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NOI'S THAI FRIED RICE BALLS WITH CUCUMBER SALAD

SERVES 6

These rice balls are inspired by my friends Lawrence and Noi Allen, who used to own Asia Market, one of the only Thai markets in Houston. I started going there to buy green papayas. But I never left with just papayas—each visit would start with me wandering the aisles, checking out all the different ingredients, until Lawrence would come over and strike up a conversation. He probably didn't realize when he asked me if I needed help that I was going to bombard him with all kinds of questions about ingredients and Thai cooking, but he was always generous with his time and knowledge.

In addition to the store, Lawrence's wife, Noi (who immigrated to the United States from Bangkok), offered a small menu of Thai dishes, which she'd prepare out of a tiny kitchen in the back. These rice balls were one of my favorite things she made. Studded with meat and aromatics, and deep-fried until crispy on the outside, they reminded me of the deep-fried rice balls that you see in other cultures, like Italian arancini or the boudin balls that are so popular in Cajun cooking. The cucumber salad served alongside them works like a refreshing, mild pickle.

Lawrence insists that the key to the flavor of these balls is sai ua, a tangy Thai fermented sausage that is seasoned with lemongrass. But if you can't find it, they're pretty delicious with ground pork, too.

FOR THE RICE BALLS

2 cups short-grain rice, rinsed and soaked ([See rice cooking methods](#))
2 tablespoons vegetable oil, plus more for deep-frying
2 tablespoons minced lemongrass (*see Note below*)
2 tablespoons minced fresh ginger 3 tablespoons thinly sliced garlic (about 9 cloves)
1 teaspoon minced Thai bird chile (about 1 chile)
1 pound ground pork (or sai ua, Thai fermented sausage)
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
¼ cup red curry paste (I like Maesri brand)
1 tablespoon soy sauce
1 teaspoon fresh lime juice

FOR THE CUCUMBER SALAD

2 tablespoons boiling water
1 teaspoon sambal oelek
1 teaspoon fresh lime juice
2 tablespoons fish sauce
1 teaspoon sugar
1 English cucumber, thinly sliced on a mandoline
½ medium red onion, thinly sliced
¼ cup salted dry-roasted peanuts

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1. In a rice cooker, combine the rice and 2 cups water and cook according to the machine instructions. (If you don't have a rice cooker, use your favorite method from [these rice cooking methods](#))
2. In a medium skillet, heat the oil over medium heat until it shimmers. Add the lemongrass and toast for 30 seconds, until it begins to smell fragrant. Add the ginger and toast for another 30 seconds, until fragrant. Add the garlic and cook, stirring, for 2 minutes. Stir in the chile.
3. Add the pork and cook, breaking up the meat with the back of the spoon until crumbled and cooked all the way through. Season generously with salt and pepper (if using sai ua, you may not need to add much).
4. Put the cooked rice in a large mixing bowl. Add the curry paste and soy sauce and mix well. Add the pork mixture, lime juice, and 1 tablespoon salt and mix until thoroughly combined. Using your hands, form the rice mixture into 12 balls about the size of golf balls. Place the balls on a large plate, uncovered, and transfer to the refrigerator to chill for at least 1 hour (or up to overnight).
5. Meanwhile, make the cucumber salad: In a medium bowl, whisk together the hot water, sambal, lime juice, fish sauce, and sugar until the sugar is dissolved. Add the cucumber and red onion to the dressing and let sit for at least 10 minutes to let the flavors infuse.
6. Fill a medium Dutch oven or large saucepan with a few inches of oil and heat over medium-high heat until it reaches 350°F on a deep-fry thermometer. Working in batches, add a few rice balls and fry until golden brown and crisp on the outside, about 4 minutes. Transfer to a paper towel-lined plate.
7. To serve, flatten the rice balls slightly (they will break in places) and put two each in six small bowls. Spoon some of the cucumber salad and its dressing over the top, garnish with a sprinkle of peanuts, and serve.

NOTE: Lemongrass comes in stalks that are shaped a bit like scallions. To prepare lemongrass, cut off the root end and remove the first few dry outer layers until you reach the tender center of the stalk. Mince the paler-colored part (usually the bottom 4 inches or so) that is tender and fragrant, stopping when it becomes woody and brittle.

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