



In January 1992, Prasong "Pak" Nurack, in the cook's apron, and Friends of A Taste of Thailand celebrated the successful campaign to save the restaurant from the urban renewal wrecking ball. Photo by Bob Mandel

A Taste of Thailand: Serving the "Publics"

Dan Hunter & Patrick McClintock

Have you ever seen a bird fly backwards? What is the cause of the current farm crisis? Are you able to touch your toes? Whom will you vote for? A Taste of Thailand restaurant in Des Moines conducts polls on all sorts of topics.

Thai natives Prasong "Pak" Nurack and Benchung "Beni" Laungaram, his wife, opened the now-popular restaurant in December 1983, in an abandoned auto repair shop, repainted bright yellow. "So the publics will know we are here," said Prasong. It may be the only restaurant in the world with a home-made voting booth.

The quixotic polls and the delicious Thai food have made A Taste of Thailand a place to meet candidates for every office and a mandatory stop for presidential candidates — from Al Haig to Paul Tsongas. Journalists

from the *New York Times* to the *London Times* stop by for conversation. In 1988, C-Span broadcast a discussion between restaurant patrons about the caucuses. Television crews from many countries and other networks swarm in with lights and cameras.

After the lights and cameras depart, A Taste of Thailand's service to the community continues. On the statistically coldest day each year, the restaurant sponsors the International Hot and Spicy Food Day. For many years, it also sponsored the Free Speech Award, to increase awareness of the First Amendment. In addition, Prasong and Benchung have welcomed visitors from all over the world to observe American-style democracy. Prasong has a simple explanation: "We are here to serve the publics."

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is a randomness to nature and to the farmer's life. Corn and soybean harvests were poor in 1993, bountiful in 1994, and weak last year. Spring rains made plantings late — or canceled them. Perhaps as many as 200,000 acres weren't planted. Then it became deadly hot in August, mischievously cold in September. Corn harvests were about half of 1994's levels.



And so that is it. Iowa is about the land and nature and people and taking pride in what we do with our lives. But it is also about gorging yourself on blueberry strudel in Pella, on three kinds of sausages in Amana, and the very best fried pork-tenderloin sandwich in the world. It is about remarkable steak houses, each with no windows: Jesse's Embers in Des Moines, Lark Supper Club in Tiffin, and Rube's in Montour. It is about a state university with a football team with 73 players who each weigh more than 200 pounds — and a marching band with more than 240 musicians.

And, oddly enough, Iowa is about Herbert Hoover. "My grandparents and my parents came here in a covered wagon," Hoover once said in West Branch, where he was born in a two-room cottage in 1874. "In this country they toiled and worshiped God. They lie buried on your hillside. The most formative years of my boyhood were spent here. My roots are in this soil. This cottage where I was born is physical proof of the unbounded opportunity of American life."

This is the essence of America. This is the essence of Iowa.

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