OCTOBER | NOVEMBER 2014

The Cook's Cook

A Magazine for Cooks, Food Writers & Recipe Testers

BAKING CHEZ DORIE

by Regina Baraban

Rijsttafel: The Dutch-Indonesian Rice Table

by Georgeanne Brennan

Bacon on Salad: Michael Bacon's Quest for the Perfect Caesar Salad

by Jacob Dean

How to write Chocolate Recipes that work: (Hint: The Secret is in the Cacao Percentage)

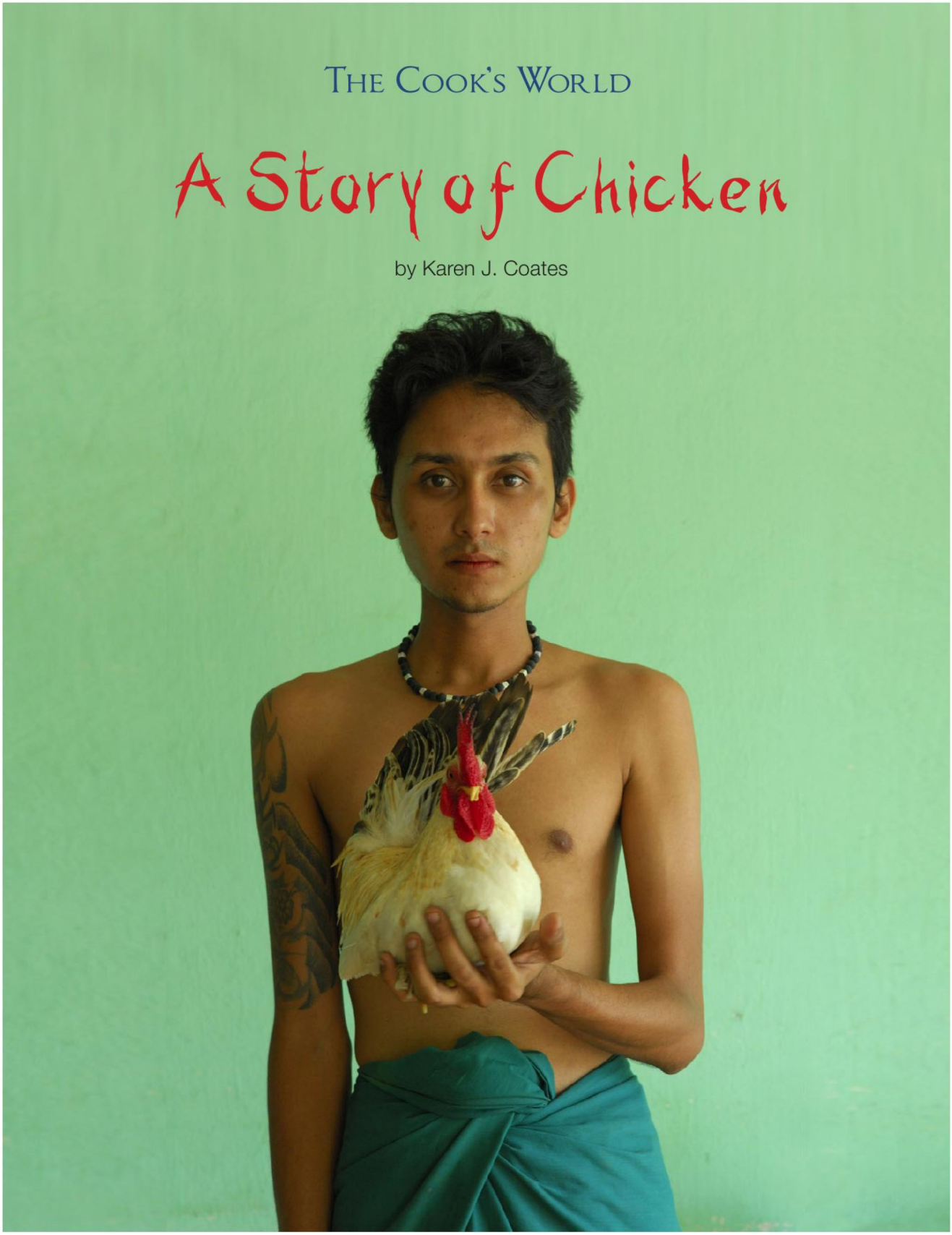
by Alice Medrich

Chef Dorie Greenspan

THE COOK'S WORLD

A Story of Chicken

by Karen J. Coates



Jerry Redfern

I'm sitting on the bank of the Chao Phraya, digging into a slimy plastic bag of fall-off-the-chopped-bone grilled chicken with sticky rice, which I bought at a little street stall just upriver from Bangkok. It's a one-person feast. I devour the meat, one bite at a time, as I roll the rice into little balls between my fingers, dipping it into super-spicy *nam prik*. I sop up the sauce and revel in the sweet-tangy heat of the whole affair (undoubtedly enhanced by MSG). My mouth tingles, my fingers glisten with grease. I sweat in my seat on this riverside pier, the air 90 degrees on the Fahrenheit scale, the chile many multitudes higher on the Scoville scale. All around me, people dig into little plastic bags of their own. I briefly wonder how many others are having unique little chicken epiphanies this same afternoon.

As a species, we humans love chicken. As a meat, it surpasses all others in the number of animals raised for consumption. It's the most plentiful bird in the world, and we've made it so: more than 19 billion worldwide, which equates to an average of nearly three chickens per person on Earth (or nearly 40 for every person in Bahrain and Brunei, the biggest chicken lovers on the planet). Those numbers are rising, with poultry as the world's leading livestock industry.

Why such ardor for a bird? Well, it tastes like chicken. But it's also cheap—chickens are quicker and easier to raise than cattle, pigs or goats. And unlike other creatures of the human dining repertoire, few cultures maintain chicken taboos.

But our chicken addiction has led human beings into a thicket of trouble. The more we eat, the more we produce, the more we wrestle with our conscience about what we do to animals in order to consume them—practices that may threaten our very survival as human beings. The human-chicken story is one of love, evolution and risk.

The typical chicken we eat is a descendent of the "aggressive, pugnacious" red jungle fowl of Asia, writes Harold McGee, the godfather of food science. It was *Gallus gallus*, a member of the pheasant family, which eventually morphed into the breast on our plates today. "Chickens seem to have been domesticated in the vicinity of Thailand before 7500 BCE, and arrived in the Mediterranean around 500 BCE," he writes. Fitting, then, that Thailand today serves such finger-licking luscious little bits of bird. In the West, it wasn't until the 19th century when imported Chinese fowl sparked a frenzy of bird breeding, turning the "unpampered farmyard scavengers" of the day into the meat we Americans now love. We humans have tamed the wild and pugnacious into a feathered food machine.

I have seen *Gallus gallus* in the wilds of Asia. It's a mighty impressive bird, especially the cock, with radiant orange plumage like a coat of lava—unlike anything I ever saw growing up in the 70s and 80s in the American Midwest. We didn't live on a farm. We lived in the suburbs. Our already-plucked chickens came on yellow Styrofoam trays, wrapped in plastic and arranged in parts. Usually breasts. Usually more breasts on a tray than on an individual chicken. I never thought about that as a child, and I never fully thought much about the math until years later, living in Asia, where the chicken in our local market was a bird, the whole bird and nothing but the bird. With two breasts. And then one day, one vendor started selling separated breasts, legs and wings. It was the absence of the rest of the bird that really got me thinking.

In Europe, "Breast fillets are so profitable that they finance all the other parts of the bird," according to a Heinrich Boll report called *Meat Atlas*. "For the producer, if it is not breast, it is waste." In years past, all those wings and legs were ground into feed. But that ended with the emergence of mad cow disease, and the subsequent EU ban on feeding animals bits and pieces of their cousins. So, instead, European producers sent their poultry bits and pieces to Africa at such low prices that the imports undermined the local chicken industry—and Africans developed a palate for wings and legs.

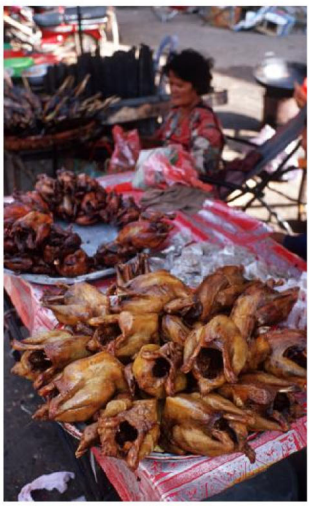
Frozen bird bits have made forays into other parts of the developing world, too—such as deep in the heart of Borneo. I'm squashed in the back of a beat up old Toyota double-cab with ripped interior and, on the outside, a rusty hunk of metal where the bumper should be. The tires are slathered in mud as Francis, the driver, shimmies down a slick logging road in an oppressive rain. We're in the Kelabit Highlands where undulating mountains form the border between Malaysia and Indonesia. For thousands of years, small local tribes have occupied the old-growth jungles that straddle these two nations. But the forests are falling, and the village is changing as traditional diets make way for the modern. "People here love chicken wings!" Francis says with a grin. So he buys them frozen from a warehouse in town on the coast, he trucks them 15 hours into the jungle. Afterward he returns to the coast with a cooler full of bush meat, for his family, completing the circle.

But still, many Asians harbor a deep admiration for the bird that sustained their youth. "Local chicken." "Village chicken." These terms are used with the same reverence we Westerners accord "free-range" and "organic" (whatever that actually means anymore).

I'm in mountainous farm country in the far north of Laos

Young women take their small lunches at food stalls outside the gates to the garment factory where they work on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. With their small salaries they are able to buy a hard-boiled egg or a couple of chicken satay skewers for their lunch. - *Phnom Penh Daunh Penh Cambodia*

Photos and captions by Jerry Redfern



So Linda, age 8, stands with a chicken she bought while shopping with her mother at the Chbar Ampeou Market, across the Mekong River from Phnom Penh. The market is known for catering to the large Vietnamese population in Phnom Penh, and sells many goods grown and made in Vietnam. Over the Chinese New Year, a scare over the bird flu kept customers from buying chickens and ducks at the market, but vendors report as of January 25, sales had returned to normal. - *Phnom Penh Cambodia*

when, one day, I start describing the typical American chicken operation to local farmers. "It's not possible to do that," a man named Davong tells me. He sees no future in Laos for an American-style broiler operation, which can easily house 100,000 birds at a time. Why wouldn't it work? "If you have a chicken coop," he says, "you have to look for food for the chickens." And, he points out, that's just not economical. By his estimation, it's far easier and cheaper to let chickens eat what they peck on the ground.

Farther down the dirt road I ask a woman named Lee similar questions about chicken, and she agrees with Davong. "That's for economy only," she says after I describe typical conditions for industrial chickens of the West.

Plus, her neighbor Mon says, the meat won't taste good if chickens can't run around and find their own food. Cooped-up birds also need medicine and chemicals, she says, and that's not good either. "If you raise chickens for eating, fed by nature is best."

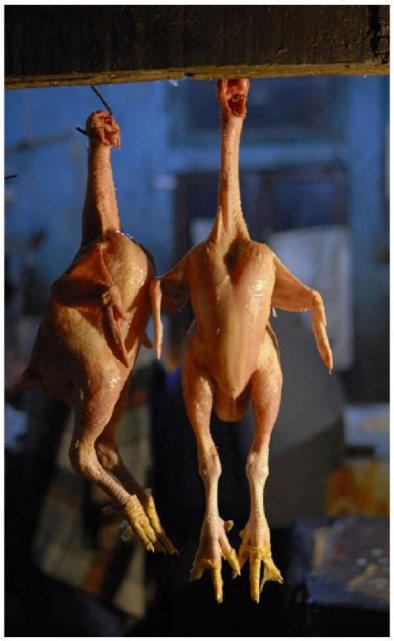
Another neighbor, Noi, confirms this: free-roaming chickens develop strong legs, thick muscles and, consequently, tasty meat. Chickens kept in a coop have soft legs and little muscle. "Their legs are not too strong," she says, and their meat is not delicious (though she's never actually tasted factory chicken).

Yet flavor is so often influenced by the world around it. It's not just what we eat, but how we eat it and with whom. That's true for chicken, for lobster, for a humble bowl of rice with a dollop of fish paste: how we, as humans, think of a meal depends on context. I learned that as a child.

I remember the stench of charred chicken skin. Not burnt, but utterly black; entire wings and breasts crusted over, obscured by a shroud of carbon. It smells of fire and dirt and damp air. It smells, too, of potatoes wrapped in foil over open flames, and of summer in the mosquito-ey Midwest. I see my Mom standing in the screen door of the Minnie Winnie camper, shaking her head as my Dad mutters insults at the fire.

Most every weekend during the summer of my 5th year, we camped. And most every weekend that summer, we ate my Dad's charred grilled chicken. When I think of those scorched hockey pucks of flesh today, it's not the chicken that forms the meaning of my memories. It's everything else: the air, the light, the towering oaks, the ambient sounds of camper doors and the *pssshhhht* of Deep Woods Off! as mothers spray their

Spicy papaya salad - or Som Tam - and crispy barbequed chicken with sticky rice await students for lunch at the Prem Center Cooking School. The Prem Center Cooking School is one of the few cooking schools that takes a holistic approach to Thai food. They raise produce and livestock on the adjoining organic farm and teach traditional foods appropriate to the season and the student's health needs. -Chiang Mai Chiang Mai Thailand



Cleaned chickens for sale at an evening market stall on the outskirts of Darjeeling. *-Darjeeling West Bengal India*

Jerry Redfern

An assistant at the Prem Center Cooking School cooks Thai-style barbecue chicken for lunch.

The Prem Center Cooking School is one of the few cooking schools that takes a holistic approach to Thai food. They raise produce and livestock on the adjoining organic farm and teach traditional foods appropriate to the season and the student's health needs. *-Chiang Mai Chiang Mai Thailand*

kids. Food isn't always about food; sometimes it's about the life around it. Consequently, I look back on my Dad's black chicken with a smile. And I miss those summer nights by the fire.

Just as I almost—*almost*—look back fondly on the night my husband and I spent in Sukhothai, Thailand, in the height of the hot season a dozen years ago. We're young, we're cheap, we're having an adventure. And the adventure goes like this:

We toss and turn in pools of sweat, a budget room with a fan, a bed and a great ruckus outside, all night long. Our luck: we have chosen a guesthouse beside a chicken slaughterhouse. We didn't know this when we checked in because the slaughterhouse operates only at night so the chickens are ready for the morning markets. The butcher begins lopping the heads off birds, one by one, starting at 10 pm—just as we attempt to sleep.

I see it through our window and through a small slit in the ramshackle wooden building where this death occurs. I see a small light. And in that light, I see a man sitting beside a bin. I see him grasp a feathered beast from the bin, and I hear it wail. It sounds so real and human: "No. No, no, no, no, NO." A crescendo of pitiful tones, ending abruptly on a high quick plea shouted in anger. "NO." I cannot actually see the man perform the act of killing (a wooden slat blocks my view), but I know. The cries cease immediately and the headless carcass flies into an adjacent bin. And then it begins again as the man's hand reaches again toward the other bin for another bird.

This continues without fail every 24 seconds (I count) until sunrise. Soon thereafter, we depart Sukhothai by train, heading south 8 hours to Bangkok. We ride third class, no aircon (we're young, we're cheap, we're having an adventure). Sweat pearls on my face, neck, arms and hands. It drips down my legs and fingers. The sweltering air never ceases, and the passing scenery seems all the same: green fields and workers in straw hats. And then another town with another market and another row of rainbow-colored umbrellas shielding storefronts and stalls selling smoking-hot grilled chicken.

I have never killed a chicken, and I admit the disconnect between what I eat and what I know—the reality that a once-living bird must die for it to become paprikash on my plate. Production and slaughter are neither pretty nor nice, especially not on a massive scale. They offend the sensibilities of those who care about the treatment of animals, and all of us non-vegans make our own moral justifications for consuming flesh.

(as I was today) and it's the most appealing thing on a limited menu. I eat chicken (organic, free-range) breasts in Boulder, chicken (of unknown provenance) saj in Baku, and chicken (freshly slaughtered, in my presence) soup in mountaintop Hmong villages of northern Laos. I do my best to do the best I can. But we are only human.

I'm back on the river Chao Phraya. I take one last bite of Thai barbecued chicken, slathered in sticky chile. And for a few moments I just eat, thinking no deep thoughts at all.

RECIPE

Thai Grilled Chicken

(Inspired by David Thompson's recipe in *Thai Food*, Ten Speed Press 2002)

Serves 4

Cloves from 2 small heads local garlic, peeled
3 small cilantro roots
13 strong black peppercorns
Pinch of sea salt
Pinch of ground turmeric
1 lemongrass stalk, chopped
5 hot Thai bird's eye chilies
1 chicken, cut into serving pieces

1. In a mortar and pestle (or food processor), combine the garlic, cilantro roots, peppercorns, salt, turmeric, lemongrass, and chilies. Pulverize (or process) to make a coarse paste.

2. Rub marinade under and over chicken skin. Cover and refrigerate for about 2 hours.

3. Prepare a hot grill and grill to desired taste.

RECIPE

Chicken in Pandanus

Adapted from Smart Cook Thai Cookery School

Makes 6 packets (2 to 3 appetizer servings)

3 teaspoons minced garlic
1 teaspoon minced cilantro root
1/2 teaspoon white peppercorns
3 teaspoons roasted sesame seeds
1 tablespoon soy sauce (or fish sauce for a gluten-free version)
1 teaspoon sesame oil
1/2 teaspoon sugar
100 grams (4 ounces) boneless chicken, diced small
6 fresh trimmed pandanus (also known as pandan leaves), available in Asian markets and at importfood.com
470 ml (2 cups) oil, or as needed for frying
Sweet-sour sauce or chili sauce, for serving

1. In a mortar and pestle (or food processor), combine garlic, cilantro root and peppercorns. Pulverize (or process) to make a paste.

2. Place the paste in a mixing bowl and add the sesame seeds, soy sauce or fish sauce, sesame oil, sugar, and chicken. Mix well, cover, and refrigerate for at least 1 hour.

3. Wrap the chicken with pandanus leaves to form a triangular packet. This is most easily done by making a loose triangular knot out of a single long leaf, stuffing in the filling, and enclosing the filling by tightening the knot and weaving loose ends as necessary to cover any exposed chicken. If necessary, toothpicks may be used to secure each wrapper.

4. Heat the oil in a wok over medium heat. Deep fry the packets until the leaves are crispy on the outside and the chicken is opaque inside; you may need to cook one alone to test the cooking time. Remove from heat and drain oil on paper towel. Serve with sweet-sour or chili sauce of your choice.