

Shrimp biryani at Rangoon Tea House, in Yangon, Myanmar.

A TASTE OF YANGON

Burmese food is a mix of savory and funky, with influences from China and India. It just might be the next global culinary phenomenon. BY CHANEY KWAK

I couldn't tell if Desmond Tan was crying from jet-lag-induced delirium, sweating from the spicy food, or both. We were diving in to sea bass with mustard greens and vibrant herbs that I couldn't name, all steamed in a banana leaf. It was complex yet comforting, hitting every note from sweet to sour to bitter.

Tan, a Bay Area-based Burmese restaurateur, and I were at **Shan Yoe Yar** (fb.com/shanyoeyar; entrées \$2–\$11) in downtown Yangon, Myanmar, a stop on our tour of Burmese cuisine. The restaurant specializes in the food of the Shan ethnic group in the country's northeast. Combining seasonal vegetables, foraged herbs, and hearty meats, the dishes defy modern borders and reflect Laotian, Thai, and Chinese influences. Opened in late 2013, the restaurant is in an 80-year-old teak mansion and is adorned with folksy traditional instruments. Before we could cool our palates, more plates landed: pleasantly bitter leeks pounded with dried soybeans and coriander, pork rinds drizzled with a tamarind sauce, eggplant pulp smoked to a sultry perfection, and tofu made with chickpeas. →

The Dish

“A couple of years ago, you wouldn’t have seen a restaurant that has good food and great ambience,” Tan said, wiping away at his face. I had to agree—on my last trip to Yangon, six years ago, fine dining consisted mainly of curries drowning in oil served under harsh fluorescent lighting.

For nearly half a century, Myanmar languished in isolation as its military junta fended off the political and economic progress that swept across much of the rest of Asia. But since the democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 2010, Yangon has had its first free election, seen an increase in overseas investment, and introduced affordable SIM cards for better phone and Internet service. Suddenly the city is in dialogue with the world, and with this has come a reimagined dining scene imbued with international flair.

Tan, the owner of San Francisco’s hit restaurant Burma Superstar, has been watching this transformation closely. He returned to his birthplace regularly to research his recently released cookbook, which is named after his restaurant. He brought a copy of it with him to dinner, and his friends passed it around the table, incredulous to find familiar Burmese dishes in a glossy book—published in America, no less. The unspoken question: Is the cuisine of Myanmar really ready for the international spotlight?

In short, yes.

Burmese food draws culinary traditions from its geographic proximity to India, China, and Thailand; British rule in the 19th and 20th centuries brought additional influences. I ventured out the next day to find this diversity in action. Getting lost in downtown Yangon’s checkerboard of monsoon-beaten Edwardian town houses and fin-de-siècle edifices, I discovered old-school businesses like a dairy shop next to the Shri Kali Hindu temple. The boyish proprietor, Dhana Shekaran, scoops mustard oil and ghee out of big jars, just like his South Indian immigrant grandfather did. The shop’s star product is its yogurt, made fresh with buffalo milk and served in handmade clay jars. Cool and custardy, it also has a tangy kick, not unlike a summery salad of mozzarella dressed with vinegar—just the thing I needed after a stroll through Yangon’s oppressive humidity.

Amid the cacophony of the produce market on 17th Street, I encountered a spring-roll-paper maker, whose hand dipped into a watery rice batter and flashed across a dozen hot plates so quickly that my phone’s camera could only capture blurry streaks of white. Slices of pomelo and papaya were piled up high on carts, sugarcane juicers jangled incessantly, and samosas floated in vats of hot oil. Businessmen, wearing starched white shirts tucked into their sarong-like *longyi*, slurped the national breakfast of *mohinga* (fish stew).

“Myanmar’s food has always had a lot of potential to appeal to different palates,” said Ngwe San Aung, who goes by Axiao. His café, **Pansuriya** ([fb.com/pansuriyamyanmar](https://www.facebook.com/pansuriyamyanmar); entrées \$2–\$6), serves a mean salad of



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From top: A fruit vendor in a colonial-era building; Desmond Tan, of San Francisco’s Burma Superstar, at one of the city’s night markets.

tamarind leaves tossed in garlic oil and sesame. The kitchen uses hyper-local ingredients, like most restaurants in Yangon, where locavorism isn’t a recent fad but a way of life. The people have always had to make do with whatever is on hand—a side effect of weak transportation infrastructure.

That’s not to say Yangon is a bubble. Axiao has never lived abroad, but after a couple years of study he picked up fluent English by interacting with the city’s expat community, one that has grown exponentially since the U.S. and European Union eased sanctions in 2012. Another thing he learned from the foreigners: the →



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From top: A spread of cold cuts and cheese at the gourmet deli Sharky's; Shri Kali, a temple built to honor the Hindu goddess Kali.

food served in Yangon's restaurants needed less salt and oil to broaden its appeal and allow the flavors to shine. In a way, this year-old café exemplifies the city's potential: it's locally rooted and globally inspired. A collaboration with art dealer Aung Soe Min, who champions Burmese artists at his downtown gallery, Pansuriya is really an upstart cultural center that happens to serve excellent food. Paintings by Yangon artists hang alongside vintage photographs and posters. The café has hosted cultural events, such as a screening of a documentary on human rights—an act of defiance that could easily have gotten it shuttered a few years back. Axiao pointed out the moss-covered Victorian building across the street. "That's a police station," he said, shrugging. "Why should I be afraid? I'm not doing anything illegal." Seeing his success, a number of cafés and restaurants targeting monied Yangon natives and expats have followed suit on Bogalay Zay Street.

To explain how the food here is changing, Tan took me to Sharky's (fb.com/sharkys.yangon), a deli run by an eccentric food maker who has lived in Switzerland and Israel. Sharky, whose

given name is U Ye Htut Win, makes gelato, Camembert, and other foreign food from scratch. "He created a market for things people didn't know about," Tan said.

Locals like Sharky returning from abroad are reshaping Yangon's food scene. Next door to the new downtown Sharky's store is Rangoon Tea House (fb.com/rangoonteahouse; entrées \$2–\$4), opened by 27-year-old Htet Myet Oo, who came back to Yangon after attending college in London. He takes a barista-like approach to tea, all of which is made to order. (Try *cho kyat*, or sweet and bitter, flavored with condensed milk.) Upstairs, German expat Ulla Kroeber runs an accessories and décor boutique named Hla Day (hladaymyanmar.org). As the spouse of a UN diplomat who first came to the country in 1994, Kroeber is aware that much of Myanmar's population still struggles for survival, with one-quarter living below the poverty line. Her social enterprise works with artisans to design and market products, from handwoven textiles to candied pomelo peel—none of which would look out of place in a boutique in Dallas or New York City.

Inevitably, some worry that these accoutrements of globalized taste run the risk of homogenizing Yangon. Tan is well aware of the consequences. "It makes me sad to think that, in a few years, Yangon will be like any other city in Southeast Asia," he said, pointing at the streets full of Korean and Japanese cars. And for a second, I could see what he meant: teenagers passed by, their eyes fixed on Facebook on their phones. I might as well have been back home in San Francisco. But for now—with food this eclectic and underrated—Yangon is in a class by itself. ■

FROM TOP: MORGAN OMMER; PRISMA BY DUKAS PRESSEAGENTUR GMBH/ALAMY