cuisine du Vietnam* won three awards at the World Gourmand awards in Sweden: best photography; best chef's book and best Asian cookbook. Available in both English and French editions, Didier's hardbound book is published in Vietnam, and sold at the Sofitel Metropole. Didier, and his sous chef Van, is co-author of Robert's own book *Vietnamese Home Cooking*, which has just been translated into French by Editions Soline.

http://www.amazon.fr/exec/obidos/ASIN/2876775018/qid=1105582295/sr=1-7/ref=sr_1_0_7/171-2992464-6696203

Congratulations to Barbara Snow of Mentor, Ohio, Jerilyn Cheney of Bainbridge Island, Washington, and Robin Hirsch-Simons of Valencia, California, for winning autographed copies of Robert's Cookbooks: "Thai Home Cooking", "Fondue", and his latest, "Vietnamese Home Cooking". And double accolades to Jerilyn for her inspiring work helping to remove the landmines from Vietnam's former DMV zone. For those interested in her organization Peace Trees, go to the website www.peacetreesvietnam.org April marks the 30th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, but that country still suffers from landmines, chemical deforestation, and among the world's worst rates of birth deformities.

On the press front: Robert's article on juggling careers ran in *Words*, the IACP online newsletter for food writers and publishers. *New Idea* food editor Patrick Collins reviewed Globetrotting Gourmet food tours in the February issue. Robert Carmack also contributed to the new anthology "Stir-Fries", from Lansdowne in Australia.

Next issue: pepper taste off – which is the best? Koh Samui, Thailand's luxury resort island on the Gulf of Siam. Xi'an China and the Silk Road. Chinese medicinal herb cooking, plus heirloom tomatoes.