

Drink in a Bag

Quenching thirst with coffee, tea, soda, juice and herbal tinctures

“Waiter, there’s salt in my drink!” No mistake, salt is often added to drinks in Thailand, especially fruit juice. One gulp from freshly squeezed and salted orange and many a foreigner sputters. Some, though, find they like the heady mix of citrus and sodium chloride. Many other drinks in Thailand have distinct character, whether coffee filtered through a sock, water tinted with herbs, syrups spritzed through a rocket-shaped soda fountain, or cold beverages served in a bag, and dangled from an elastic band. Just as in Thai cooking, where condiments balance out the principal flavours – sweet vs sour, salty vs bitter – so with drinks. Salt softens water, and so counteracts tartness from the lime. In this climate, minerals need replenishment, so Thais take all they need (glucose, salt, water, vitamin C) in one go. Or they reach for nature’s all-in-one rehydration pack: the coconut. The outer husk is hacked off with a machete to leave

a pentagon shape with a ‘lid’, so you can scoop out the coconut lining with a spoon. Most other drinks get the sugar treatment. And how.

No drink is deemed too sweet, thanks to lashings of palm water, granules or condensed milk. Instead of by the spoonful or lump, you could measure the sugar by its depth: “One centimetre or two?”

Though Thai tea is brick red, the sock filter is stained black with many inundations of powdered tea, brewed earlier in a tin. Most tea vendors also have apparatus for coffee. Same drill, whether sweet black Chinese *oliang* or sweet brown *gafae*. Ordered hot, it comes in a cup. Decanted over ice, it can be taken away in a bag with handles or in a cup dangled from loops on a plastic sleeve.

Shaved ice gets shovelled into the bag, the hot tea or coffee is then poured on top, plus a further slick of sweetened milk from a can. The resulting swirl of white on orange adds an essential touch of



left: A monk holds a green soda drink in a bag in Yaothorn. PCS

below: The way to rest half-drunk drinks-in-a-bag. JG

bottom: Tables at holes-in-the-wall get pools of condensation from aluminium mugs of iced drinks. JG



beauty. Stick in a straw – plus another for your friend – and you’re off. Same goes for juices, shakes, Coke and saccharine soft drinks flavoured red or green. Unlike spill-prone plastic cups, the pendulous bag makes a steady mobile vessel. Just don’t try to sit it down... look for a hook!

Since the 1997 economic crash rekindled fashion for things traditional, herbal drinks have joined the plastic bag parade. They’re ladled from enormous glass jars, or more authentically from unvarnished, decoratively scored Mon pottery in the shape of a lotus bud. Lift the pointed lid and use the coconut shell scoop to retrieve the herbal nectar. It may be the diluted, sweetened residue of boiling ambrosially smooth bael fruit, lemon grass stalks, chrysanthemum flowers or rozelle buds, which resemble currants in taste and colour. Each herbal drink harbours medicinal goodness, though the sugar negates that, and diuretic herbs like lemon-grass pose a problem since herbal drinks have become common at marathon festival shows.

Similar lidded jars and ladles still sit in pairs under shelters in front of some Northern houses. They offer water (naturally chilled by the pottery’s porous properties) to the thirsty passing traveller. In bygone days, when these jars were universal up



above left: Pre-mixed drinks ready to pour over a bag of ice in Chiang Mai. PCS

above right: An embossed aluminium cup rests on the lid of a ceramic water jar, an hospitable invitation to passersby to slake their thirst. JG

left: OJ to go. Plastic bags of frosty, fresh-squeezed juice are hung on a pole for easy sale and consumption at festivals, here seen in Yasothorn. PCS