

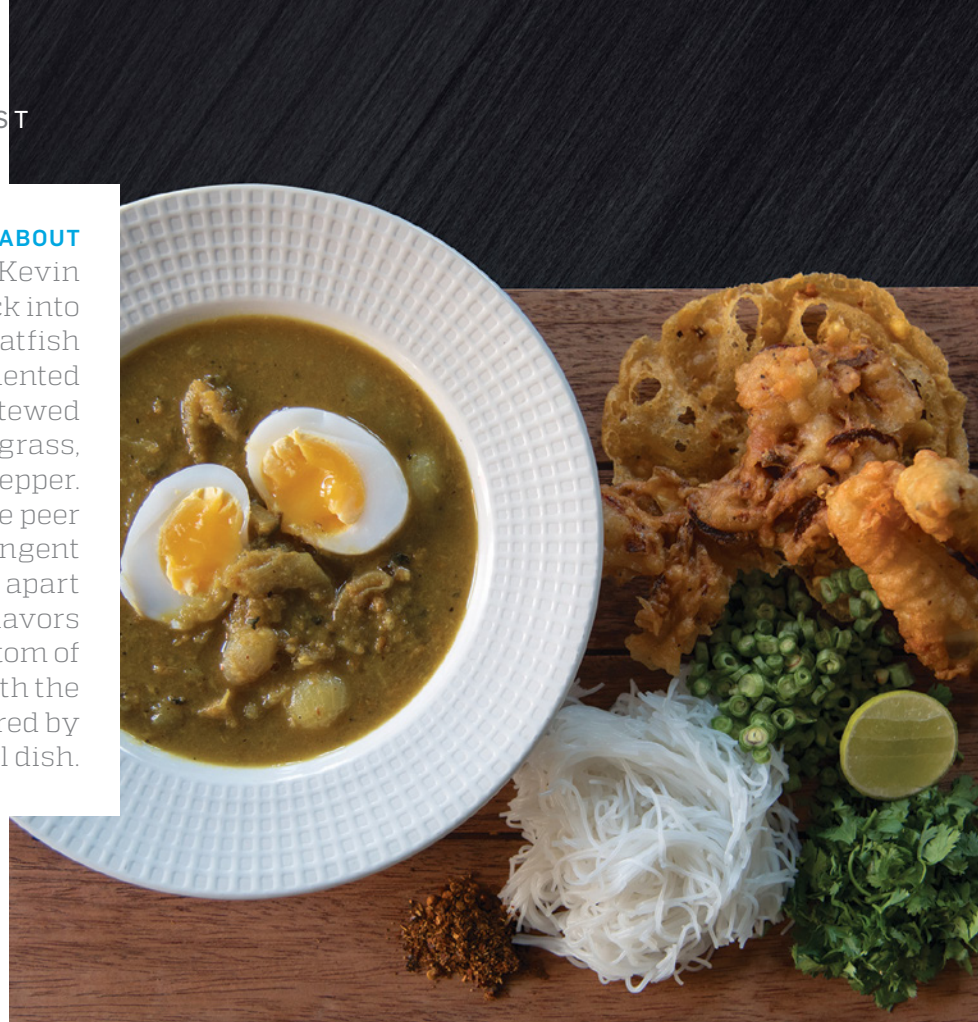
I'M ON A MOHINGA WALKABOUT

with Rangoon-based chef Kevin Ching. In old tea shops, we tuck into hearty bowls of the tangy catfish soup, slurping the mildly fermented rice noodles mixed with stewed banana stems, lemongrass, coriander and heaps of black pepper. In between toothsome bites, we peer at each other through pungent swirls of mist and try to pick apart the bewildering textures and flavors in an attempt to get to the bottom of the country's obsession with the iconic breakfast soup, considered by many to be the national dish.

Mohinga is fishy business, we find out. Born in the backwaters of the Irrawaddy Delta, the peppery soup combines chunks of river catfish, thickened with toasted banana stems, lemongrass, coriander and heaps of black pepper. A sticks-to-your ribs repast, mohinga has a silty texture that has absorbed the river's saltwater. You can practically taste the Irrawaddy in each bite.

Mohinga made its debut centuries ago, though the exact timing is tough to pin down. After migrating up the Irrawaddy, it was adapted to regional tastes and spices. During colonial times, the dish came to represent a shared heritage in the diverse society. When the socialist-leaning military effectively shut down the country in 1962, mohinga hawkers were one of the few vendors permitted to sell on the street because it is cheap, filling and neutral. In tea shops across the land, dissidents, students, housewives and laborers commiserated over bowls of the steaming soup, and before long, mohinga took on a deeper meaning: it filled the belly, yes, but it also fortified the soul.

When I first traveled to Burma, I steered clear of mohinga. The idea of eating a piping hot soup in the



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Soup garnishes at Toe Toe Tin's house; Toe Toe tosses shallots in the broth; early morning mohinga at Myaungmya Daw Cho.

Burma in a Bowl

Rangoon-based chef Kevin Ching leads the way through the fine restaurants and back alleys of the nation's largest city in search of the perfect bowl of mohinga fish noodle soup. BY RACHNA SACHASINH. PHOTOGRAPHED BY THET HTOO



FROM TOP: Chef Kevin Ching's tasty take on mohinga; Kevin peppers his stock.

sweltering heat was not appealing, even though locals insisted it would cool me down. But on this trip I run into Kevin Ching, a noodle-obsessed expat chef who masterminds all the menus at Rangoon-based Pun + Projects, and often runs their kitchens at Rau Ram and Paribawga Café. After a drawn out discussion, Kevin convinces me I must try mohinga. "I grew up on ramen, saimin, wonton mien, roast duck noodles and pho," he says. "But mohinga is like nothing I've cooked or tasted before." Even though Burmese flavors are not his global favorite, Kevin sees mohinga as an entry point into the cuisine. Singular

and versatile, the recipe can be tweaked on the fly depending on the spices on hand. More ginger, less turmeric, heavy on garlic, light on lemongrass; and yet despite the perpetual fiddling, mohinga still manages to taste like mohinga.

The soup's evolving flavors seem to mirror the country's fast-changing culture. Maybe the best way to this nation's heart is through its belly, so we hatch a plan to undertake a mohinga odyssey, with the hope of knowing Burma a little better with every bowl.

HOME-STYLE

Our first stop is a homecooked meal with Dr. Toe Toe Tin, a dentist, and her husband U Stanley Kyaw Zaw, both Rangoon natives. Their charming daughter Khin Thu Thu welcomes us with cups of green tea and leads us to an outdoor kitchen under a canopy of yellow-flowering shade trees.

A spirited conversationalist, Toe Toe regales us with anecdotes while chopping river catfish fillets, lemongrass, banana stems and fresh garlic. In 1989, she was sentenced to three years in prison for leading protest marches during the 8888 Uprising for democracy. "I asked Stanley to bring me mohinga on visiting days," she says, "It was one of our few comforts, a reminder of home." Listening to her, it becomes clear that mohinga is more than a meal; it has historical sentiment.

Mohinga means pepper soup, Toe Toe tells us, and its success begins and ends with the broth. She spices the stock, simmering in a cauldron in their courtyard, with lemongrass, black pepper and garlic. Next she adds rice flour, turmeric and a colander full of fresh banana stems. "Don't add onions to your stock," she cautions. "Or it will taste like curry."

The secret ingredient, she tell us, is fish sauce. "That's where the taste

comes from," she says, adding *ngan bya yay*—a lot of it. The dark, cola-colored Burmese fish sauce is extracted from fermented local river fish and salt, without added sugar or water. Kevin and I take a whiff: it smells fishy, yes, but mostly it's like sticking your nose into a bowl of dank mushrooms. We agree that it's like *nam pla*, or Thai fish sauce, on steroids. By now the ochre-tinged broth has been cooking for two hours and is ready to eat.

We pile our bowls with vermicelli noodles and sprinkle on garnishes. The ruddy-brown broth goes in last. Toe Toe's mohinga is tangy, spicy and pungent. Generous amounts of garlic (perhaps too much, she admits), coupled with a pinch of jaggery (raw sugar) give the peppery

chowder a subtle sweetness. The banana stems have little taste but contribute texture. Kevin's eyes brighten, and he scribbles his notes: *No onions in the broth. Extra garlic. Fresh green beans. Don't over-boil. Choose the right ngan bya yay.* His perfect bowl of mohinga is already taking shape.

CITY-STYLE

Mohinga is typically a breakfast soup, and most morning stalls sell out by 9 a.m. When we walk up to **Ma Phyu's** simple shack in a narrow lane off Inya Road at 7 a.m., things are already winding down. When she opened shop 30-odd years ago, Ma Phyu set the benchmark for Rangoon-style mohinga, which gets its richness from lemongrass and ginger fried in oil. Country mohinga, meanwhile, is leaner and highlights the fish, black pepper and lemongrass. Ma Phyu's mohinga is famous for its lightly battered vegetable fritters. Kevin and I elbow our way past rickshaw drivers and high-society mavens and dig in. He jots down: *Pungent ginger, black pepper notes. Lime to offset extra oil. Crispy fritters in mildly sour batter.*

NORTHERN-STYLE

Each region of Burma puts its own stamp on mohinga: Mandalay's has a watery broth, with fewer noodles and less oil; Barman or Rangoon-style is rich, with plenty of noodles and fancy fritters; in the far south, Mawlamyine mohinga uses carp rather than catfish. In the northwestern state of Rakhine we discover a whole different ball game. Here anchovies replace catfish. *Ngapi*, or pressed fermented fish paste, galangal and tamarind are added, while toasted rice and chickpea flour are left out. We speculate that perhaps they skip the grains because it is a less affluent society. An extra dose of black and red pepper explains this version's moniker: "hot throat, hot tongue."

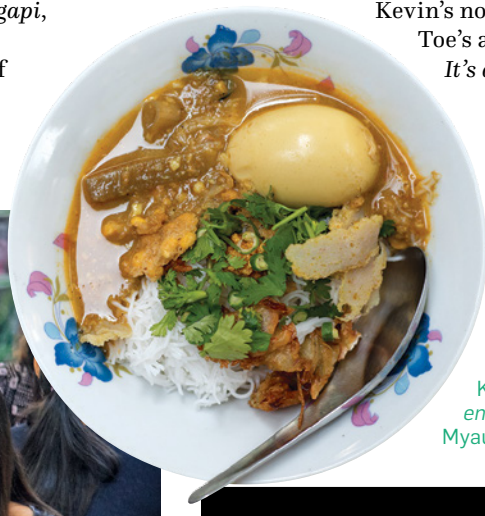
Kevin and I flag down a *longyi*-clad hawker peddling *moti* (another name for Rakhine mohinga). We squeeze into small plastic chairs in front of his rig and watch him efficiently whip up two bowls. He mixes the rice noodles with a pinch of *ngapi*, a couple of teaspoons of fermented

nga bya yay, chilies, red pepper oil and cilantro. Rakhine *moti* can be eaten dry or wet, so the clear broth is served on the side. This rendition is very light, citrusy, spicy and unfussy. It is my favorite so far. "Yeah, it's definitely skinny-girl mohinga," Kevin teases, as he jots down this thoughts: *Citrus, lime, clear broth, galangal.*

DELTA-STYLE MOHINGA

To get back to the dish's roots, we head over to **Daw Cho's** eponymous tea shop for Myaunmya or delta-style turmeric-laden mohinga, with chunks of river catfish, lemongrass and coriander, which arrives looking like a bright ray of sunshine. Predictably, the river catfish is potent, although it is the ginger and black pepper that linger after each mouthful. In between bites, I notice folks coming in just to buy bottles of *ngan bya yay*, the shop's special fish sauce blend that's fermented and bottled on site. "It's famous, very fresh!" a lady next to me exclaims.

Kevin's notes echo Dr. Toe Toe's advice about broth: *It's all in the fish sauce.*



FROM FAR LEFT: At U Yae Khael, friends catch up over bowls of mohinga; Dr. Toe Toe's fully garnished mohinga, ready to eat. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: Kevin lays out the *mise en place*; ladling broth at Myaungmya Daw Cho.

GUIDE:

- Ma Phyu** Ou Yin Street at Inya Road; mohinga for two with extra fritters K7,500.
- U Yae Khael** Officially named Daw Yin Shwe Moti Yen Khar, but everybody knows it by the street its on. U Yae Khael Street at Pyay and Insein Road; mohinga for two K1,600.
- Myaungmya Daw Cho Mohinga** 11th Street at The Strand; mohinga for two K1,400.
- Rangoon Tea House** A savory and classic version of mohinga, but using the lighter daggertooth fish in addition to the traditional catfish. 77-79 Pansodan Street; mohinga set with fritters K5,500.



HIPSTER-STYLE

Late one evening, we hop into a cab and race north on Pyay Road in search of **U Yae Khael Street**, where the cool kids eat. The cabbie, a young chap with moussed hair and skinny jeans, knows the hipster mohinga joint well, famous for its late-night crowd. Smartly dressed Yangon University students and late-night revelers from nearby discos saunter in around 2 a.m., and the vibe turns youthful and buzzy. Mohinga here is hearty, great for midnight munchies. Kevin swirls the broth around his mouth, singling out ginger and lemongrass. Though satisfying, we agree that U Yae Khael's real cachet is the scene, not the soup. "Wait, what's this?" Kevin asks. "This" turns out to be square bits of pressed fish-roe. *Add fish roe?* writes Kevin.

THE KEVIN FINALE

In the kitchen, Kevin is a daring alchemist not shy to experiment. When I met Kevin back in 2015, he and his business partner Ivan Pun had just opened Port Autonomy, a tricked-out food truck serving international hipster bites: Cuban sandwiches, Korean barbecue, American fried chicken. It was all about showing the country what it had been missing. Today, elbow deep in *nga khu* (a petit river catfish) fillets, Kevin's changing tactics: he's tackling Burmese cooking head on.

"I cherry-picked highlights from our mohinga journey," he tells me, showing me his notes: *black pepper and extra garlic (Dr. Toe Toe), strong lemongrass and ginger (U Yae Khael), extra turmeric for bright yellow color (Daw Cho).* He pre-blanches the fillets for a cleaner flavor, then gives them a quick turn on the skillet before tossing them into a vat of boiling water. He goes easy with toasted rice and chickpea flour and blends in the fish bones for extra richness. The soup he places before me is piquant and bold in flavor, but not in the least bit overworked. It tells a story of Burma—complex, evolving, richly satisfying—as seen through the eyes and palate of the chef. Kevin's version is classic, and yet somehow also very new. It tastes, I decide, like mohinga. ☺

KEVIN'S MOHINGA RECIPE

Serves four

THE BROTH

A lighter take on classic mohinga broth

- | | |
|-------|---|
| 1 kg | baby catfish or other firm, white fish |
| 4 c | fish stock |
| 10 | stems lemongrass |
| 1/3 c | ginger, finely chopped (half for broth, half to sauté fish) |
| 1/3 c | garlic, finely chopped (half for broth, half to sauté fish) |
| 1/3 c | shallots, finely chopped (half for broth, half to sauté fish) |
| 4 t | <i>ngapi</i> , or shrimp chilli paste |
| 6 t | toasted rice flour |
| 6 t | chickpea paste |
| 2 t | turmeric |
| 1 t | black pepper |
| 5 t | Burmese fish sauce (reserve a splash when sautéing fish) |
| 5 t | Thai fish sauce (reserve a splash when sautéing fish) |
| 4 t | jaggery or palm sugar |
| 1 c | sliced banana stems |
| 15 | whole shallots |

THE GARNISH

Per individual bowl, and will vary according to taste

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 1/2 c | fresh rice noodles |
| 3 T | coriander, chopped |
| 3 | lime wedges |
| 2 T | long beans, thinly sliced |
| 1 t | dried chili flakes (optional) |
| 1 t | chili garlic oil |
| 1 | eight-minute duck egg |
| 3-4 | various fritters: onion, gourd or chickpea |

THE METHOD

- Boil chickpeas until very soft. Blend with small amount of cooking liquid to create a paste. Set aside.
- Clean fish and boil in a stock of lemongrass, pepper, garlic, ginger, turmeric powder and fish sauce.
- When the fish is fully cooked, remove, debone and reserve meat. Strain fish stock and set aside.
- Sauté fish meat in oil with chopped ginger, lemongrass, shallot, garlic, turmeric powder, fish sauce, salt and pepper, until it becomes a golden brown paste.
- In a new pot, bring fish stock to a boil and add the chickpea paste, toasted rice flour, sautéed fish paste, and palm sugar. For fortification, blend the fishbones at high speed with a bit of cooking liquid and add it to the pot.
- Add in the whole peeled shallots and banana stems and simmer for 20 minutes. Check for seasoning, tasting for black pepper, salt and fish sauce.
- Place rice noodles in bowl, with garnishes and duck egg. Pour in one cup of mohinga broth.
- Drizzle with chili oil and enjoy.