

Thai Food Magic – Maothai

Prologue

Life is a Dream

"La vida es sueño" – Life is a Dream, wrote Calderón de la Barca nearly four hundred years ago.

Looking back, the past three decades also seem like a dream: the emergence of a small group of Thai restaurants in Berlin and Spain, their golden years, their struggles, their disappearance.

The restaurants no longer exist today. Yet for many people they remain bound up with memories: of long nights in post-reunification Berlin, of conversations between artists, diplomats, students, chefs and travellers, of the scent of fresh herbs from Thailand, of a piece of the wide world that suddenly became possible after the fall of the Wall.

This account wishes to lift a little of the veil of forgetting that time draws over everything. It is meant to remember places that have vanished, the people who made them possible, and a time when Berlin was in a state of awakening — raw, improvised, and full of unimagined possibilities.

At the same time, it is an expression of gratitude to the guests who remained loyal to us for decades, to friends and supporters, to all those from politics and public life who helped, but above all to the staff and chefs from Thailand, without whose dedication and skill this story could never have been possible.

Chapter I

Berlin After the Fall of the Wall

The Birth of Maothai (1992–1993)

When the MAOTHAI flagship restaurant opened in 1993 at Wörther Straße 30 in Prenzlauer Berg, this neighbourhood was still far removed from the gentrification it would later undergo. Behind the grey facades bearing the scars of war, workers, students and intellectuals lived quite ordinary lives. The restaurant was meant to bring a piece of the wide world to a part of Berlin that had been cut off from it for decades.

The creation of Maothai became a symbol of the times. Just to get the restaurant open, Wörther Straße had to be dug up five times to lay new gas, water and electricity lines. Maothai had the first American Express card reader in East Berlin and quickly became known to international visitors as well.

It was more than a restaurant. It was a sign that the former East was opening itself to the world.

Prenzlauer Berg Before the Boom

The Prenzlauer Berg of the early nineties, marked by crumbling facades and the haze of coal stoves — a blend of upheaval and decay — still retained something of the old East German lightness of being. But amid the ruins of the old East, there was now space for new ideas, and good international restaurants were still a rarity.

Building Against Resistance

Much had to be improvised. Authorities operated chaotically, jurisdictions shifted constantly, infrastructure was lacking. But it was precisely this mixture of uncertainty and freedom that made the time so unique.

The First Guests

Visitors came from all over the world almost immediately. For many international guests, it was fascinating to suddenly discover a restaurant with sophisticated Thai cuisine right in the middle of what had been East Berlin.

MayDay

The area around the Maothai flagship near Kollwitzplatz had until 1989 been home mainly to workers and intellectuals. The buildings were owned by the Kommunale Wohnungsverwaltung Prenzlauer Berg (the municipal housing authority). With the end of the GDR, the struggle over real estate began. By around 1998, most of the apartment buildings had been privatised and sold to new owners. Kollwitzplatz became one of the most expensive areas of inner Berlin.

This process played out over years. Those who knew the local landscape and wanted to acquire buildings had an interest in keeping purchase prices low. It seems unlikely to have been a coincidence that in the early years, on the 1st of May, unrest broke out not only in the notorious districts of Kreuzberg and Neukölln, but also in the eastern part of Berlin — with the result that purchase prices for buyers remained low, and the activists behind these protests were mostly not from the ranks of the East German residents. Once the greater part of the apartment buildings had been privatised, the Berlin Chief of Police was able to report that the situation had calmed down. After 1998, there were no more major disturbances in Prenzlauer Berg on the 1st of May.

The operator of the Maothai restaurant had invested over 1.2 million Deutschmarks in creating the restaurant and renovating the building at Wörther Straße 30. The new management of the Wohnungsbaugesellschaft Prenzlauer Berg (the housing company) came from Hamburg, from the SPD-owned construction trust "Neue Heimat." They did not sell the building to the operator, but instead — via a property management firm also from Hamburg — to the pre-war owners, who quickly resold the property at a handsome profit.

Chapter II

The Restaurants — Berlin and Mallorca

MAOTHAI STAMMHAUS (Flagship) *A Window onto the World*

The flagship in Prenzlauer Berg developed into a cultural meeting point. It attracted artists, journalists, diplomats, students and travellers. It consciously conveyed a different image of Thailand from the distorted one that had emerged from mass tourism — the highest quality, including aesthetically, with the finest service.

KAMALA *The Battle Against Bureaucracy*

In 1995, KAMALA was created on Oranienburger Straße, directly opposite the Berlin Synagogue. From a dingy basement shop where the antisemitic National-Zeitung had been sold, it became a small basement dining bar with outstanding Thai cuisine.

Berlin's bureaucracy almost made the opening impossible. The necessary building permit was withheld for a prolonged period. Only after every party represented in the Berlin House of Representatives had intervened was a West Berlin official transferred to Berlin-Mitte, and the permit was finally granted.

But by that point the restaurant had long since opened. On the 9th of November 1994 — the anniversary of the fall of the Wall and simultaneously the historical date of the Reichspogromnacht — Kamala opened its doors without a permit. The legal dispute that followed lasted eight years.

KLEINER DRACHEN (Little Dragon) *Thai Noodles in Historic Berlin*

In 1996, our KLEINER DRACHEN was established in the historic Nikolaiviertel near the Rotes Rathaus. In a Berlin townhouse spared by the war, primarily Thai noodle dishes were served. The restaurant was smaller and quieter than the other establishments in the group, with a restrained elegance all its own.

TUANS HÜTTE *Bangkok – Tokyo – Berlin*

In 1997, TUANS HÜTTE opened at the corner of Dircksenstraße and Rochstraße. Alongside Thai dishes of the same quality as the flagship, excellent sushi was also served. A Thai sushi chef who had learned his craft in the "Little Tokyo" district of Bangkok, and had accompanied his employer to Japan as well, prepared it to the highest standard. The combination of high-quality Thai cuisine and a proper sushi bar was new to Berlin at the time. The concept quickly found imitators and is today a common feature in many places.

MAOTHAI AM FASANENPLATZ *A Symbolic Conquest of West Berlin*

In 1997, MAOTHAI am Fasanenplatz was created on Meierottostraße. The restaurant was housed in a magnificent turn-of-the-century building near Ludwigkirchplatz and the Schaubühne theatre. Until 1933, Heinrich Mann had been among its residents. Zarah Leander ran an artists' boarding house there; later, Sabine Christiansen lived in the top floor apartment. In the former Café Cristal, West Berlin's social elite had gathered in the 1970s and 80s — it was said that even in the height of summer, snowstorms raged there.

The restaurant soon became a social gathering place once again — this time for diplomats, artists, international guests and the Berlin scene. Kasit Piromya, who would later become Thailand's Foreign Minister, frequently received his visitors there.

The opening also carried a symbolic significance. West German visitors to the East Berlin flagship had repeatedly remarked with arrogance: "Surely your roots are in the West." All too often after 1989, West German companies had taken over former GDR businesses and turned them into branch offices. It was precisely for this reason that this restaurant was created in the heart of one of West Berlin's finest neighbourhoods. And to make the matter perfectly clear, I now officially added "Stammhaus" (Flagship) to the name of the restaurant in Prenzlauer Berg.

ISSAN AM BRANDENBURGER TOR *Thai Cuisine Opposite the Adlon*

From autumn 2000 to May 2003, the small restaurant ISSAN was located on Unter den Linden, directly opposite the Hotel Adlon. Here, Thai cuisine and sushi found their place at the political and social heart of Berlin. Its sushi kitchen was so well regarded that the Japanese Embassy regularly sent official guests there. In 2001, the chefs of Maothai, together with the Hotel Adlon, catered the gala dinner for the first major ASEAN gathering in Berlin.

With this, Thai cuisine had found its rightful place — as the only Asian restaurant on Unter den Linden, at the square before the Brandenburg Gate, where otherwise only the great international cuisines of Europe were represented.

ISSAAN IM KANZLERECK *A Late Berlin Chapter*

In 2013, the elegant ISSAAN was created near the Charité hospital and the government quarter, thanks to the generous investment of Thomas R. It was an attempt at a new beginning. Today, a Vietnamese restaurant occupies that space.

MAOTHAI PALMA *A Mediterranean Dream*

In February 2003, Maothai opened in Palma de Mallorca, opposite the Marivent Palace, the summer residence of the Spanish royal family. Staff from the Berlin restaurants flew specially to Spain for the opening. The restaurant quickly made a name for itself and existed until 2018. Its success contributed to the subsequent establishment of numerous further Thai restaurants on Mallorca and Ibiza.

ATI TAIPERU *Thailand and Peru in Palma*

In 2014, ATI TAIPERU was established in the Pere Garau neighbourhood of Palma. Alongside good Thai dishes, this restaurant also offered authentic Peruvian cuisine. It was a tribute to the Latin American community living there — and at the same time the belated realisation of a long-cherished dream.

The Vision of INKAPERU LIMA-BERLIN

In 1995, I visited friends in Peru whom I had known since the World Festival of Youth in Berlin in 1973. I saw that even in the capital Lima there were scarcely any restaurants offering Peruvian cuisine. At the same time, on the markets at the edge of the Andes one found an extraordinary diversity of unknown vegetables and fruits — Peru is, among other things, the homeland of the potato and the chilli. The Humboldt Current moreover blesses Peru with a seemingly inexhaustible wealth of fish and seafood — in principle, ideal conditions for a great gastronomic culture. But why were there no good national restaurants in Lima?

In the palaces of the country's fifty wealthy families, indigenous cooks had prepared traditional Peruvian dishes since the conquest, but good national restaurants did not exist. Extreme poverty, social inequality and the absence of infrastructure had prevented the emergence of a middle class, which is necessary for the running of restaurants. A brunch of Peruvian dishes at the glamorous beachside restaurant Costa Verde cost \$50 per person in 1995 — almost twice the average monthly income at the time.

So the idea of INKAPERU Lima-Berlin was born: two sister restaurants were to be created in Berlin-Mitte and Lima Barranco, with the Lima restaurant also serving as a cookery school. When a Tyrolean property developer broke his promise to find the project a home in the Ackerhöfe in Berlin-Mitte, I was simultaneously drawn into the vortex of the collapse of the Berliner Bankgesellschaft through other projects. Credit commitments for two large projects already under way — including the first conveyor-belt sushi bar at the foot of the Berlin television tower — were withdrawn. That dream shattered, at least for the time being.

In 2001, a fax from Lima brought news of the success of Gastón Acurio's restaurant La Mar. When I visited Lima in 2002, I saw the long line of luxury cars outside this restaurant in one of Lima's poorest neighbourhoods. The reforms begun under President Fujimori were taking effect. A middle

class was emerging, one that was now seeking to discover its identity in its own national cuisine. Gastón Acurio became the driving force of a culinary revolution that catapulted Peruvian cuisine into the ranks of international gastronomy. And now, seventeen years later, I set about in Palma to make my dream a reality.

Chapter III

An Invisible Struggle

Bureaucracy and Work Visas for Thai Chefs

German bureaucracy proved to be one of the greatest obstacles. While footballers could be brought into the country without difficulty, it was extremely hard to obtain work visas for Thai chefs.

In 1994, a petition campaign was launched at the flagship and at Kamala, demanding work permits for Thai chefs. The campaign received broad support and even made it onto the front page of the International Herald Tribune.

Particularly difficult was working with the Bonn-based "Zentrale für Ausland- und Fachvermittlung" (the central office for overseas and specialist placement), which failed to fulfil its actual purpose. An official there became the most tenacious adversary in the battle for visas for new chefs. He demanded, as a condition for granting work permits, verified minimum turnovers of 100,000 euros per restaurant, language tests, proof of formal training, and limited approvals to a maximum of two Thai chefs per restaurant. At that time, there was barely any formal culinary training in Thailand. Most chefs had acquired their knowledge through practical work — learning by doing. In 1998, he reclassified Thai chefs as sous-chefs, which created total costs of nearly 6,000 Deutschmarks per chef — a burden many small restaurants could not bear. The number of Thai chefs entering Germany by this route fell dramatically.

The "Young Thai Professional Exchange Program"

In 2000, I attempted to establish a training and exchange programme with the support of the German Development Service. The Thai Deputy Minister of Education even travelled to Berlin for this purpose. But the concept had been leaked to the representative of the Royal Thai Capital Fund, who at the time held shares in the Hotel Adlon and wished to exploit it for his own purposes. He failed quickly in this, as the children of Thailand's upper class who arrived in Germany by this route had never made a bed themselves, let alone cleaned a room — least of all in the grand Adlon.

The struggle for work permits attracted media interest. Press reports about the high quality of the Maot Thai kitchen did the rest, and made the restaurants widely known.

Chapter IV

E Pluribus Unum — One from Many

What United All the Restaurants; Why the Maot Thai Kitchen Prevailed — Our Motto: The Best for Our Guests

All the restaurants of the Maot Thai group shared a common symbol, found at their entrance: the Chofah. It resembles a stylised bird's head and is part and symbol of the Indian mythical bird deity

Garuda — in Thai, *krut* — which mediates between heaven and earth and culturally connects all of Southeast Asia. As a roof finial, it crowns the temple roofs of Thailand and the palaces of the Thai royal family. Its understated elegance symbolises the deepest and most beautiful essence of this country. It appears in modified form in the logo of the first Maothai restaurant, and in a different form again in the brand mark of 2003. And our Buddhas. Just as Buddhism shapes the nature of Thailand, they too conveyed a sense of calm and reassurance to our guests.

One from many — this applied equally to the dishes served in all the restaurants in the same manner and to the same standard, prepared with the finest fresh ingredients by skilled chefs. Guests could enjoy the coconut soup with chicken or the Pad Thai noodles in all the restaurants with consistent quality and virtually identical flavour. They were prepared in all restaurants with fresh herbs and vegetables from Thailand, and became the very embodiment of the highest culinary quality. In the early days, Maothai imported essential fresh vegetables and herbs directly from Thailand. Before long, "Fine Thai Cuisine" also appeared on the facades of other Asian restaurants in combination with their respective national cuisines.

Another characteristic was shared by all the restaurants in the group: they were built to a high standard of construction. The fitting out of the kitchens in particular involved considerable cost. While the Maothai on Wörther Straße came to over 650,000 euros in total, each restaurant ultimately cost between 1,500 and 2,000 euros per square metre of restaurant floor space.

Not least for the team: our chefs came exclusively from Thailand, as did most of the waiting staff; the restaurant managers came from Laos; kitchen assistants and other staff from Germany, Vietnam and Mongolia.

The Thai cuisine of Maothai endured above all thanks to all those who dedicated themselves to it wholeheartedly.

Chapter V

Maothai People

The Face of the Restaurants

It was the people of Maothai — the Maothai People — who wrote its history. Most of the chefs came from Isan, the poor north-east of Thailand, where Thailand's unrelenting sun had prepared them for the hard work in the kitchens. With their earnings from Germany they could support their families, buy land, build houses, or give their children a better education. The greater part of their wages went there every month. Some established families in Germany.

Uthai and the Sudcha Brothers

Among the defining chef personalities was Uthai Janthimat, who quickly learned to speak good German. He was accompanied to Berlin in December 1992 by Set Sudcha, the "doyen" of Maothai's Thai chefs. He had begun working in kitchens as a child and embodied the principle of "learning by doing," as did his brothers Jamrath and Padeth. As did the outstanding chefs Wichian Klaikaew, Somkhid Nakhon, Suwimon Tjaenjaem, and also Sanit, Boworn, Somchai, Sinchai, Thawee, Chumpol, Buncherd, Martin, and others who passed through the Maothai school. Many of them still practise their craft today — some elsewhere in the world, or having opened their own restaurants.

But the service staff too. Joy ran the flagship in Berlin until 2022. Khamphou Maniseng led Maothai am Fasanenplatz in masterly fashion; Khamsouane, Kjet, Hat, Otgo and Baggi from Mongolia; Sugar, Aom, Pornsukwan, Om, Ying, Thep, Gom, Som, Soulignon, Mr Ha and Ms Dao from Vietnam — they all gave the enterprise its face and soul. As did the German staff — Petra Gleim, who managed the first Maothai; Julia S., the loyal soul of the restaurants; Bernd F. And not least Tuan, who in 1988 as a tour guide in Bangkok unknowingly gave the first impulse towards the Maothai enterprise. Through their work, they were the finest ambassadors Thailand could have had.

Friends, Supporters and Companions Along the Way

Numerous people helped the group through turbulent times. First and foremost Jürgen H., who built the first Maothai with me; Joachim Zeller, who as Mayor of Berlin-Mitte held a protective hand over the restaurants; Monika Grütters; journalists, guests, artists and helpers; my family and friends from Japan — Yoshi & Fumiko T., Ryuko S.; Alwin Olbrich, the modest and experienced site manager for the first two restaurants; Anne and Jan H.; Sabine Gothan; Dr Jacobson; the media people whose support helped us survive many a crisis in the 1990s; the Ambassador and later Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya and Khun Damrong; our friend Thomas R.; Volker S. and also Christoph N.; and the loyal friend Tony Z. from New Jersey. Also the landlord on Mallorca, and Schweizer-Toni and Gori in Palma. Andreas S., Simone, Franzi, and Kevin Wilkins, who created the lettering for the smaller restaurants. They are all part of this story.

Chapter VI

Why Thailand?

In 1988, I was working as a lecturer at a university in Japan. Together with Japanese students, I undertook an eight-week trip to Europe. The first stop was Bangkok, to buy cheap flight tickets there. What was planned as three days became three weeks, and a deep love for this country was born.

The Other Side of Thailand

Alongside the beauty of the country, I also came to know its other face — the extreme poverty that drove many of its people into the brothels of the tourist centres; the omnipresent corruption; the stark social inequality, especially between the rural population and the inhabitants of Bangkok; and ultimately the merciless exploitation of the most vulnerable.

A few years later I decided to build Thai restaurants rather than teach middle-class students in Japan, whose circumstances promised them an ordinary, comfortable life.

Chapter VII

Money, Risk and Loss

Dreams and Debts

People often asked: where did the money come from? Why restaurants? After the fall of the Wall, I wanted in 1991 to create a low-budget hotel in Berlin-Mitte for Japanese travellers, with a restaurant and travel agency — the Japan-Haus. A plot of land at Engeldamm had been found. A West Berlin estate agent financed the land purchase, but not the actual project. A great dream

collapsed. I withdrew from the partnership, and the financial settlement from it formed the seed capital for the first Maothai.

Expansion and Risk — The Year 2003

The success of the restaurants brought credit from banks and breweries. But instead of consolidating cautiously, I took on risks. A business plan from 1996 listed no fewer than 22 projects in total.

In 2003, several factors led to the loss of the Berlin restaurants: heavy debts that had accumulated following the failure of several large projects; a drop in turnover in the year of the euro's introduction, which made bearing the loan burden more difficult; and finally the outcome of a tax dispute before the courts that had lasted over ten years from the very beginning — a case in which political interference worked against me and brought further burdens. Not least, my own exhaustion after more than ten years of daily struggle.

This brought the era of building in Berlin to an end. But it was possible to ensure that four restaurants passed into the hands of staff members, and they continued to operate.

Chapter VIII

The Name "Maothai"

The Drunken Thai

In 1992, Jürgen H. and I were searching for a name for our restaurant. After the enjoyment of one and a half bottles of Chinese Moutai millet schnapps, the idea emerged: "Mou" became "Mao," and "Tai" gained an "h" and became "Thai."

In Thailand, I noticed a curious smile whenever I mentioned the name. A taxi driver explained its meaning to me on the return journey from the factory where the rosewood furniture for the first Maothai was being made: "Thai mao mao" — a thoroughly drunk Thai. Years later, Kasit Piromya told me that this very name had initially deterred him, as Ambassador, from making contact. He only visited us once Maothai had long since become synonymous with fine Thai dining.

Epilogue

Memory, Legacy and Possibility

The restaurants no longer exist today. Their story lives on in memories, in friendships, in the life paths of former staff. They gave impetus to the development of fine Thai cuisine in the heart of Europe. They could always say with pride: "We work at Maothai."

Certainly, their story represents only a tiny fragment of the history of Berlin after the fall of the Wall. But they are also proof that culture often arises where people struggle against resistance to create something of their own. I hope that what was created goes some way to outweigh the mistakes that were made along the way.

And who knows: perhaps one day a fine Thai restaurant will be created again — in Nice, in Bangkok, in Georgetown DC. Or perhaps one day a Thai restaurant ship will leave its wake across Lake Lucerne.

I am ready.

Norbert Hans Georg Frankenstein, Spring 2026