

6 For the Perfect Steak

It's no wonder that wildly diverse Bangkok has so many wonderful steakhouses from which diners can choose. Text & Photos **By PAUL CYPERT**

I LOVE STEAKHOUSES. IN MY OPINION it takes guts to open a steakhouse. Unlike other restaurants where the focus and execution can be a bit vague -- a German Tapas restaurant that's also a boutique coffee shop, for example -- a steakhouse declares itself -- "Everything we do here is centered on the steak." The restaurant will live and die, be judged and weighed off the selection and execution of one dish.

It seems simple, I mean it's just a steak right? But operating a steakhouse is tricky business. Do you use gas, charcoal or wood to cook the steak? Do you serve grain-fed or grass-fed beef? What type of beef then: USA Angus, Australian wagyu, or luxury Japanese cuts? How much salt to coat the steak with prior to cooking? For that matter what kind of salt do you use? Each may seem but a small detail, but since the steak is lying there naked on the plate, these small details will decide the primary tastes of your meat. And each and every diner that comes through the door will have a different list in his or her mind of what makes the steak taste good.

Add to all this that a steakhouse meal is almost always an occasion - a birthday, an important business meeting, or a decision to let loose and treat oneself. So the meal almost always carries more weight than a typical night out. The pressure on the restaurant is immense and so you'll often hear intense reactions to favorite steakhouses. When someone finds one they love, they'll visit it time and again, forsaking all others.

And so it's no wonder that wildly diverse Bangkok has so many wonderful steakhouses from which diners can choose. There are steakhouses of all varieties, styles, meats, and approaches. All of them serve up quality beef in luxurious settings. Each employs exceptional chefs at the top of their game.



Every one listed here is a valid choice for your special meal; the choice then comes down to the details you're looking for. What combination of ambiance, price, service, and meat style will satisfy your raw hunger for one of our most primal meals?

Lookeast Magazine sampled steakhouses all around Bangkok and here's what we found.

1. Arturs

Walking through the doors of Arturs, one is immediately transported to a different time. The word "dated" is normally used in a negative fashion when reviewing restaurants, but it is owner-manager Artur Kluczewski's surprising strength. In an age when fine dining is flooded with new for the sake of new menu items that are passé seemingly overnight, Arturs' channeling of a simpler time is a most refreshing change to Bangkok's dining landscape.

The menu here doesn't feature tongue-in-cheek adaptations of classics, but rather an unapologetic stroll down memory lane. Those old standard dishes became so ubiquitous because at one time they were tasty. The dishes didn't stop tasting good, they were just done too many times and lost their appeal (much like foams or molten cakes in modern cuisine), eventually becoming cliché. A return to these classics at Arturs reminds us why these dishes were so damn delicious to begin with.



(Top, clockwise from left - Arturs) Artur's cote de bouefe carved tableside and dressed with garlic butter. Interior bar area has a vintage vibe. Lovely and light una tartar on top of scallop ceviche. Artur personally prepares each caesar salad tableside. Pan seared foie gras almost as large as a steak.

(Right, clockwise from top left -- Fifty Five) Chef-carved steak. Elegant desserts as tasty as beautiful. Large dining areas for group celebrations. A "lady's portion" of carved steak at Fifty Five.



A meal here starts, as a steakhouse should, with a strong martini (Bt270). An out-spoken drinker, Artur believes in tasting the alcohol and claims the best martinis, shaken tableside, in town. And he's right, I'd be hard pressed to name a better classic martini in Bangkok.

The meal then should move on to a classic caesar salad (Bt300) and oysters rockefeller. When was the last time you saw oysters rockefeller on a menu? And for that matter, when was the last time the owner of a restaurant personally made your caesar salad for you? Both here are done perfectly.

Then it's time for a hearty red and the steak. Go classic and order the cote de boeuf (Bt990 per person with a two person minimum) which Arthur will again cut tableside personally. The meat is well seasoned and air aged in house. There is one deviation from the classics here though, instead of accompanying the steak with a normal béarnaise or café de paris, one should sample the newly created foie gras sauce (a Bt90 upcharge).

Artur believes that desserts should leave a lasting good impression and so carefully selects the featured desserts. End the meal with an apple strudel or crème brule and espresso, for a deliciously rich finish to the meal.

There's an understated elegance at Arturs's due in most part to Artur himself. A third-generation food industry professional who seeks to satisfy the most demanding clientele, his confidence is infectious. You trust his selections, and he'll remember you on your next visit.

2. Fifty Five

Even the most jaded restaurant-goer will catch his breath walking off the elevator and down the spiral staircase to Fifty Five. The view out over budding Bangkok is truly awe-inspiring. Stepping outside into the breeze to take it all in, the sea of buildings and maze of congestion is far removed from your mind. The only sound to break the spell is the faint whistles of those directing traffic.

Fifty Five is Bangkok's newest steakhouse and it shows. The interior features modern touches and has a nice balance of group and private dining options. Reserve ahead of time to get a window facing the Baiyoke Tower.

Besides the stunning view, Fifty Five is all about the little extra details, like having an angel on a wire fetch your bottle of wine from the two-story glass enclosed vault, or enjoying sauces from individually sized copper pots. Everything from the tableware to the staff uniforms is stylishly modern.



(Left page, clockwise from left - Hamilton's) Lava stone cooked ribeye with complimentary starch and veg, President's Salad, featuring foie gras, breaded prawns, and seared scallops. Professional service from bread to table clearing. New Orleans home-style decor gives a personal feeling to Hamilton's. (Right page, clockwise from left -- Madison) Tender chargrilled Australian wagyu steak. Intimate dining areas along the side of the restaurant feel detached from the larger area seating. A classic dessert, baked Alaska, with tableside flambe.

Start the meal off with the signature lobster bisque (Bt455), a treat for the mouth and the eyes with its fiery tableside preparation. Or, look for a seasonal menu starter from adventurous young chef, such as the white asparagus soup with poached egg and Iberico ham.

Move into the steaks with a roasted wagyu rib of beef carved tableside by the chef. The "Ladies" 9oz-cut is Bt1,155; and 12oz-"Gents' Cut," Bt1,755; and the 200oz-"Diamond Cut (I'd say Texas-sized cut)," Bt2,255. Top it off with one of their many tasty sauces including favorites like béarnaise, cabernet red wine, and horseradish or something a bit fresh like nam jim jaew or tuscan porcini cream. Pair the steak with foie gras hash browns and some macaroni and cheese (both Bt155).

Finish off the evening with the classic crepe Suzette done with a tableside flambé (Bt455) to start and finish the meal in fire, or a moist pecan brownie on chocolate mocha sauce (Bt355) to satisfy the sweet tooth.

Fifty Five has a lot going for it besides the stunning view, but that view shouldn't be minimized. Perched above Bangkok,

feasting on imported delicacies, while looking out over all those stuck in the hustle of the city. It makes the reward all the sweeter.

3. Hamilton's

The walk in, past Dusit Thani's other large, lavish restaurants, makes the quaint Hamilton's even more a surprise. Suddenly you're not in a hotel, but rather in a small New Orleans home from the 1920's. Sepia toned prints adorn the walls, lots of warm wood fills the space, and the view out the window is into a lush, green garden.

Hamilton's is steak without the sizzle. Where the other restaurants in Dusit regularly feature celebrity Michelin chefs, Hamilton's has a 20-year veteran Thai chef. Where many other steakhouses in town list expensive steaks to give the high-society crowd a chance to show off to guests, prices here are some of the lowest to be found. This is steakhouse as comfort food.

That's not to say that it doesn't impress. Hamilton's is one of Bangkok's oldest steakhouses and counts celebrities and even the Thai royal family as patrons. The

restaurant is like old money - they've had it for a while, know how to act, and don't like to flaunt it.

Start a meal off here with their signature lobster bisque with brandy-flavored soup with lobster chunks (Bt340). The soup is baked in a golden, flaky puff pastry and features large chunks of fresh lobster. Or for something a bit more lavish try out the president's salad, which is not so much a salad as an appetizer all-star platter with pan seared foie gras, breaded prawns, and scallops with some lettuce on the side and mango dressing.

For steaks try the Aussie wagyu, at only Bt1,680 for a 300g rib-eye. Cooked with a combination of gas and lava stones, the steaks here are never directly kissed by the flames so are perfect for those that don't like a bit of char on the surface. The focus here is on a clean, consistent steak that's juicy and tender. A nice touch is that a sauce and a choice of starch, such as gratin or garlic mash, are included with the cost of the steak.

Named after the first U.S. ambassador to Thailand, Hamilton's has always looked to

history to move forward. One of Bangkok's oldest steakhouses, Hamilton's has ridden the various waves and trends of Bangkok since their founding. They're not out to show off or impress; they know that in the end people here just want a good meal.

4. Madison

Hidden in the back corner of the Four Seasons awash in a warm, amber glow lies Madison; the least steakhouse of the bunch - in the sense that Madison seems to defy classic formulas. Tables here are round and large, accommodating small family gatherings, with only a few private booths along the side for semi-private dining. Even the Thai chef de cuisine, Anchalee Ponrungrasit, defies normal steakhouse logic.

However the food does not so much defy the classic formulas as move past them to bring diners to something new. In what other steakhouse will you find seasonal menus featuring asparagus parfait with butter poached lobster, sea urchin sauce (Bt1,400) The regular menu is a collection of steakhouse staples, elevated. Order any of the classics and delight at the slight twists made to bring the dish to a new level.

For instance while Madison features a standard spinach and bacon salad (Bt350), they also offer up a fried squid and warm fennel salad with a pancetta

crouton (Bt700). The blue fin tuna tartar (Bt480) is a lovely to look at as it is to taste, with a dash of wasabi to cut through the avocado and tuna.

Next one should sample the stunning seafood platter abounding with river lobsters, oysters, razor clams, jumbo prawns, and diver scallops. A refreshing change to the normal tobacco or vinegar, Madison also offers up a spicy Thai dipping sauce for the oysters that shouldn't be missed.

The rib-eye steak (300-day, 12oz-Australian wagyu for Bt2,450) is not to be missed. The outside of the fatty, yet toothsome rib-eye is wonderfully charred from the charcoal grilling. For those who want extreme marbling, splurge on the 10oz-striploin (Bt5,200) with an impressive 11 on the marbling scale. If you're a starch fan, do not miss the garlic mash (Bt220)

For desserts something old is new again. A tableside flambéed baked Alaska will fill up any empty space you might have left and ensure a deep, deep sleep that night.

Madison is the least conventional steakhouse, but out the constraints that bind normal steakhouses they've managed to create something a bit new, fresh, and beyond what's expected. With a hearty seafood menu as well that almost doubles the steak portion of the menu, there's plenty here for anyone wanting to dine well.



5. New York Steakhouse

As if the name didn't make things obvious enough, from the moment one steps inside the door and takes in the ambiance and décor, it's clear: this is NYC in Bangkok. Considered by many as home to some of the world's best, NYC steakhouses are often imitated. Someone who has never visited NYC might think that New York Steakhouse is simply mimicking the idea of what a NYC steakhouse should be. But trust us, they're spot on.

Here the details are done right. Simple black and white colors decorate the interior. Black and white photographs of NYC line the walls (some would think that a real NYC restaurant would never do this...they would). Even the wait staff has confidence and professionalism mixed with just the right amount of familiarity one encounters in the Big Apple. This isn't a copy of hipster NYC, but rather of the NYC steakhouses of the 90's, which are experiencing resurgence in recent years; the restaurants where important people meet to discuss important things. As you're absorbed into your large backed, leather seat, you feel your inner fat cat emerge.

A steakhouse meal should never be about restraint, and as such most of the locations listed here are not for the light of wallet, but even more so at NY Steakhouse. If you want to watch the baht, head someplace else. But for those that can afford it, there's a lot to delight in.

Start the meal off with a caesar salad prepared tableside. Most in Bangkok do it, but few however offer a tasting leaf before completion to check the flavors of the salad, a very refined touch.

Next move onto the steak and be sure to order lots of sides. NYC steakhouses are all about the side dishes – creamed spinach, buttery mash, hash browns, and more make regular appearances and shouldn't be missed here. New York Steakhouse seems most confident in pricier cuts like filet mignon.

Lastly finish with a dessert, coffee, and, if you enjoy, a cigar in the smoking room. This is the one time New York Steakhouse gets a bit styled. Desserts like the chocolate lava cake and crème brûlée delight not only the eyes but also the belly.

New York Steakhouse seems to coax the inner mobster, politician, or fat-cat out of its guests. Out of all the steakhouses in Bangkok it's the one that feels the most hearty and primal. The place you want to go with the guys (though in reality there are just as many, if not more, women present). Sip a manhattan, roll your cigar between your fingers, and imagine you're eating at the Strip House.

(Left, top) Signature New York Steakhouse tender filet mignon **(Left, center)** Expertly prepared caesar salad done tableside **(Left, bottom)** enjoy any of the elegant desserts such as the creme brûlée. **(Top, right)** Plush backed seating, perfect for group or intimate dining **(Center, right)** Tableside caesar with a sunset background **(Bottom, right)** The chef presenting tournedos rossini

6. Prime

Prime is a steakhouse with two views. The first is obvious and often discussed. Perched on the 3rd-floor of the 5-year young Millennium Hilton overlooking the Chao Praya River, Prime is a steakhouse with an amazing, if understated view. Take your seat and order a mango martini just before sunset to see the river and surrounding areas take new life as the sun fades from golden orange to black while boats and buildings light up like Christmas.

The other, and more important for foodies, view comes the moment you walk through the door. At Prime, like all the restaurants in the Millennium Hilton, the products and processes are also on full-time view. You pass the open kitchen, with chefs already at work creating the dishes you'll be sampling. The wine cellar wraps the 10-seater, private room in over 200 choice labels and continues down the side of the restaurant. Fresh produce is out so you can see why there's a special menu that day; on this day I saw white asparagus the size of a child's arm.

From the refreshingly citrus salmon amuse bouche start, you can tell this is one of Bangkok's more refined steakhouses. Start the meal off with a Prime caesar salad (Bt450 and as always prepared tableside) and Phuket lobster bisque, poured theatrically at your table. Do yourself a favor and also look for something off the specials menu like a warm asparagus with extra virgin olive oil, scrambled egg, hand carved mangalica, and rustic bread.

Be sure to order wine with the courses here. Of course this recommendation goes without saying at any of the steakhouses reviewed here, but even more so here. Not only is the depth and breadth of wines impressive...also is the newly implemented iPad wine menu. Browse wines by region, style, tasting notes, and pairing suggestions for the dishes.

Then it's on to the main course. If you like, you can get up and see your steak wrapped in flames at the prominently featured wood-fired ovens. Prime is equally skilled with an Australian rib-eye (14oz for Bt1,850) as it is with tournedos rossini (Bt1,850), a lovely pan-fried beef fillet, with goose liver and Madeira sauce. If steak isn't your thing don't miss the lamb cutlets with mint sauce (Bt1,450) or any of the lovely seafood options. Pile on some Prime potato gratin and cream spinach with garlic, the best cream spinach from any steakhouse in town.

Finish with a decadent chocolate soufflé. It arrives at the table fluffy and puffed to perfection, and then the servers pop the top with a spoon and pour in warm chocolate syrup to take the dish to a whole new level. Enjoy the soufflé with a scoop of their heavenly balsamic or cinnamon ice creams -- must be tasted to fully appreciate the finesse.

To laud Prime only for it's beautiful riverfront view is to miss a large part of it's magic. The restaurant takes it's wine, produce, and preparation very seriously and shares these dramatically with guests. A seat at the chef's table here will provide just as much visual treat as one of the six river view tables lining the far walls.

"Did you ever see the customers in health-food stores? They are pale, skinny people who look half dead. In a steak house, you see robust, ruddy people. They're dying, of course, but they look terrific." -- Bill Cosby ■

