

## Death by Panang

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Dedicated to Scott Horton, my erstwhile partner in spice-crime.*

I went for a walk this evening before dinner, & I eventually came to the Bahn Thai restaurant on Roy Street near 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. "Ah, Thai food", though I, "I haven't had proper Thai food since before I moved to Memphis". So I entered.

When the waitress took my order, I asked for panang & a Thai iced tea. "How spicey?" she asked, referring to the panang, not the tea, of course. "Very spicy", I said & presented my best cute grin, which, I suspect is more

She didn't ask me if I was sure I knew what I was doing. She wrote it down.

Those in culturally underprivileged centers, such as Memphis & the mid-west, might not know what panang is. Panang is one of the culinary masterpieces of mankind. If aliens ever ask me why humanity shouldn't be shredded in a Quisinart to make paint for decorating the interiors of their homes, I'll give them four reasons: the pyramids, Lao-Tsu, Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup>, & panang. Panang is a simple, beautiful, coconut curry. I'm not sure why it's panang & not simply "orange curry", as most Thai curries are named after colors. So be it. Panang is a curry, & it's typically spicy, & I ordered it "very spicy" with a sheepish grin.

In this one meal, I made up for six months of nearly spice-free dining in Memphis.

When the waiter brought the plate, I could smell the spice from it before I even spooned it onto the rice. My nose ran, of course. I asked for a paper napkin, & at first, I wiped my nose in the occasional, polite, subversive way that James Bond might. Before long, this wasn't enough, so I resorted to unashamed nose-blowing into my paper napkin.

My eyes watered. I eat a lot of spicy food, but my eyes have never watered before except once, when I wiped them with a Tabsco-covered finger. That was an amazing experience in wishing I were dead, & my panang made memories of Tabasco seem strangely soothing, so I wasn't about to dry my eyes before

I washed my hands. That path would have led to certain death or permanent blindness, at least.

My tongue swelled up, & I couldn't exhale through my nose because my breath burnt my sinuses.

My worst fear was that the waitress would ask how things were & I wouldn't be able to speak because my tongue was swollen.

I ate it all, stopping periodically to sit back & smile through my tears so the other patrons would know that I was a masochist, not just a fool who ordered his panang "very spicy". I didn't drink any of the Thai iced tea while I ate, even though the soothing cream in it called to me telepathically, "Drink, gene, drink! It will feel *so* good!" I knew that if I cleaned my palate, the next bite of panang would be even more painful. Hell, it was already more painful than I had thought possible. So I ate it all without a single drink. I entertained myself with thoughts of just how good a cold drink, a cold shower, or a cool breeze would feel. I fantasized about running barefoot in the snow. Anything to keep my mind off the pain.

When I finished, I still didn't drink. I sat still & enjoyed the afterburn for about ten minutes. As a character-building exercise, I stirred the Thai iced tea in front of me. I stared at it & listened to its telepathic love-calls, but I didn't drink it.

When finally drank the tea, it was the most beautiful, wondrous, concoction ever created by man. It was divine! Damn, but it felt good!

End.