





The Friday night fights at Bangkok's old Lumpinee Stadium begin with flyweights on their knees, swaying from side to side, their lean, oiled bodies covered in garlands of jasmine and marigolds. The prefight ceremony continues with the fighters in prayer-covered armbands and rope-like headpieces called *mongkhon* as they dance around the ring to the twangy, almost hypnotic *sarama* music, a band of reed pipes and cymbals that will pick up speed as the fighters do. I wander past the Royal Thai Army officers and stray cats with, as usual, just enough cash for dinner. Word is there's quite a bit of money on this match. Looking around, I see the inscrutable hand signals of more experienced gamblers.

BY TEJAL RAO

At times, Bangkok can appear as a city of giant, expensive, air-conditioned malls that gleam so brightly they put America's shiniest cities to shame. But here at Lumpinee Stadium, things are pleasantly grimy. The stadium opened in 1956 on the wide, traffic-jammed road known as Rama IV, which runs along the southern edge of Lumpinee Park. The stadium is covered, but the ceiling leaks everywhere when it rains and puddles collect on the uneven floors. Still, it's not a bad spot to be at dinnertime. The house fills up with fighters, both amateurs and pros, fans, gamblers, and the vendors required to feed them. A fruit

seller minds piles of rambutan and grapes. Women sell skewered meats and meatballs. A man fills flimsy plastic cups with a lumpy black drink made from grass jelly (*chao kuai*) and brown sugar. Fighters in training (you can tell from the bruises and the limping) dawdle around the stalls, looking for touch gloves and slinky fighting shorts. Spectators come in from the rain for a quick bowl of *guay jab*, a basic noodle soup made with pig offal and rice noodles, that I consider one of Bangkok's greatest culinary pleasures.

The soup can be found all over the city, with various proportions of meat to noodle, and with different cuts of offal. I first tasted it with my brother at the maze of food stalls in Yaowarat, Bangkok's Chinatown.

We weren't quite sure what we were ordering, but the vendor's stall enticed us with piles of carefully sliced pork offal and a massive pot of pale, creamy pork broth that smelled so sweet we floated naturally toward it. While other vendors sold three or four different kinds of dishes, plus variations, the guay jab vendor was a specialist. Pig soup was his game; all he needed to know was how many bowls we wanted. Taking a cue from the eaters around us, we reached for vinegar and red chili flakes to season the silky, peppery broth, then marveled at this single-subject dish tasting purely of pork.

The Chinese immigrants who first helped to build nineteenth- and twentieth-century Bangkok

into a network of waterways, and later a modern, paved city, ate mild, meaty noodle soups that made nourishment out of the cheapest, toughest cuts of meat—soups that are now a defining part of Thailand's street food culture. They are why, now, in the cluttered space between Lumpinee Stadium's main entrance and the boxing ring, the guay jab vendor is in high demand. His stall is laid out with slices of dark, wobbly liver, intestine, kidney, pig skin, and crisp belly—some parts are fried, others are poached in stock—and is ready for the rush before the main-event fights start later in the evening. Into hard plastic bowls, he tosses a mix of pork with soft rice noodles—wide white sheets rolled up like ACE bandages—and halved boiled eggs,

then ladles the steaming broth on top. It should look monstrous, all of these guts bobbing together in dark and cloudy pork soup, but I find it to be a beautiful, delicate thing, scattered with scallions, a sprig or two of cilantro, and just a bit of fried garlic. Spectators settle down with their dinner and tweak the broth with the bottles of vinegar, chili, and fish sauce, shouting to each other across a wobbly table or reading the newspaper, and slurping everything up with Chinese spoons. Some order a second bowl the moment they finish their first.

Ringside, a tall Danish boxer with a pulpy black eye explains that women like her can't fight at Lumpinee—ancient rules, no girls allowed. But hundreds of thousands of boys train in camps across the



Photographs by Tejal Rao

country for the chance to fight here one day, and a championship title won at Lumpinee is among the most coveted in the world of muay thai. But the stadium is closing soon and a newer, bigger, air-conditioned Lumpinee, with a trim of green hedges and several floors devoted to car parking, will open farther north on the same street in 2015. It's a \$12 million project that will hold between five and eight thousand spectators, depending on whom you ask, and will house various food vendors managed by Central Group, which also operates Bangkok's CentralWorld Mall. One doubts that there will be room for the guay jab vendor with his rusty cart.

But right now, the oboe honks. Cymbals clash. The music speeds up

and the boys finish their ceremony, bow, and start thrashing the absolute hell out of each other, quickly and efficiently. A knee flies up to the belly in a fast, unfolding kick; a glove meets an unguarded chin. Muay thai is known as the art of eight limbs. Fighters use their whole bodies to do damage: fists, elbows, shins, knees, feet. But even as they strike, both fighters maintain the calm, determined faces of two rivals shaking hands. They give nothing away.

There are fight scholars who mourn the old days of muay thai, which is to say when matches were longer and bloodier and mostly unregulated, and young fighters often died in the ring with horrific injuries, but from my perspective it seems like things can get messy

these days too. At around eight o'clock, a fighter falls, gets up. Falls. Rolls his eyes back into his head and needs two men to carry him into a wheelchair, where he slumps as if his neck were broken. Maybe it is. The crowd does not go wild. The winner walks quietly to the back room that smells intensely of Vicks VapoRub, where everyone, even those who've come out on top, are in recovery mode.

Here, a woman walks around with a laundry basket of Lay's and Pringles chips strapped to her chest, smiling a welcoming smile that lets those who've just fought know that they can finally eat, and that those who have not yet fought, well, they can eat soon. As the bruises bloom on his ribs, the winner sits alone, slurping noodles and broth. **12**

