

By **LOW SHI PING** in Yangon  
For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

It is 11am and the Lucky Seven Tea Shop in Yangon is full. Customers balance on wooden stools in the shaded outdoor section that runs parallel to the storefront, as well as indoors.

Although it is late in the morning, locals in Myanmar's largest city are still enjoying the most important meal of the day: breakfast.

For them, this means a saccharine sweet tea, mixed with condensed milk, known as *la phet yay*. This can be paired with a wide range of dishes from noodles to dough fritters and meat-based curries.

The noodle salad with chicken is fried with bean powder paste and a dash of tamarind. This dish is garnished with half a hard-boiled egg, crackers and parsley. The result is a piquant and tangy meal with a melange of textures.

Having opened 18 years ago, Lucky Seven is a bit of an institution, and a visit gives a sneak peek into what the country has to offer in terms of food.

On a separate note, rumor has it that it was once the setting of many meetings to debate issues the military government frowned upon.

In the bright daylight, nothing about the place looks clandestine. The crowd is a mix of young and old, served by teenage boys who come to the city from the countryside to learn about delivering service in an eatery, in exchange for food and board.

Staff members are efficient and work diligently to keep the place clean, which encourages the clientele to return repeatedly.

Apart from Lucky Seven, another well-known watering hole is Rangoon Tea House — Yangon's version of the contemporary hipster cafe. Opened in late 2014, it still brings in the crowds during peak periods for its good food and well-designed interiors.

Found on the menu, naturally, is Myanmar's national breakfast dish, *mohinga* — rice noodles in a broth made with ingredients like catfish (or any type of fish that is available), lemongrass, fish sauce and chickpeas.

Its closer competitor is the Chinese-influenced coconut noodles, or *oun-no hkauq-sweh*, where chicken thigh is cooked in coconut milk, turmeric and fresh pea broth. The meat is so tender it falls off the bone, and the broth is fragrant and rich.

On the side are crackers, parsley, onions and a wedge of lime. Add it all in to provide texture and extra flavors that dance on the palate to add a lively dimension.

Given the country's proximity to India, it is no surprise that Myanmar's cuisine is influenced by its neighbor, by way of the spices, cooking methods and even types of dishes.

At Rangoon Tea House, the egg *paratha* is a good example of this. Layers of cooked dough — whole-meal is used at this cafe — are dipped in egg and then deep fried.

The result is an addictive snack,

# Savoring Yangon's tastes, textures

City's restaurants and street vendors showcase the freshness, adventure and diversity of Myanmar cuisine



**Clockwise from top left:** Thousand island stew pork noodle, served with rice noodles in a slightly spicy soup; *Mohinga*, Myanmar's national breakfast dish; Egg *paratha*, made from dough dipped in egg and deep-fried; A street hawker making betel quid, dubbed the "chewing gum" of Myanmar; Grilled fish, which is commonly sold at eateries on 19th Street; and Chinese-influenced coconut noodles.

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also commonly found at street food stalls, which is crispy on the outside and chewy on the inside. Sugar is on the side for dipping, but this is optional as the *paratha* can hold its own.

Tidbits aside, a typical meal in Myanmar is anchored by rice, paired with a variety of dishes blending Chinese, Indian, Mon — from the country's southeastern Mon State — and local influences.

Many of them are made with local produce, including plant-based and seafood ingredients, successfully juggling the flavors of salty, spicy, sour and bitter.

Salads, curries and fried dishes tend to take center stage, followed by sides that feature soup and vegetables.

But the appeal of the country's cuisine also comes from the diversity of the regions and ethnicities found throughout.

Loosely speaking, Myanmar can be split into upper and lower. The former is focused around Mandalay, and the latter, Yangon and the delta area. From upper Myanmar come dishes with more sesame, nuts and beans, while lower Myanmar's cuisine is primarily fish pastes and sour foods.

The sheer size of the Shan State — the largest of the 14 administrative divisions — means that it, too, has an impact on the country's food.

Shan Yoe Yar is a good restaurant in Yangon focusing solely on this region, where the plants and seafood ingredients used highlight the same emphasis on freshness found all over the country.

A must-try is the thousand island stew pork noodle, with rice noodles served in a comforting, clear and slightly spicy soup, mingled in with chunks of tender pork.

For greater variety, Taing-Yin-Thar restaurant prides itself on representing ethnic minorities from all over Myanmar.

Enjoy a cuttlefish salad from Rakhine State, grilled pork loin with spices from Kachin State, and boiled fish soup with roasted rice grain from Mon State.

For those with more adventurous digestive systems, walk the streets of Yangon in the evening to sample local snacks.

Common are stalls selling betel quid, dubbed the "chewing gum" of Myanmar, where the betel leaf is wrapped around betel nut, lime and other ingredients to yield a sweet, nutty or bitter flavor.

Stop by 19th Street, famous for its grilled seafood eateries. On display at the front is the catch of the day, waiting to be chosen and then barbecued in a panoply of herbs and spices.

Other snacks at the night markets and sold by street vendors include sticky rice roasted within bamboo (*kyauk nyin kyit tout*), dough fritters of every shape and size, and pancakes topped with peanuts and garnished with poppy seeds (*bein mont*).

Wash it all down with a bottle of ice-cold Myanmar-brand beer. The light, crisp and easy-to-drink formula goes well with many dishes — a simply wonderful note to end the day on.