



A FIELD OF THEIR OWN

In 2012 an Australian photographer and his Thai wife turned their hilly village homestead into Samui's marquee destination for organic agriculture, in so doing spearheading a now-burgeoning farm-to-table movement. Despite challenging conditions, their innovations are being emulated by farmers, business owners and resort hotels all over the holiday island

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y partner and I are forever planning our dream garden. We both love food and cooking and watching *Nigella* re-runs. Lately, we've been hungrily consuming

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's *River Cottage*. In a perfect world, we'd host grand feasts of roasted free-range chook atop a medley of our own heirloom vegetables, golden-brown quesadillas stuffed with house-smoked pulled pork and slathered in creamy homegrown avocados and gooey mozzarella (which would come from the pair of Mehsana water buffalo that grazed in our organic rice field out back). Perhaps there'd be a big bowl of *gaeng keow wan* (Thai green curry) with chillis, eggplant and herbs all plucked from our patch. Heck, even the coconut milk would be fresh off the tree out back. This supper would be accompanied by pitchers of home-made lemongrass juice and growlers of home-brewed IPA.

Our acreage wouldn't be limited to vegetables. We'd have an orchard, too: rows of mango, banana and papaya trees. Sometimes, we think we'd like goats in pens; other times we'd just have a chicken coop for fresh eggs. But these are all rather far-fetched fantasies: we currently split our time between two bustling, dense and humid Asian cities. Our two apartments are both studded with small Juliet balconies – there's about enough tillable square metres for a few pots of coriander and basil, some chillis and an aloe plant. We have no idea how to brew beer, or raise goats or milk buffalo, and we are yet to master the perfect *gaeng keow wan*.

Yet across Thailand, there are a growing number of places for those wishing to unleash their inner agrarian. Perched in the middle of the Gulf of Siam's warm waters, the palm-lined island of Koh Samui is full of hotels and resorts that run the gamut from humble beachside bungalows to decadent six-stars frequented by Hollywood celebrities, and everything in between. With development of the island so pervasive, I was surprised to discover on a recent trip that a more organic, sustainable-living scene was thriving there.

In the island's north, not far from the pretty villages of Bophut and Bangrak, there is a place for wannabe farmers like my boyfriend and I. Founded in 2012, Island Organics is a one-acre, 100% micro farm where people can forage and fossick around for the freshest of yields while also mastering the minutiae of aquaponics and worm castings. That's all on the itinerary before learning to whip up Thai dishes that reflect the breadth and power of this venerated cuisine – a *laab moo* (ground pork salad) with just the right amount of crunch; a northern-style *som tam palah* (papaya salad with fermented fish) with a powerful, fiery kick; or a rich, aromatic *tom kha gai* (coconut chicken soup). Apart from the protein (which is all sourced ethically and as locally as possible) and the rice (organic and from Chiang Rai), all ingredients are plucked from the trees and tugged from the soil on site.

The seeds of Island Organics were sown when Cameron Hansen, an Australian photographer and his wife Rattanaphorn "Lat" Dokduang, who hails from Thailand's north-eastern Isaan province, realised the sloping land they'd built their house on couldn't grow a single thing. Groves of coconut trees were draining the soil of its nutrients and minerals, so after a little Google and YouTube research, Cameron discovered that he'd need to chop a few down and terrace the land to create a drainage system (monsoon rains on Samui can wreak havoc on gardens). It worked, and "changed everything," said Cameron. "Then we both became obsessed. It was all trial and error. The irrigation system really worked wonders, and soon enough the garden was thriving. People were asking to come and see the farm. We held open days and supplied markets, but Lat's always been an amazing cook, so we thought: Why not marry the two concepts? Nearly everything we grow now is used in the classes – we're that busy."

At the top of the hill sits the couple and their two daughters' house, flanked by coconut palms and mango trees. Not far from this is the mothership: a spacious bamboo sala decked out as a professional demonstration kitchen with 13 cooking stations, fans, fridges, grills

At Island Organics, chef Rattanaphorn "Lat" Dokduang demonstrates how to master the seminal pad thai. Most of the ingredients inside her wok can be seen growing on Lat's lush micro farm (opposite)



and a barbecue. Surrounding the cooking sala are sheaths of vertical gardens with plastic pots growing loofah and mustard leaf, and wide terraces stuffed with coriander, all the basil, mint and dill. Beyond that are lemongrass and aloe bushes, as well as cascading planters of tomatoes, cucumber, wing beans, sweetcorn, peanuts, Thai celery, sprouts, shallots, Thai eggplant, kale, chillis, *pak choy* (cabbage), lettuce, ginger, galangal and bamboo. Right at the base of the farm is Cameron's latest experiment, a mushroom house where oyster and tom yum varieties sprout.

After our farm tour, we wandered back to the cooking sala through an orchard of starfruit, roseapple, pineapple, avocado, papaya, kaffir limes, banana, tamarind, dragonfruit and passionfruit trees, and met up with Lat again at an impressive aquaponics set-up with tilapia fish and a chicken coop.

The tilapia excrete nutrient-rich waste which is then channelled into the roots of the plants, while the African night-crawler worms the pair raise enable them to brew what Lat dubs "worm tea" that's fed to the garden. Cameron's interest in aquaponics was first piqued by the simple fact you could grow food from fish waste in a closed-loop system and eat the fish, too. He's now become passionate about it: "Commercial systems are complicated and require a lot of initial investment, but built as a hobby you can almost put a system together from recycled materials," he said.

Cameron told me what he enjoys most is the diverse clientele attracted to Island Organics' classes, although our group was heavily skewed towards foodie types. In our class, there was the young couple who both worked in corporate communications but told me they spent most of their weekends at their suburban Melbourne home, brewing beer in the shed and building a veggie patch. Then there was the fair-haired Scandinavian family, who nodded knowingly as Cameron talked us through the fine art of composting. Once the fungi has "really set in" after four or five months, Cameron or Lat will grab a big handful into a bucket, aerate it and





add a bit of molasses, and then pour the liquid form into the soil. Lat handed me a cucumber she'd just added to her basket to taste – it was the juiciest cucumber I'd ever tasted, with a hint of sweet caramel lingering on the tongue.

I also met the affable Swiss entrepreneur Walter Kern, who is based in Hong Kong and was a former president of the Slow Food movement's local chapter. A relentless schedule had required Walter to take some respite at a beach resort, but he confessed that Lat's cooking class had been the highlight of his trip so far. He was particularly taken with a passionfruit Cameron offered us. "It has a slight rose flavour to it," Walter enthused, scraping the inner skin of the pulpy fruit with a teaspoon. The passionfruit are particularly special for Lat and Cameron – he brought home the seeds from his grandfather's tree in Queensland. "We planted some at my parents' village in Isaan," added Lat. "They've gone wild and now feed the entire village!" With that she plopped a heavy mortar and pestle on my kitchen bench, and our cooking class began.

Samui's organic revival isn't confined to Cameron and Lat's farm. In Lamai on the island's east, young entrepreneur Benjaphon Iamvatcharin has converted his grandfather's wooden shophouse into the Samui Health Shop by Lamphu. He and his wife cook up healthy lunches and sell organic Thai products: skincare, soaps, curry pastes, cold-pressed coconut oil.

Benjaphon also organises CSA (community-supported agriculture) through a co-op of small-scale Samui farmers, linking them with wellness resorts such as Kamalaya, and locals and expats seeking organic produce. He ensures no chemicals are used, and that soil is certified. "Consumers commit, and then they get what's grown that week or in season," he said. "It helps both consumer and farmer. The problem here is that the farmers are poor, and they lose out if they can't sell certain products. With so many big resorts here and trends being dictated by tourists, the farmers soon go to join the hotels. I noticed farming was dying out, and thought it would be worthwhile to guide them in a sustainable way."

Then there's Shelley Poplak, who is a member of Samui Mala, a "green-living" group of local volunteers on the island who arrange sustainability workshops, yoga festivals and various fundraisers. She also coordinates a small "green market" where chemical-free, locally grown produce is sold. So far they've showcased chocolates, cheeses and probiotic drinks in addition to fruit and vegetables. Shelley said farm-to-table had extra challenges on Samui, where land is expensive and labour fickle. "But tourism feeds into it all and we love that places like Island Organics are showing that small, locally grown solutions are welcomed by tourists and locals alike," she said.

Resorts like the swish Four Seasons and The Tongsai Bay have also made a point to build impressive gardens. Through employing award-winning chefs, there's in turn been more emphasis on resort kitchens embracing local flavours and native ingredients. At the former hotel, sous-chef Sumalee Khunpet led me through her fragrant herb garden just beside the Four Seasons' excellent southern Thai restaurant, Koh. She pointed out peanut sprouts and fern leaves that would later go into a salad with light soy and ample garlic, and *nor riang* beans – a speciality of the south – that would be tossed in a wok with prawns.

At Six Senses, a plush but earthy resort on the very northern tip of Bophut, resort manager Gary Hendon and his permaculturalist Khun Tada last month finished the transformation of what was the staff car park into a micro farm like Cameron and Lat's. Around 60% of it was created with offcuts from a recent resort renovation. Along with fruit and veg, there's an aquaponics set-up with 200 tilapia, chooks that feed off resort scraps, and even eight goats that gorge on the resort's 300kg daily landscape trimmings. Gary has plans to add their milk and cheese products to the menu, and create daily tours of the farm where guests can pick out their own breakfast eggs. "We're just trying to have new ideas and be sensible – five-star dining doesn't have to be foie gras or lobster... it's about technique and creativity," he said.

What does it actually mean to be "organic" in Thailand? The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) defines this form of farming as "a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs (synthetic chemicals like pesticides and fertilisers) with adverse effects."

The Organic Agriculture Certification Thailand (ACT) is an organisation that was originally established in 1995 by the Alternative Agriculture Network (AAN), a group of 85 Thai NGOs working on sustainable agriculture. At the time, interest in organic agriculture among Thai farmers and consumers was emerging, and several business groups were marketing products with "hygienic food" or "non-toxic food" labels. These products were not organically produced, and AAN felt they could potentially mislead consumers and undermine the integrity of genuine organic farmers. This triggered AAN to establish a certification programme. ACT gained official international accreditation by IFOAM – an expensive yet essential label that means the products it certifies can be distributed as "organic" in Europe and Singapore. ACT was the first body to gain such accreditation in Asia.

"One of the problems in Thailand is that most organic consumers are not aware of accreditation. As 'organic' becomes more trendy, we're seeing more 'self-claimed' organic products on the market – and in Thailand right now we don't have a law to protect the integrity of organic products," one of ACT's inspectors, Piyaphan Phinthuphan tells me. "It tends to be the bigger farms that export organic rice and coffee internationally that seek accreditation. So for products sold in the domestic markets and at local farmers' markets, it's a bit trickier."

ACT has worked with the Thai government's National Bureau of Agricultural Commodity and Food Standards to help develop national organic standards, yet a national accreditation body has not yet been made official.

Vitoon Panyakul was one of ACT's founders



Many of the island's top resort kitchens are embracing local flavours and ingredients, such as the Four Seasons' sous-chef Sumalee Khunpet (inset)

Opposite, top right: Southern Thai dishes at the Four Seasons' Koh restaurant include prawns fried with local Samui beans, a coconut heart salad and a stir-fry of peanut sprouts cooked with fern leaves, garlic and soy



Squeezing freshly grated coconut into a fresh milk for our curries

and now heads Green Net, a Thai social enterprise linking sustainable farmers with consumers. He tells me that in 2014, there were around 10,000 farms and 38,000ha of farmland certified as organic in Thailand – just 0.16% of the country's total farmland. However, he says that while still in its infancy, the industry was growing at a rate of about 4.3% per year.

He says smaller hobby farms such as Cameron and Lat's could make an impact on the organic scene by influencing consumers. "They can't really produce enough to grow the industry, and the climate in Samui isn't the best for cultivating rice and coffee, which are the big ones. But hobby farmers understand the relationship between organic food, health and the environment, and therefore are excellent organic consumers who spread the word."

Cooking classes with Lat are a family affair. Cameron fired up a smoky charcoal grill, grilling our chicken satay skewers to perfection. Satay is one of those dishes that most countries in South-East Asia claim as their own. We'd learnt from Lat,

though, that the dish is a southern Thai staple – Lat's satay paste (and most authentic Thai recipes) uses coconut cream rather than just peanuts, making the dish richer than Malay and Indonesian versions. We also pounded lemongrass and kaffir lime with the chillis and other spices, which gives the sauce a zesty freshness. The couple's youngest daughter, Apsara, was the official taste tester, twirling a fork into all of our pad thais.

One of the highlights was grating coconut flesh by hand to make fresh milk and cream on a *gkra-dtai*, a traditional coconut grater – something that all Thai families would do daily in the old days.

As we sat down for our meal, I felt immensely satisfied with my *kang kaew wan gai*. I'd picked the eggplants, green peppers, lemongrass, shallots and chillis myself, plucked the coriander, sweet basil and kaffir lime leaves, and knew that Lat or Cameron had foraged for the galangal, garlic and cumin seeds. The coconut was grated by myself and my kitchen crew, and squeezed into a pulp to extract the sweet milk. My green curries

Tom yum gung (hot and sour prawn soup), som tam (papaya salad), satay skewers and more at Island Organics (below); Six Senses' Farm on the Hill (right)



Good to know

Read more

Learn more about Thailand's involvement in organic farming in *Thailand's Sustainable Development Sourcebook*, available at thailsustainabledevelopment.com

Did you know?

Organic foods and products are the fastest-growing category in America's grocery carts, accounting for more than US\$35 billion in sales per year. Organic goods sold are increasing by 15% every year and comprise approximately 5% of all grocery store purchases. Forty million US households (a figure equivalent to almost 100 million people) are currently buying organic foods. Will this movement catch on in Thailand?

The directory

Island Organics
islandorganicsamui.com

Six Senses
sixsenses.com/resorts/samui

Four Seasons
fourseasons.com/kohsamui

Tongsai Bay
tongsaiabay.co.th

Kamalaya Koh Samui
kamalaya.com

Samui Health Shop by Lamphu
samuihealthshop.com

Samui Green Market
[facebook.com/SamuiGreenMarket](https://www.facebook.com/SamuiGreenMarket)

Further reading

Read about Thailand's best farm stays on page 104



Clockwise from left: Lat among the aloe plants; the nutrient-rich soil is the result of "worm tea"; the chooks; Island Organics' aquaponics; Biofizz, a Samui-made probiotic drink, is sold at Samui Green Market

have in the past been too creamy and too sweet, but Lat's teachings had imbued this one with the perfect balance of sourness, sweetness, saltiness and heat. The secret was my lovely, vibrant green paste, I'd learnt. The green peppers, chillis, cumin and coriander seeds, galangal and lemongrass and pungent prawn paste had to be the freshest of fresh. We also used coriander root rather than the leaves, which gives the dish far more intensity.

Lat and Cameron have grand plans for their little micro farm. They're in the process of building a large greenhouse, expanding the aquaponics set-up into a tower system and getting Island Organics 100% off the grid. They're not so bothered by certification; the aim of the farm is simply to feed hungry guests and their own family, of which there will be another soon – Lat is pregnant with another girl. "I'm totally outnumbered now," Cameron laughed.

"At the end of the day, we just want to keep building what we have created here. Maybe all the other hydroponic farms using chemicals should be the ones proving what they've got in their food, rather than the other way around. Then we could just do our thing, experimenting and feeling our way. Organic farms are making a comeback – people want to know what they are or aren't eating." ●



As aproned strangers pound mortar and pestles, then share meals together, Island Organics has an intimacy you don't find in many cooking classes

ไอส์แลนด์ ออร์แกนิกส์ เป็นฟาร์มขนาดเล็กตั้งอยู่บนเขาระหว่างบ่อผุดและบางรัก ทำเกษตรแบบผสมผสาน ที่สอนการทำอาหารไทยง่ายๆ ส่วนผสมนั้น ถ้าไม่หมั่นเนื้อสัตว์และข้าวออร์แกนิกจากเชียงรายแล้ว ล้วนเก็บมาจากฟาร์มที่นั่น คุณแคมเมรอน ฮานเซนและคุณรัตนภรณ์ ภรรยา ทำการค้นคว้าจากยูทูบเพื่อค้นหารายชื่อปลูกพืช และลองผิดลองถูกมากมาย จนกระทั่งคุณรัตนเองเชี่ยวชาญด้านการทำอาหารมากกว่า 20 ปี จึงได้เปิดฟาร์มให้คนเข้าเยี่ยมชมและสอนทำอาหารในเวลาเดียวกัน

แถวหาดละไมยังมีอีกเจ้าที่เน้นฟาร์มเกษตรแบบออร์แกนิก คุณเบญจพล เขี่ยมวัชรินทร์ ผู้ประกอบการรุ่นใหม่เปลี่ยนร้านไม้เก่าของที่บ้าน มาเป็นร้าน สมุย เฮลท์ ซุป บาย ล่าพู ขายสินค้าปลีกรังออร์แกนิก มีขายตั้งแต่ยาสมุนไพร ครีมนำรุงผิว ไปจนถึงเครื่องแกง เขายังจัดตั้งสหกรณ์ขนาดเล็ก เพื่อให้เกษตรกรชาวสมุยนำสินค้าไปขายให้กับรีสอร์ทและชาวต่างชาติที่ต้องการสินค้าออร์แกนิก เพื่อช่วยเหลือเกษตรกรแบบยั่งยืน

ตามคำจำกัดความของหน่วยงานเกษตรแบบออร์แกนิกสากล ออร์แกนิกคือรูปแบบของการทำการเกษตรอันมีระบบการให้ผลผลิตที่รักษาสภาพดิน สภาพแวดล้อม และมนุษย์ โดยอาศัยระบบนิเวศน์ ความหลากหลายทางชีวภาพและวงจรที่ปรับให้เข้ากับสภาพพื้นที่นั้นๆ แทนที่จะใช้สารเคมี ปัจจุบัน มีกลุ่มธุรกิจที่ขายสินค้าโดยทำการตลาดว่าเป็นสินค้าไม่มีสารพิษ ทำให้ผู้บริโภคเข้าใจผิดว่าเป็นสินค้าออร์แกนิก สำนักงานมาตรฐานเกษตรอินทรีย์ ผู้ทำหน้าที่ให้ตรารองรับเกษตรอินทรีย์ระดับสากล กล่าวว่าผู้บริโภคยังไม่คำนึงถึงความสำคัญของการรับรองความเป็นออร์แกนิก และประเทศก็ยังไม่มีความหมายรองรับ

ฟาร์มออร์แกนิกเล็กๆ ของคุณแคมเมรอนกับคุณรัตน ถือเป็นตัวช่วยอย่างหนึ่งที่ดีและช่วยให้ผู้บริโภคเข้าใจความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างอาหารออร์แกนิก สุขภาพที่ดี และสภาพแวดล้อม นับเป็นนิมิตหมายที่ดีของอนาคตสินค้าออร์แกนิกเมืองไทย