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Cracker, a female raccoon laps, up the attention at Little Zoo Cafe.



ROOMS WITH A ZOO

Cafes where patrons can interact with all manner of exotic animals are highly popular in Thailand, but animal welfare workers warn against the practice, writes **Tibor Krausz**

The waffle with egg and bacon looks appetising, but no one at the table really cares. There's a bit of mischief going on at another table in the small eatery that demands more attention.

Cookie, a young raccoon, has clambered onto a Thai woman's shoulders and is tugging away at one of her dangling earrings with intense curiosity. The woman doubles over and giggles happily, forgetting all about her vanilla and chocolate sundae.

Cookie is a dashing little chap with winsome features and his species' trademark black patches around the eyes. "He's so cute!" the woman coos.

"Cookie is very outgoing and loves attention," notes the owner of Little Zoo Cafe, Wachiraporn Arampibulphol. Her space is a two-storey "pet café" on the outskirts of Bangkok, and contains numerous wild creatures from around the world.

Wachiraporn's private menagerie has raccoons and prairie dogs from North America; chinchillas and marmosets from South America; meerkats, serval cats and caracal cats from Africa. She also has North African fennec foxes, European red foxes and Russian silver foxes. There's also a hairless guinea pig, a fluffy-tailed corgi, a Pomeranian, a cockatiel and a snowy owl.

Her animals are seen as "cute"

and "exotic" – a combination that makes Little Zoo Cafe something of a novelty and a big draw for enthusiasts of animal cafes, which vie for customers with live animals (usually cats, sometimes dogs or rabbits). Wachiraporn insists that none of her pets are endangered species and they are all properly licensed. Not everyone, however, is pleased at the sight of wild animals being treated as pets.

"These cafes tend to showcase various [rare and] purebred animals rather than promoting animal welfare," says Katherine Polak, an American veterinarian who is director of animal welfare at the Soi Dog Foundation, a leading Thailand-based animal rights organisation. "We were in touch with a cat café in Phuket Town, but they were not interested in housing any of our adoption cats."

To Wachiraporn's credit, many of her animals aren't confined to cages. They loll or scamper around inside two parquet-floored, air-conditioned enclosures with glass windows where diners can pet them. Visitors arrive in droves to cuddle the animals and take selfies once they're done with their lattes, milkshakes, fish and chips or ice cream. The raccoons and meerkats don't seem to mind the attention. The fennec foxes, aloof

creatures by nature, appear less sanguine, shying away from stroking hands to hide in corners.

Then there is Pizza. Not the cheesy Italian flatbread but a six-month-old meerkat. Pizza is busy burrowing into the knapsack of a female visitor. The meerkat ignores the banknotes that come tumbling out of the bag and carries on digging, clawing at a pack of facial tissues and nosing around a keychain.

"I'm really into animal cafés and this one is amazing," enthuses Jonathan Tan, a property agent from Singapore. "I seem to have bonded with one of the meerkats," he adds. "He let me pick him up. I cradled him in my arms like a baby. They seem to enjoy human interaction and don't appear stressed or fearful."

Mishaps do happen, however. "I'm not going to lie: some of our customers have been bitten or scratched," concedes Wachiraporn, whose own forearms bear visible claw marks.

An exotic animal enthusiast, Wachiraporn, 29, has been collecting furry wildlife since high school with a single-minded zeal. "Many women love handbags or shoes," she says. "I love animals." Of sugar gliders alone, she has some 200 at her home, where she breeds them for sale. The small marsupial gliding possums from Australia are popular as exotic pets in Thailand and farther afield.

Some of her pets have cost her so much to buy that she might as well be collecting designer bags. A raccoon costs 40,000 baht (HK\$9,000), a fennec fox costs 70,000 baht, while a caracal cat costs 250,000 baht. "It's easy to buy these animals, but they're hard to keep," she says. "Red foxes are stinky and shed a lot."

Wachiraporn opened Little Zoo Cafe last year and her exotic animals became instant hits. "Some people fly to Bangkok just to see them," she says. Many visitors are from Hong Kong and Singapore, where it's likely an establishment like hers would never be allowed to operate because of animal welfare laws.

In Thailand, however, there is more of an "anything goes"



It's easy to buy these animals, but they're hard to keep. Red foxes are stinky and shed a lot

WACHIRAPORN ARAMPIBULPHOL, OWNER, LITTLE ZOO CAFE IN BANGKOK

attitude. The country's sole animal welfare law, which was passed in 2014, is vaguely worded and remains largely unenforced. It fails to effectively regulate the use of animals for commercial purposes, whether at tiger zoos, elephant camps or pet cafes.

Some people believe these cafes are mostly interested in using animals as gimmicks. They're essentially petting zoos with overpriced desserts, and they're all the rage from Beijing to Tokyo and Seoul. In Bangkok alone, more than a dozen animal-themed eateries with cutesy decor and resident pets cater to animal lovers: Catholic Cafe has long-haired Persian cats, Lucky Bunny has floppy-eared rabbits, while True Love Cafe has Siberian huskies. Several establishments let you bring your own pets (for an extra charge) and offer separate food menus for them.

The food, though, is routinely secondary.

"We don't sell food; we sell happiness," insists Chotiros Ratanabirabongse, who breeds Siberian huskies and runs True Love Cafe, a small eatery on a suburban Bangkok street. If happiness for you means polishing off a so-so slice of cake before heading out to the kennels at the back to snap selfies with some long-suffering huskies in a noisy throng of other visitors, then you'll certainly feel right at home at True Love Cafe.

Originally bred by the indigenous hunter-gatherer Chukchi people of eastern Siberia in a land of ice and snow, huskies sport a double coat of thick fur. In tropical Thailand, True Love's 23 huskies spend most of their time cooped up in cages inside cold, air-conditioned rooms.

Huskies like to roam and run wild, but their dogs are let out into a small yard only for short periods when her cafe's visitors can pet some of them – for a fee.

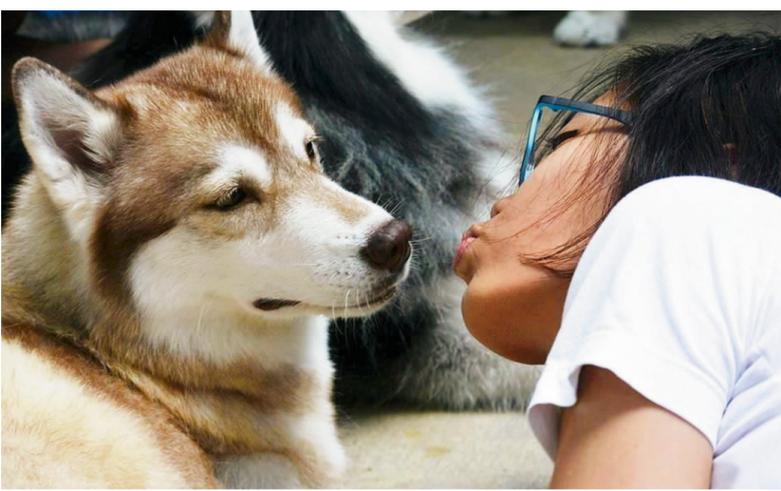
"These animals are not suited to a hot and humid climate," Chotiros acknowledges. Yet she continues to breed them because "all of them are purebred and beautiful." And presumably because a single one can sell for up to 450,000 baht.

Sheryl Teo, a 20-year-old university student, flew to Bangkok from Singapore with her housewife mother just to see the huskies for herself after watching online videos of them running down a small street in a pack. "I would've been disappointed if I'd missed this," she says in between petting the dogs. "I cuddled them and I massaged them. I want to take a video of them dashing about in slow motion."

Out on the street, stray dogs sprawl in the shade or loiter around lethargically in the muggy heat. It's as if they're moving in slow motion. No one pays them any attention, least of all the Thais and foreign tourists flocking to True Love Cafe in taxis and tuk-tuks to pet the huskies.

Not all abandoned animals are left to their fate, though. Recently, a pet fennec fox was found inside a plastic bag in a garbage bin on a Bangkok street. The animal was near death with a severe back injury, which he had likely suffered in a savage beating. When Wachiraporn learned of the injured animal on social media, she offered help and the fox was nursed back to life. "He's alive but he can't walk," she says. "I don't know how someone can do something like that to an animal."

At Little Zoo Cafe, she says, she tries to educate people about animals. "It's not enough to love animals," she says. "We also need to look after them." life@scmp.com



A fennec fox at Little Zoo Cafe (above right); a customer plays with one of the huskies at True Love Cafe (below).