



Clockwise from this picture: A corner table at 80/20; the façade of the Grand Postal Building, now home to the Thailand Creative & Design Center; seared tuna at 80/20; inside Little Market café.



STREET SMARTS

From edgy galleries to cool new eateries, the oldest road in Bangkok is getting its groove back.

BY SIMON N. OSTHEIMER

Laid down more than 150 years ago, Charoenkrung was Bangkok's first paved road. Paralleling the Chao Phraya, it rapidly became the city's center of commerce, conveying international traders and diplomats from the southern riverside up through Chinatown and on to the gates of the Grand Palace. The legendary Oriental Hotel—now the Mandarin Oriental Bangkok—was founded in 1876 just off the Bangrak section of the road; a decade later, the city's first tramline opened along Charoenkrung. By the mid 20th-century, however, the thoroughfare had lost its importance as the Thai capital spread east and Sukhumvit Road became its main artery, a dominance it continues to hold to this day. But there are signs that this part of town is ready for a comeback.

"Although I was born in Bangkok, I was never familiar with the riverside at all," says Rungsima Kasikranund, the project director of **Warehouse 30** (48–58 Charoenkrung Soi 30;



Above: Chefs Saki Hoshino, Andrew Martin, and Napol Jantraget at 80/20, where retro shophouse charm meets a multi-cuisine locavore menu.

66-2/861-0953; *no website*), an exciting new multipurpose space helping to breathe new life into the area. “In fact, the only time I ever came down here was to grab a drink at the Bamboo Bar at the Oriental,” she laughs.

Warehouse 30 is the latest project from renowned Thai architect Duangrit Bunnag, whose Jam Factory—a series of restored warehouses that were converted a few years back into a design store, café, gallery, and offices—is just a ferry hop across the river. Opened in July, his new complex comprises a series of abandoned World War II-era warehouses that have been transformed into open-plan spaces housing a screening room, bookstore, vinyl record shop, flower stall, organic market, roaster café, fashion outlet, and much more besides. “Duangrit has always had his eye on this property, with its beautiful structures that are in very good shape,” Rungsi-ma says. “We want to give life back to the space, and bring people back to this part of town.”

It’s a remarkable endeavor, and one that ties

in with the opening of the recently relocated **Thailand Creative & Design Center** (1160 Charoenkrung; 66-2/105-7400; *tcdc.or.th*) down the road. Better known by its acronym TCDC, the 9,000-square-meter facility occupies one side of the 80-year-old Grand Postal Building, a modernist landmark that now houses a library filled with thousands of art and design books as well as “maker spaces” that encourage designers to experiment and explore new materials.

On a smaller but no less significant scale is **80/20** (1052-54 Charoenkrung; 66-2/639-1135; *fb.com/8020bkk*), where an old shophouse has been turned into a hipster-friendly restaurant of refurbished wooden doors, painted brick walls, wrought ironwork, and exposed lighting. The name stems from a commitment to locavorem that sees 80 percent of menu’s ingredients either made in-house or sourced locally; the glazed duck leg with cilantro emulsion and green papaya rice is a standout.

80/20 is just one of the new openings in Talad Noi, a neighborhood on the edge of Chinatown. Here, amid auto-parts shops and crumbling shophouses, you’ll find appointment-only tattoo studio **Black Pig** (672/65 Soi Charoenkrung 28; 62/80-595-2999; *fb.com/blackpigtattoobkk*), vintage-cool diner **Little Market** (1056/7 Soi Charoenkrung 28; 66-61/558-7689; *fb.com/littlemarketbkk*), canal-side gallery and nightclub **Soy Sauce Bar** (11/1 Charoenkrung 24; 66-98-956-6549; *fb.com/soysaucebar*); and alternative art space **Speedy Grandma** (672/50-52 Soi Charoenkrung 28; 66/89-508-3859; *fb.com/speedygrandma*), the last three of which are all the brainchildren of expat Frenchman Thomas Menard.

“I call Talad Noi ‘Thomastown,’” quips David Robinson, an Australian who has lived in Bangkok since 2002 and is one of the co-founders of the Creative District Foundation, a community initiative geared toward pushing Charoenkrung and the area immediately across the river as the city’s creative heart, incorporating elements of art, design, urban planning, community, and food. Apart from organizing a bimonthly “gallery-hopping night,” Robinson explains that this will involve “encouraging people of the old and new communities to appreciate and get to know each other. Next door to Speedy Grandma, for instance, there is a man who makes traditional Chinese-style lanterns. Luke [Satoru, from Black Pig Tattoo] then painted works on these for display at the gallery.”

In microcosm, this example sets out a unique template for the future, one where Bangkok’s first modern road reclaims its historical position at the heart of the city. Though there are exciting projects already underway, it is not there yet. But surely, that’s only a matter of time. ●