

# WINE NEWS

## Bangkok street food vendors at war with Thailand's military junta

By freelance correspondent Johan Augustin

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PHOTO: Supakit Lamrueang and his wife have cooked street food on Khaosan Road for more than 20 years. (ABC News: Jonas Gratzer)

**Khaosan Road may be Bangkok's most memorable street. Loud electronic music, masses of holidaymakers pouring between thriving bars and clubs, blinking neon signs, and exotic cuisine ranging from deep-fried scorpions to traditional Pad Thai and banana pancakes.**

Not long ago it was hard to sneak through the heaving stalls. Now, they neatly line one side of the strip.

Local couple, Supakit Lamrueang and his wife, have cooked street food on Khaosan Road for more than 20 years. But in the last year, they've suffered in the military junta's crackdown on street food.

Their previously affordable stall fees sky-rocketed.

"We need to make a living and can't afford such sums," Mr Lamrueang says.

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**PHOTO:** The variety of street food entices foreigners and locals. (ABC News: Jonas Gratzer)

## Stall vendors vs. a military junta

In May 2014, Thailand's military junta, known as National Council for Peace and Order, overturned the elected government and parliament was annulled.

The junta said they would prohibit all street food by the end of 2017, the same year that CNN named Bangkok as the street food capital of the world.

In April 2017, the ban was enforced at many of the city's most popular places, with police announcing they would "clean up the city and make accessibility better on the sidewalks".



**PHOTO:** The new ban will affect the vendors in a negative way since many have to move to less attractive areas. (ABC News: Jonas Gratzer)

Another vendor on Khaosan Road sums up the ban:

"They want to turn this city into the new Singapore. Sterile and boring, that's not the Bangkok people know."



**PHOTO:** Swedish tourists Catarina and Sacke Jacobsson stop by a stall on the famous strip. (ABC News: Jonas Gratzler)

Swedish tourists Catarina and Sacke Jacobsson stop by a stall on the famous strip.

"We've only been eating street food since we arrived. It's cheap, fast and easy," Mr Jacobsson said.

Ms Jacobsson thinks the stalls are already managed in a "clean and tidy way" and doesn't understand the criticism.

"Why do they want to ban street food? It's part of Bangkok, and actually a primary reason we chose to come here".

Hundreds of guided food tours provide a steady flow of income to Bangkok's tourist industry — a major part of the city's economy.

Last year, 20 million people visited Bangkok, making it one of the world's most popular cities.



**PHOTO:** Locals appreciate the inexpensive food, which is also an informal way to meet friends and colleagues. (ABC News: Jonas Gratzer)

## Vermin, trash, bugs and accidents

Few locals interviewed support a total ban on street food, but some support the junta's initial moves to relocate stalls and reduce the number.

Bangkok's formerly relaxed approach to street life put the city on the tourist map, but local guide Kanuengnit Sae-Heng believes cleaning up street food culture will improve the city.

Piles of garbage attract vermin and cockroaches, she explains, while plastic waste blocks the sewage system when Bangkok frequently floods, which makes the flooding even worse.



**PHOTO:** Kitchenware is usually washed on the streets. Sanitary issues can lead to upset stomachs. (ABC News: Jonas Gratzer)

"We need to educate people not to throw plastic waste on the streets," Ms Sae-Heng said.

Guests have become ill after eating food on her guided tours, or from stall-owners rinsing plates and utensils in dirty water.

Another problem is the traffic. Previously, stalls covered the footpaths, encroaching onto the roads, which often resulted in accidents between vehicles and pedestrians.

"Hopefully there will be fewer accidents when the stalls move to new areas," Ms Sae-Heng said.



**PHOTO:** Many stalls that used to be spread out over large areas are now confined to strictly controlled spaces. (ABC News: Jonas Gratzer)

## 'I don't know how to make it work'

But the relocations bring higher rents and lower sales. Many of these costs will flow on to customers.

Kanittha Pirrommung owns a stall that was previously located outside Central World shopping mall.



PHOTO: Kanittha Pirrommung owns a stall that was previously located outside Central World shopping mall. (ABC News: Jonas Gratzer)

In the 2017 crackdown it was moved to a secluded area beneath the Skytrain tracks. It's a dark and damp area with few visitors.

Her steady flow of customers has stalled, her salary cut in half.

"People find the new location dodgy. I don't know how to make it work."



PHOTO: Under bridges, hidden away from the main roads; it's now harder for vendors to make a living with fewer customers. (ABC News: Jonas Gratzer)

Speak up and go to jail

Under the military regime, not much can be done about the situation. Protests against the street food ban have so far been in vain.

As Ms Sae-Heng explains, "If you speak your mind you end up in jail. So, it's better to be silent."

Bangkok police did not respond to a request for comment.

Journalists, former politicians and professors who oppose the new regime have been imprisoned without trial, while the country's strict "lese-majesty" laws have inflicted long jail sentences on people criticising the royal house on social media.

Since the coup four years ago, the junta has promised that democratic elections will be held. With increasing pressure from the international community and Thai citizens, junta leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha announced last October that "elections will be held in November 2018", but that has recently been delayed again until March next year.



**PHOTO:** Democracy activist Rangsiman Rome has been imprisoned for his involvement with the Democracy Restoration Group. (ABC News: Jonas Gratzer)

Democracy activist Rangsiman Rome has been imprisoned for his involvement with the Democracy Restoration Group. The law student from Thammasat University says the constitution needs to be rewritten before any hope of an election.

"The current one is not democratic," he said.

The latest constitution from April 2016 gives power to non-elected decision-makers within the military elite.

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy where the royal court has a huge influence on society.

"The military coexists through the king. They support each other and form two pillars of society," Mr Rome explains.

"The military swears to protect the king, not the people."

Despite the political chaos, he is hopeful. Social media, he says, is the most crucial tool in reaching out to potential young voters.

In a country where freedom of expression is non-existent, it must be done through a careful balance, for example by using local Thai celebrities as advocates.

"We have support from the young generation," Mr Rome said.

It's too early to predict the outcome of this political struggle. But the world's most famous street food hangs in the balance.



**PHOTO:** Despite the political chaos, Mr Rome is hopeful. (ABC News: Jonas Gratzer)

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