



BURMA

BY KAREN COATES  
PHOTOS BY JERRY REDFERN



## A Burmese Salad that Means Welcome

THE BURMESE HAVE A SAYING: “Among meats, pork is best; among fruits, mango is king; and among leaves, nothing beats tea.” Such reverence explains the country’s affection for *laphet thote*, or tea leaf salad (*laphet* means tea, *thote* means salad). The dish—equal parts bitter and spicy—is a savory combination of dried butter beans, yellow peas, roasted sesame seeds, peanuts, dried prawns, tamarind or lime, chile, garlic, oil, and the star ingredient, pickled tea leaves.

“No party nor feast, nor even a formal festivity” is complete in Burma (also known as Myanmar) without laphet thote, writes scholar U Ba Than in his 2003 book, *Myanmar’s Attractions and Delights*. For years, a main expression of hospitality has included

offering houseguests betel nut, tobacco, and laphet thote. As far back as many families can remember, they have kept a partitioned bamboo lacquerware tray in which to store the ingredients for the salad. “There’s something really wonderful about eating laphet thote and drinking tea and catching up on gossip,” says Tin Cho Chaw, author of the Burmese cookbook *Hsa Ba*.

Most locals prefer to buy their own pickled leaves and dry ingredients at the market and then mix them at home. In her cookbook, Chaw describes the customary way of eating laphet thote with guests in the home: “A little of each crispy tidbit and laphet are spooned straight into the mouth and savoured slowly, sometimes with a bite of raw garlic and green

chile. A cup of hot tea completes the ritual.” Street stalls sell small plates of salad throughout the country for about 500 kyat, or 50 cents.

Laphet thote is prepared in two ways, enhancing either its spiciness (with a mouth-burning amount of chile) or its bitterness (the tea leaves’ natural flavor, which can be reduced by rinsing them). After the salad is finished, one Burmese custom remains: swiping a finger across the plate to savor the laphet thote juice. Many believe the magic lies in that liquid, according to a Yangon journalist named Kyaw, who says, “This taste is even better than the salad.”

For a quintessential street-side experience, head to the Myanmar Shopping Mall Sule on Pagoda Road in Yangon. In front of



the mall, the Daw Yeik Kyi stand has served its special hand-mixed salad for nearly two decades. (Ask around; locals know the spot.) You could also try the salad on the north side of the city, at Shwe Zone Salads & Juice (No. 236/238 Ma Ha Baen Ga Street, Myay Ni Gone, near Dagon Centre). For an adventure, board the ferry from Yangon to Patheingyi in the Ayeyarwady Delta (ferries leave daily around 5 p.m. from the Lan Thit jetty). Ferry vendors sell a spicy version of the salad throughout the overnight journey. In Mandalay, the Star One Mandalay Rum Station (24th Street, one block west of the palace moat) serves tiny stainless-steel saucers of unmixed bitter laphet thote, the perfect grub to accompany beer or rum. **A**

**STEEP ORDER:** Burma’s best tea plants are grown on the high slopes of the Shan state mountains, 125 miles northeast of Mandalay. During the harvest in March and April, farmers pick the young leaves, then steam and store them underground for several months to ferment.



### Laphet Thote

(SERVES 1)

Recipe by Moe Moe Hlaing of the Daw Yeik Kyi laphet thote stand, Sule Pagoda Road, Yangon

#### INGREDIENTS

- 1 handful of pickled tea leaves, (more if desired)\*
- 1 tsp fish sauce
- 1½ tbsp sesame seeds
- 1½ tbsp fresh yellow beans (broad or butter beans)
- 1½ tbsp dried yellow peas
- 1½ tbsp roasted peanuts
- Pinch of salt
- 1 tsp tamarind juice
- 1 tsp peanut oil

#### OPTIONAL:

- ¼ cup shredded cabbage
- 1 sliced tomato
- Whole, raw, hot green chiles, also called Thai bird’s eye chiles
- Raw garlic cloves (small Asian variety), skin on

#### MAKE IT

1. Boil the tea leaves until they are soft, then rinse with cold water to remove some of the bitterness.
2. With a mortar and pestle, pulverize the leaves and fish sauce.
3. Transfer to a bowl and knead the mixture by hand until blended. (Locals say if you mix the salad with a spoon, the flavors will not blend as well.)
4. Add in all of the remaining ingredients. Taste and adjust ingredients for the balance of bitter/sour/salty/spicy that you prefer.
5. For a zingy option, add shredded cabbage and sliced tomato and serve the salad with raw chile and garlic cloves on the side.

\*Available online at [burmesefavourite.com](http://burmesefavourite.com) or at your local Asian market.



Clockwise, from top: a novice monk in Mandalay balances his washing bowl; the 2,500-year-old Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon; laphet thote and eggs, as served on the ferry between Yangon and Patheingyi; young Burmese gather at a cafe in Patheingyi.