



# shopping with chef

## *With Norraset Nareedokmai of Bangkok Balcony and Silk Elephant*

*By Jesse Sharrard  
Photos by Heather Mull*

I met up with Norraset Nareedokmai, chef/owner of Squirrel Hill's Bangkok Balcony and Silk Elephant, in the Strip District outside of the Asian market WFH (which stands for Wing Fat Hong), where he likes to shop for many of the specialty ingredients he uses in his restaurants. Nareedokmai, a Thai native whose mother still lives in Thailand, has a special spot in his heart for this small grocery store. "Most of my knowledge of ingredients and techniques came from working in [my family's grocery] store when I was growing up," he says. "We made curry paste fresh for wholesale to the local restaurants. They forced me to pestle all the components of curry," he says with a smile. "I didn't enjoy it at the time, but it became useful."

Nareedokmai became a chef by accident, after he took over the business operations of Bangkok Balcony in 2004, but his love of food is obvious as he examines the offerings in the narrow aisles of WFH. He extracts star anise, an Asian spice that resembles a star in its shape and anise in its flavor, and cinnamon bark, a less-processed form of cinnamon stick that still boasts the cinnamon tree's outermost

layer; Nareedokmai says both of these ingredients are essential in Thai cooking. "To develop flavor with heat," he says, "I grill the cinnamon briefly before adding it to sauces."

We examine the seafood. "Not much fish today," he laments as he seizes an available specimen by the gill flap and peers inside. He is happy with the "nice red color" he finds in the gills, but hesitates briefly as he glances at the fish's eyes. "They're a bit cloudy," he explains, and considers other specimens and species before settling on the Asian Sea Bass he first examined.

In the produce aisle, Nareedokmai's sharp eye scrutinizes fresh vegetables that will pair well with steamed fish. His recipe changes depending on what's available, and he settles upon leek flowers—the delicately flavored, tender shoots of the leek plant.

Back in the kitchen of Silk Elephant, it is obvious that Nareedokmai has excellent knife skills. He confidently runs his blade across a steel and then starts scaling the fish. Once he rinses the stray scales away, he slices the fish's

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belly to remove the entrails, rinses it again, and cuts hatch marks through the fish's side to expose its flesh in preparation to steam it with a flavorful sauce. He explains, "In Thai cuisine, we cook the whole fish, with the head still on."

The sauce for the fish begins in Nareedokmai's mortar. He macerates garlic, star anise, coriander stems, green peppercorns and fresh ginger until they form a rough paste that he sautés to golden brown. He adds Malaya Blanc, a Thai-produced white wine; palm sugar; oyster sauce; and chicken stock. He stirs the mixture to a uniform consistency, adds lightly grilled cinnamon sticks, pours the mixture over the fish and seals the container tightly before putting it in the oven to steam for twenty minutes.

As a surprise, Nareedokmai demonstrates a special tapas: prawns battered with coconut, peanuts, lemongrass and ginger. He knows the amount of each ingredient by touch, adding pinches of varying sizes to a bowl containing just a bit of egg white. He brings the batter together with a touch

of flour and coats his butterflied prawns, which he then puts in the freezer to harden so that the batter will stay on when they are deep fried. Once the shrimp have been cooked, Nareedokmai completes the dish by arranging each shrimp over two betel leaves and topping each with a sweet chili plum sauce, thinly sliced strips of red and green peppers, a chiffonade of Kaffir lime leaves and a touch of crispy fried garlic.

With the shrimp presentation complete, it is time to remove the fish from the oven. Nareedokmai arranges it on a platter with steamed leek flowers and asparagus, pouring the pungent sauce over the top.

The full flavors and exotic presentation of Nareedokmai's dishes belie the simplicity of the techniques by which they were prepared. However, with a generational memory of these magnificent ingredients and techniques, it all comes naturally to Nareedokmai.