



Patipran Jankaew (left) and Junapark Gunpo, in character as Lamsong and Hoy Salah, trying the food at Panda King in Bangkok. Photos: Tibor Krausz

An odd pairing, but quite delicious

Thailand's new social media stars are celebrating the country's cuisine in all its glory

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The chances are that videos from a pair of deadpan food reviewers from Thailand have popped up on your social media recently. The quirky series, whose Thai title translates as Let's Taste, Mr Hoy, celebrates Bangkok food in all its spicy, sticky and steamy glory.

Lamsong and Hoy Salah are a bit like the *Dumb and Dumber* of Bangkok food reviewers. They're the eccentric stars of the short, fun videos featuring highlights of the Thai capital's rich food scene, from a kerbside noodle soup shop in the city's Chinatown, to a high-end Italian steakhouse downtown.

Lamsong is tall and gangly, with unruly locks and a wispy goatee. Hoy Salah is short and slight, with an Afro and a bushy beard. Lamsong speaks in a sombre monotone and is concise, while Hoy Salah never says a word.

In their hilarious culinary adventures around Bangkok, the two Thai men remain inscrutably poker-faced.

But now and again Hoy Salah does show some emotion. Whenever his taste buds tingle from dishes such as pad thai or steamed crab roe with milk, he slaps the table and throws his head back, eyes closed in ecstasy.

When delivering his own verdict, Lamsong produces a thumbs up and an accented: "Very good!"

Produced for Wongnai.com, a Thai lifestyle platform featuring user-generated reviews of restaurants, spas and hotels, the quirky videos starring the pair have become hugely popular, with millions of views on Facebook.

Thanks to their zany antics and deadpan delivery, the odd couple have turned into unlikely celebrities, with a devoted social media following as far afield as Malaysia, Hong Kong and the Philippines.

Junapark Gunpo, who plays the character Hoy Salah (so named for his marked resemblance to the Egyptian soccer player Mohamed Salah), has been a particular hit. A sidekick of sorts to Lamsong, played by Patipran Jankaew, he's the frequent butt of gags, which he endures with his character's trademark indifference.

"The other day we were at Siam Paragon [a luxury mall in central Bangkok] ... and a group of Malaysian tourists instantly recognised Hoy Salah. They wanted to take selfies with him," says Athiwat Pongpanich, a content editor for Wongnai.com who scripts, shoots and edits the pair's



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JUNAPARK GUNPO, AKA HOY SALAH (ABOVE)

Athiwat Pongpanich, a content editor for Wongnai.com, writes, shoots and edits the videos starring the duo.



videos. At a recent concert in Bangkok, the two similarly became the centre of attention. "People ignored the musicians and television actors who were there," Junapark recalls. "They jostled to take pictures with us."

Not bad for a couple of guys who until a few months ago were unknown and had zero acting experience. "It started as a lark," says Athiwat.

One day last December, Athiwat was scheduled to shoot a promotional video, but the client cancelled at the last minute. Bored in the office, he decided to head to the rural outskirts of Bangkok and shoot a lighthearted video about how to grill chicken in the traditional Thai style – a spiced, whole bird is placed on the ground under an overturned metal can, which is then heated by burning piles of hay.

He invited Junapark and Patipran, then working as freelance food photographers, to tag along. Having dark complexions and being down-to-earth, he thought they'd be good stand-ins for rural folk. The personalities of their characters were made up on the fly during the off-the-cuff shoot on a willing farmer's plot of land.

"I'm a shy guy," says Junapark, 30. "I don't like speaking on camera so I let him speak," he explains, pointing to Patipran, who is 25.

"Patipran speaks in a funny sort of way in real life," Athiwat says. "Basically he's a bit like himself when he's Lamsong."

By chance, Patipran and Junapark have replicated the winning formula of the American illusionist duo Penn and Teller – one is a tall chap with the gift of the gab, while the other is his wee partner who forever keeps mum. They've never heard of the Americans, though.

The result of the three young Thais' afternoon in the countryside was a zany, three-minute video which introduced the dynamic duo to the world when it went viral on social media.

"We hit on a popular format by accident," says Athiwat, who has taken some of the visual quirks in Lamsong and Hoy Salah's videos from Japanese manga comics. Some of the inspiration for the characters' cartoonish buffoonery has likewise come from comics.

A few months on, they've made 11 videos, which are posted first on the Wongnai.com Facebook page, then on YouTube.

They shot the latest video at lunchtime in Panda King, a restaurant specialising in Sichuan dishes in central Bangkok.

"I'm one of their greatest fans," enthuses Wittawat Fujitnirun, 27,

Panda King's Chinese-Thai owner, who opened the restaurant three years ago and has since turned it into a franchise with four other branches and another two in the works.

"I've watched all their videos many times," Wittawat adds. "They're unique and fun."

Lamsong and Hoy Salah are here to return the compliment. Panda King has received a Readers' Choice Award on Wongnai.com, so the site's two stars will now be giving the restaurant their own seal of approval.

Patipran dons a silk tunic with a Chinese coolie's black cap and a fake ponytail, while Junapark dresses like a Chinese rice farmer, complete with a broad-brimmed conical bamboo hat. Athiwat starts recording on his mid-range Sony DSLR.

Patipran and Junapark pretend to arrive on a *saleng*, a motorcycle with a rickety sidecar used to transport bulky goods. They improvise the segment after spotting the contraption on the street, and borrowing it from its owner, a scrap metal collector.



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JUNAPARK GUNPO

The duo then make their way into Panda King's cramped, muggy kitchen. They look on impassively as Panda King's cooks carry on stir-frying noodles and producing copious amounts of its signature "Huangdi fries", which are made from aubergine and named after a mythical Chinese emperor.

That done, they return to the restaurant to deliver their verdicts on the fries. Patipran fumbles his lines repeatedly. "Oy!" he says unhappily every time he does so. "Sometimes we have to do 20 takes because he laughs or mangles the words," Athiwat observes.

Then it's Hoy Salah's turn to endorse the aubergine dish in his own quirky way: he takes a bite, slaps the table hard, and throws his head back. In so doing, he scares the unsuspecting diners at nearby tables. "This happens every time," he says, laughing.

It's a wrap.

In a couple of weeks Lamsong and Hoy Salah will be visiting another restaurant – much to the delight, no doubt, of their legions of fans. "We won't stop," Junapark pledges, "until Gordon Ramsay takes notice of us and asks us to review one of his restaurants."