

## FEMININITY ON A PLATE

### Prominent artist collaborates with chefs to bring out the breast in food

- Published: 3/04/2009 at 12:00 AM
- Newspaper section: [Realtime](#)

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An adverse effect of Pinaree Sanpitak's signature work is that when you look at something, it hallucinatingly seems like boobs, whether fried eggs, salapao (steamed Chinese buns), lampshades, bowls and even woks. Pinaree expresses her thoughts and experiences through breasts, and taking it into culinary art, she's dedicated to an ongoing art project, Breast Stupa Cookery that began in 2005.



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Pinaree uses the breast shape to represent herself and also to symbolise not only motherhood, but femininity and womanhood. PHOTOS: ANUSORN SAKSEREE

"It's my lifetime project," says the artist, who has collaborated with cooks and chefs from many countries to express the symbol of femininity on the plate. Organised in cooperation with private members' club and concierge service, Quintessentially, the latest Breast Stupa Cookery event was held last week at Bo.lan, a newly-opened Thai restaurant located in a small soi off Sukhumvit 26.

After checking out Bo.lan, she was impressed with the food cooked by Duangporn Songvisava and Dylan Jones and suggested the project to them. For their interpretation of Breast Stupa Cookery, the talented chefs created a five-course dinner, with a theme of wholesome dishes for breast-feeding mothers.



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Just as women's breasts vary in size and shape, breast stupa moulds come in various versions.

Looking back 15 years when she was a first-time mum, Pinaree recalls, "The inspiration came when I gave birth to my son. At that time, I used the breast shape, which is a beautiful form, to represent myself and also to symbolise not only motherhood, but femininity and womanhood. And there's a deeper meaning because when you look at a mother breast-feeding her child, it's about both giving and receiving."

The stupa became a part of her iconic work to epitomise the sacredness of womanhood. The composed artist was not deterred by criticisms that she

dared to compare female body parts to the Buddhist architectural monument, and so Breast Stupa became her trademark.



Chefs Dylan and Duangporn are committed to promoting authentic Thai food.

"As an artist, you have to uniquely express yourself and when you have found your identity you have to stand for it," she says. "In other words, you have to believe in what you're doing. Besides having confidence, you need to be headstrong."

A recipient of a Japanese government scholarship, Pinaree holds a BFA in Visual Arts and Communication Design from the University of Tsukuba's School of Fine Arts and Design in Ibaraki, Japan. Despite a large number of art students in Thailand, she says it's a pity that not many eventually become artists.

Is it tough to be a female artist? Is it tougher to be an artist in Thailand? The pertinacious Pinaree views that: "We face limits in terms of infrastructure for contemporary arts. There are not many art galleries and museums to display our works. But in Thailand, there are still lots of opportunities to express ourselves, for example through art-related events. And it's really up to us to make it happen."



Breast-shaped moulds on display along with traditional ingredients of Thai cuisine.

Her first exhibitions presented photographs and collages and later on she expanded into paintings, sculptures and installations incorporating various materials such as ceramics and textiles. Breast metaphors officially debuted in the 1994, Breast Works, which boasted soft sculptures made with mulberry paper. Following exhibitions included Eggs, Breasts, Bodies, I, Etcetera; Breast Stupas; Breast and Beyond; Noon-Nom; and Breasts and Clouds. "They're not erotic and none of my works has been censored," the 48-year-old artist affirms.

If you deem art exhibitions as a boring place of hanging pictures, Pinaree aims to change this perception. More and more, she has been focussing on interactive art to allow viewers to participate in her works of art.

For example, the 2001 Breast Stupas featured high swathes of silk suspended in the air, each piece meticulously unthreaded to reveal a part-stupa, part-breast image within the fibre. The installation allowed the audience to wander through the silk banners and walk out with a new perspective.



Bo.lan Balance for Breast Stupa Cookery menu included (from left) amuse bouche, assorted agar served with toddy palm and grilled river prawn with banana blossom salad.

The 2003 Noon-Nom (Laying on Breasts) had people plunging themselves into a sea of 200 large breast-shaped cushions. The installation was not only about having fun but the direct physical contact satisfied a longing for nurturing and comfort that we once had when we were young.

The inventive artist also created vibrating boobs in the 2004 Temporary Insanity at the Art Center at Jim Thompson's House. With a sensor in the silken breasts, they came alive at the sound of people visiting the novel installation. In addition, because they looked like oranges and lemons, they were dubbed as 'breast fruits'.

To further connect people to her art, to make it edible as well as touchable, Pinaree uses food as a medium, and so the Breast Stupa Cookery concept was born.

"I was working on ceramics and thought about incorporating food into art. By creating moulds, I could engage others and get their ideas of the breast stupa shape," she says. "Chefs are artists themselves and they have their own ways of using the moulds beyond my imagination."

The Breast Stupa Cookery project explores how chefs interpret her signature form, using breast stupa-shaped cooking moulds made from cast aluminium and glazed stoneware. The recipes and cooking process are documented and compiled as video and a cookbook.

In August, 2005, the first official Breast Stupa Cookery event at the Jim Thompson House involved four chefs in preparing a buffet banquet for 200 guests. The first ever full course public event took place at Restaurant Le Trois in Paris and the three-course meal proved popular to permanently be listed in the menu.

Over four years, Breast Stupa Cookery events have been organised in Thailand, Japan, China, Spain, and the USA. Chefs have been challenged to create dishes, desserts, cakes, chocolates, and even a new sweet for a Japanese tea ceremony. Two Japanese chefs also did it for a wedding reception in downtown Tokyo.

"It's really fun working with the chefs and their creations are reflections of my art. One chef interpreted it in terms of stages of life, from young breast to mature breast and that very much related to people," she says. "Even though I like cooking, I couldn't be a chef myself. Kitchenwork is tough and chefs work much harder than artists because they have to perform every day."

Joining other chefs around the world, Duangporn Songvisava (Bo) and Dylan Jones are now a part of this project. The two young chefs worked for several years with the famed David Thompson at Nahm in London's Halkin Hotel, the only Thai restaurant to be awarded a Michelin star.

Bo.lan (the title is derived from the names of the two chefs) is a twist from the word boran, meaning ancient, so it hints that the restaurant specialises in authentic Thai cuisine. Duangporn and Dylan actually carried out extensive research into Thailand's culinary traditions to cook the real thing for clients. Likewise, they also did their homework to create a menu for the Breast Stupa Cookery event.

"We did research on the internet and found a website promoting breast-feeding with information about nutrition for breast-feeding mothers. It also gives a list of ingredients, believed to increase the mother's milk. So we incorporated the ingredients in different dishes for the menu. Hopefully, people learned about nutrition and authentic Thai food from the Breast Stupa Cookery menu too," says Duangporn, who admires Pinaree for courageously engaging breasts as her artistic expression.

The Bo.lan Balance for Breast Stupa Cookery started with ya dong naree aperitif served with sour fruits, followed by Bo.lan amuse bouche, which had a breast stupa fa-chee to cover the appetisers. The rest of the exclusive menu included grilled river prawn with banana blossom salad, preserved shrimp paste served with fried liver and grilled fish, stir-fried squid with breast-shaped palm heart and chive flowers, northern style chicken curry wrapped in banana leaf, kaeng lieng (Thai vegetable soup) with lemon basil and young pumpkin, and agar served with toddy palm.

On the artistic presentation, Dylan adds: "We wanted to do more than put food in moulds. For each dish we tried to incorporate the breast stupa theme as much as possible, from the shape of the ingredients to accessories, such as the fa-chee. Above all, we wanted people to sit down and have fun because eating as well as art are about fun."

Besides the fun, Pinaree and Bo.lan's duo chefs hope that the Breast Stupa culinary experience changes people's perceptions and make them look beyond what they see on the plate.

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