

PUTTING IT ALL

ON

IS PHUKET'S  
CULINARY SCENE  
ON THE CUSP OF  
GREATNESS? VISIT THE  
RESTAURANTS OF SIX  
OF THE ISLAND'S MOST  
INNOVATIVE CHEFS,  
AND YOUR ANSWER  
IS LIKELY TO BE A  
RESOUNDING "YES."

BY SIMON N. OSTHEIMER  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON MICHAEL LANG

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Menu highlights at Bampot include grilled squid with saffron aioli and crispy garlic, and charred red snapper with fennel broth. Opposite: Bampot's chef Jamie Wakeford.



**EVER SINCE TOURISM FIRST TOOK HOLD** in the late 1970s, Phuket's international dining scene has evolved dramatically along with the rest of the island—from simple beach shacks feeding backpackers with plates of chicken fried rice and banana pancakes, to luxury-hotel

outlets serving New Zealand lamb shanks and sushi crafted from fish flown in direct from Tokyo. Recent years, however, have seen the emergence of a new breed of independent-minded chefs using their global experiences to shake up the status quo, with an emphasis on seasonal and locally sourced ingredients, melding foreign tastes and Thai flavors, and laying the groundwork for Phuket's next culinary chapter.

#### **RUSTIC EATERY & BAR**

► Among the growing community of international chefs who now call Phuket home, Nikola Lesar has one of the more varied backgrounds. "I come from a small town in northern Croatia called Čakovec, very close to Slovenia, Austria, and Hungary. So there you have this mix of cuisines blending together, as well as the Italian influence from the west."

Lesar, who was first taught to cook by his mother, won the MasterChef Croatia competition in 2012, at the age of 23. "I applied randomly and without any expectations; winning was a real surprise. But the show, the people I cooked with, and the chefs and judges opened my eyes to the world of professional cooking. I was hooked." Following a stint at a top restaurant in Zagreb, Lesar took

time off to travel around Asia. That journey ended in Bangkok, where, inspired by the local street food, he enrolled at the local campus of the famed Parisian cooking school Le Cordon Bleu to study Thai cuisine. It was there that he met Phuket-born pastry chef Chonthicha "Mook" Surajaroenjai, and the couple fell in love. "A couple years after graduating, we decided to return to Mook's home island and give her mother's beach restaurant a new life. That's how Rustic was born."

Opened last year at the southern end of Phuket's prime party town, Patong, Rustic Eatery & Bar is a quietly sophisticated addition to the scene, with whitewashed walls, open-air seating, and a seaside vibe that could have been plucked from the Dalmatian Coast of Lesar's homeland. Relaxed yet smart—think dangling Edison bulbs and polished concrete floors—the restaurant comes into its own at dusk, when the sunset bathes the interior in a soft glow. Menu-wise, Rustic showcases the young chefs' passion for experimenting with Asian and European flavors, as epitomized by such innovative dishes as black fettuccine with chili jam and grilled octopus; beef cheeks slow-braised in soy and sake with daikon puree; and torched scallop carpaccio with oranges, mint, and pink peppercorns. There's also plenty of comfort food—gourmet hamburgers, brick-oven pizza, porchetta—as well as Surajaroenjai's fabulous desserts, which include mango crème brûlée and passion-fruit macarons.

"Phuket has always had tons of hidden local gems serving epic southern Thai food,"

*Above: The alfresco dining room at Breeze at Cape Yamu. Opposite, from left: Esenzi's chef du cuisine John Becker, also at Esenzi, local baby squid stuffed with brandade (an emulsion of salt cod and olive oil), chorizo, and piperade sauce.*



Lesar says. "But now there's also this increasingly interesting finer dining scene. Combine the two, and the island has a bright future as a culinary destination. It's an exciting time to be here."

#### **PRU**

► Up the coast at PRU, 27-year-old Dutchman Jimmy Ophorst is at the forefront of one of the most ambitious restaurant undertakings the island has ever seen. Arriving in Phuket three years ago to open a fine-dining seafood outlet at the Trisara resort, he soon began to conceive of a restaurant that used only Thai-sourced produce—a rarity here. "The hotel already had a parcel of land that was serving as a tree nursery for its grounds, so I started to wonder if we could turn this into a fully-fledged organic farm," Ophorst recalls. "I really wanted to bring locavorism to Phuket. First I thought we could do 80/20—80 percent Thai produce, 20 percent imported. From there, I decided we may as well make it 100 percent local, using only ingredients sourced in Thailand, from seafood to vegetables to ... everything. Except for the wine."

The result is PRU, which opened earlier this year inside a teak-wood pavilion on Trisara's lush grounds. The name is an acronym for "plant, raise, understand," and the menu is an assemblage of correspondingly complex yet simply named dishes like "Oyster"—



butter-roasted celeriac with steamed Surat Thani oyster, caramelized-onion broth, and foraged spring onions—and "Carrot," which combines pit-cooked carrots, a hollandaise sauce made from fermented carrot juice, and cured egg yolk from chickens raised at Trisara's farm. It's a bewildering but delicious creation that imbues the humble root vegetable with a

smoky, almost bacon-like quality; Ophorst calls it "the perfect carrot." Other dishes showcase quail from Chiang Mai, Isan lamb, and wild-caught seafood, be that lobster, abalone, black crab, or the fish that appears in a glistening crescent of yellowtail tartare alongside sea grapes from the shores of Phuket's Cape Panwa Peninsula and osetra caviar harvested in Hua Hin.

"We're serving no-nonsense farm-to-table cuisine, with not too many flavors on the plate," Ophorst says. "It's what I call back to basics, but in a modern way. There's no jelly, foam, or other gimmicks, just real food crafted with a European approach."

PRU's locavore sensibilities, it's worth noting, extend beyond the kitchen. The bread and butter plates on the dining room's linen-draped tables are made from broken pieces of stone from a nearby stone factory. And some dishes, like the Chiang Mai quail—served with grilled fiddlehead and a spinach-bamboo emulsion—are plated on polished rounds of driftwood washed ashore by the Andaman Sea. It's enough to inspire some beachcombing of one's own.

#### **BAMPOT KITCHEN & BAR**

► Scottish chef Jamie Wakeford cites a six-week internship at Heston Blumenthal's three-Michelin-starred The Fat Duck as a watershed moment in his cooking career. While there, his classical training

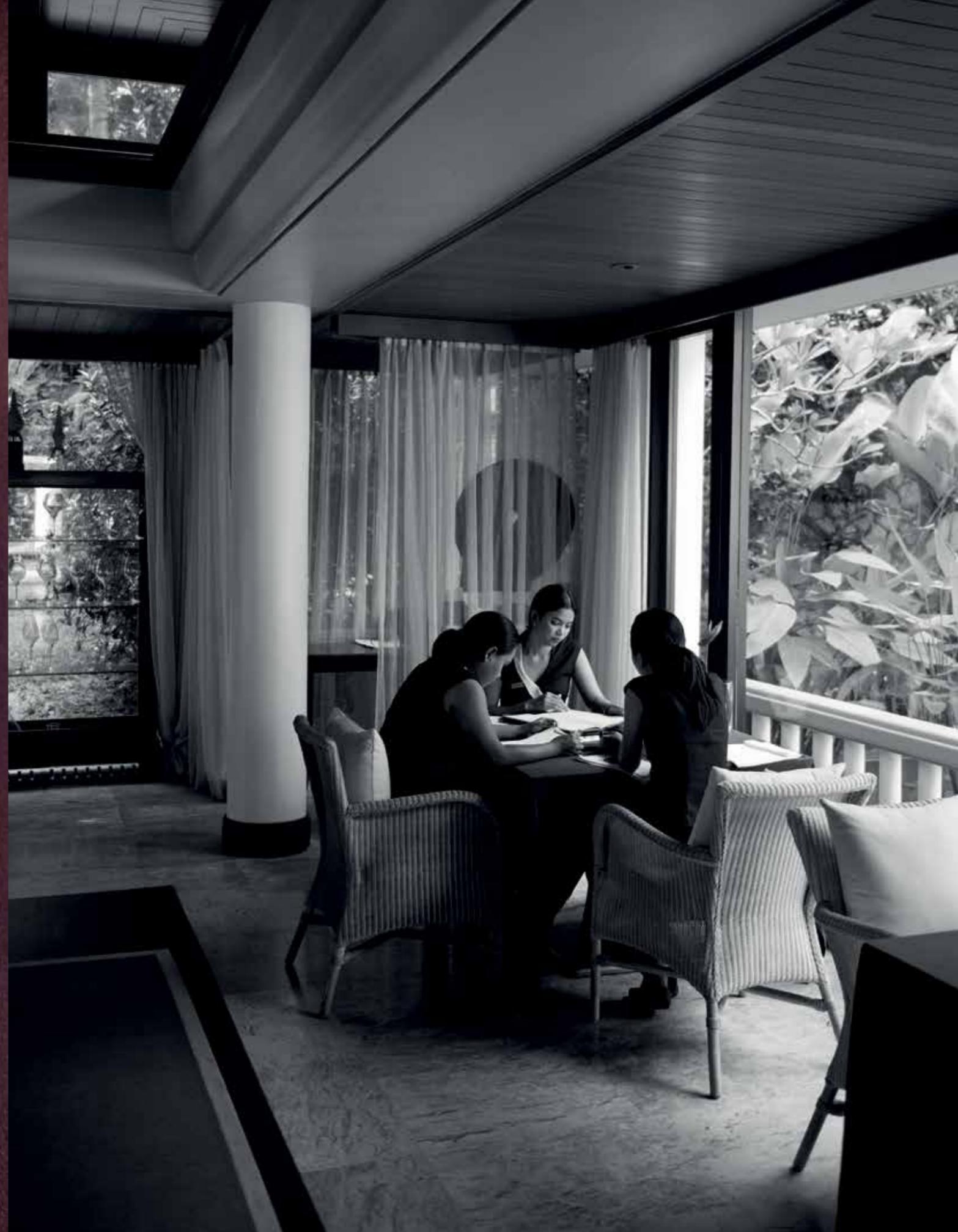


**OTHER DISHES  
AT PRU  
SHOWCASE  
QUAIL FROM  
CHIANG MAI,  
ISAN LAMB,  
AND WILD-  
CAUGHT  
SEAFOOD, BE  
THAT LOBSTER,  
ABALONE, OR  
BLACK CRAB**



*From top: Chef Nikola Lesar in the kitchen of Patong's Rustic Eatery & Bar; at the same restaurant, a dish of glazed carrots, quinoa, crème fraîche, hazelnut, and orange zest. Opposite: Outside Esenzi.*

On the farm-to-table menu at PRU restaurant, a dish of roasted cauliflower stem in brown butter with foraged mushrooms, bone marrow, grilled fiddleheads, and sardine powder. Opposite: Staff at PRU prepping for dinner service.



was challenged by modern techniques that “really blew me away. I learned at the Duck just how much you can play with the process.”

His first self-owned restaurant, Bampot, opened in 2014 in the upmarket enclave of Cherngtalay on the island’s northwest coast, and immediately caused a stir among local foodies. The setting was part of the attraction—a traditional shophouse given a modern makeover, with large windows bringing light into the high-roofed space, and an open kitchen running down one wall, where you can observe the chef’s process and technique up close. At one end, a backlit bar invites patrons to sit at the counter, where staff clad in light-blue aprons that recall the nearby ocean whip up cocktails with fun names like the Myanmar Margarita: a heady muddle of tequila, fresh mango, chocolate bitters, and chili flakes.

The food, however, is the main attraction. Wakeford’s roster of contemporary comfort fare includes an upmarket (and irresistible) take on the classic American mac and cheese—he packs it with Maine lobster—and beer-can chicken in red-wine jus that uses local organic poultry. Another standout? Grilled squid plated with saffron aioli and an artful smear of ink. The menu has been such a hit that Wakeford—who has just become a father for the first time—plans to open an offshoot of Bampot in Bangkok before the end of the year.

“The most important thing with food is accessibility—I’m all for classical techniques, but when you spend six hours making something that the customer won’t even notice, you have to ask if it’s worth it,” he says. “Food is there to be nourishment. That’s really what’s at the heart of Bampot: make it exceptional, but don’t take it too seriously.”

## SUAY

► Chef Noi, as Tammasak Chootong is known around the island, has a curious story to tell. Born just north of Phuket in the neighboring province of Phang Nga, he moved to Germany as a teenager with his mother and stepfather. Arriving without a word of German, and even less English, he ended up learning both and then, after finishing school, found work as a waiter in a Michelin-starred restaurant in Stuttgart. Intrigued by the work of the chefs, he talked himself into a kitchen job plating dishes and prepping vegetables, before embarking on a colorful cooking career that took him from restaurant to cruise ship to five-star hotel. Eventually, he was drawn home.

In 2010, Chootong launched Suay—the name means “beautiful” in Thai—in Phuket Town, then a dining backwater peopled with elderly residents. It was a brave move to open so far from the hotels and tourist crowds of the west coast, but a combination of setting—a charming single-story house with a wraparound veranda and white picket fence—

and creative European-Thai fusion dishes won Chootong a loyal following, not to mention a spot as resident chef on *Iron Chef Thailand*.

Perennially popular creations such as spicy tuna tartare and quiche Lorraine made with Phuket crab have helped the chef expand his culinary empire to include a catering service, cooking school, and a soon-to-open second branch of Suay in Cherngtalay, not far from Bampot.

“The dining scene has changed a lot since we first opened,” Chootong says. “Previously, Suay drew mostly tourists. But now, islanders have become more interested in fine dining, in eating something unique.” To judge by the convivial crowds who descend on his dining room most nights, there also seems to be an endless appetite for his signature mango sticky-rice spring roll, presented with a dollop of black-sesame ice cream.

## BREEZE AT CAPE YAMU

► A 30-minute drive north from Phuket Town, Xavier Charest is part of an unexpected French-Canadian invasion: the lively 25-year-old is the second chef in a row hailing from Montreal to helm this stunning alfresco restaurant overlooking Phang Nga Bay from its perch on the lush Cape Yamu Peninsula. While it’s an incredibly romantic venue any day of the week, with its billowing curtains, bamboo-lined roof, and beckoning infinity pool, Breeze has achieved island-wide fame for its Long Lazy Sunday brunch, where 20 or so patrons are seated randomly at a long wooden table—the idea is you make friends with

## ADDRESS BOOK

**Bampot Kitchen & Bar**  
19/1 Moo 1, Lagoon Rd.,  
Cherngtalay; 66/93-  
586-9828; bampot.co.

**Breeze at Cape Yamu**  
228 Moo 7, Paklok;  
66/81-271-2320;  
breezecapeyamu.com.

**Esenzi**  
Iniala Beach House,  
40/14 Moo 6, Baan  
Natai, Phang-Nga;  
66-76/451-456;  
esenzirestaurant.com.

**PRU**  
60/1 Moo 6,  
Srisoonthorn Rd.,  
Cherngtalay; 66-  
76/310-100;  
prurestaurant.com.

**Rustic Eatery & Bar**  
36 Thaveewong  
Rd., Patong; 66-  
76/344-838; fb.com/  
rusticeateryphuket

**Suay**  
50/2 Takuapa  
Rd., Phuket Town;  
66/87-888 6990;  
suayrestaurant.com.



Clockwise from left: Pan-fried foie gras served with a betel leaf and tamarind sauce at Suay in Phuket Town; Suay’s signature mango sticky rice spring roll with black-sesame ice cream; chef Tammasak “Noi” Chootong.



strangers—and served a selection of sharing plates accompanied by one of the finest wine lists on the island.

Charest, who says the first time he saw a beach was when he moved to Phuket three years ago, has acclimatized well to his new home, adding Thai-inspired techniques and ingredients to his repertoire. A constant innovator, he changes his menu weekly depending on the produce available at the local market as well as whatever new flavors he discovers on his culinary explorations of the island’s villages. Recent inclusions have been his take on crab in red curry, adding pumpkin to the classic Thai dish; homemade pasta served with Phuket squid in white-wine sauce; and a dubious-sounding but remarkably tasty duck breast with fried seaweed and herb salad.

## ESENZI

► The latest arrival on Phuket’s culinary scene, Tim Butler has one foot on the island and the other in Bangkok, where he has been head chef of the award-winning Eat Me restaurant since 2010. “When it first opened in 1998, Eat Me was a gap-filler,” the 39-year-old American recounts. “At the time, Bangkok dining consisted of either high-end hotel restaurants or low-end local eateries, with not much in between. You either dressed up for dinner at the Oriental, or dressed down for street food.” Eat Me has since become a landmark that has managed to stay relevant, keep old customers, and attract new ones.

Butler is hoping his new Esenzi, located just north of Phuket on the Phang Nga mainland, will achieve similar longevity. It’s the signature restaurant at Iniala Beach House resort, but despite the

exclusive location and marine-inspired decor—undulating blue waves cover the ceiling, while the waiting area features big starfish-shaped sofas—the place is anything but pretentious. “It’s formally informal,” Butler says. “Not too serious, but still definitely high-end.” That’s hard to argue with when you’re presented with succulent Spanish carabinero prawns, served in their shell with a delicate spoonful of watermelon, chili, and mint. Or perhaps the incredible scallops, harvested from the ocean off Hokkaido and paired with black truffles and a *jamón ibérico* broth. There is a determined focus on premium-quality seafood, sustainably sourced—indeed, when we talk Butler is already planning his next expedition: to oyster and wagyu farms in Shikoku, Japan.

Given his unique perspective, the chef sees many parallels between the development of Phuket’s restaurant scene and that of the Thai capital. “If you look at the scene in Bangkok now compared to 10 years ago, it’s light years apart, and you could easily say the same for Phuket. It’s a fairly undeveloped market, very driven by tourists, which makes it a perfect time to get in early, and perhaps even help produce young chefs that go on to do something for themselves.” ●